



THE GRUMPYEST ELF

JERICA MACMILLAN

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CHAPTER ONE

Dylan

STUFFED FROM THANKSGIVING DINNER, I HAVE TO STIFLE A GROAN AS I settle on the couch in my parents' living room next to Shane, my older sister's husband. Dad pats his belly in the armchair adjacent to the couch, picking up the remote and turning on the TV so we can watch the football game.

But before Dad even finds the right channel, my eight-year-old niece Sophie lets out a squeal and comes racing into the living room, making a beeline for my brother-in-law, my sister Sarah hot on her heels. "Shane!" Sophie shouts, giggling. "Help! She's gonna get me!"

Grinning, I watch Shane scoop her up and plant her on the couch between us. Sarah stalks closer, tiptoeing up to us like a cartoon villain, her hands up and prepared to tickle.

"Sneak attack!" I yell, then turn and tickle Sophie's sides, sending her into paroxysms of giggles and more high pitched squealing. She squirms away from me, scrambling over Shane and burrowing into the corner of the couch, using his body as a shield to block her from Sarah and me.

But Dad reaches over from his spot in his recliner and manages to tickle her back. She screams, arching, messy braid flying as she shakes her head and

tries to dig farther behind Shane.

Mom comes in, a look of indulgent amusement on her face at our antics. “So this is what all the noise is about. You three leave poor Sophie alone.”

“Grandma!” Sophie shouts, climbing out from behind Shane and causing him to grunt and “oof” a few times as she gets tender spots with her elbows and knees, running to Mom and throwing her arms around her waist.

Mom reaches down and pats her. “You’re safe now. I won’t let them get you,” she reassures Sophie, as though we’re all ravenous animals trying to eat her. She whispers something else to Sophie, who then scampers away behind Mom, heading for the kitchen.

Straightening, Mom spears us all with a glare. “Now. Olivia and I got the leftovers put away, and Ty is getting started on the washing up. I expect the three of you to get up and help him in a moment.” She points between Dad, Shane, and me. “But first, we need to discuss the schedule for ChristmasFest.”

“I’ll get started helping Ty,” Shane says, standing as Olivia, Ty’s girlfriend, appears in the opening to the living room. “Since I’m clearly not needed for this.” Shane’s a PE teacher and head football coach at the local high school. Olivia gives him a sympathetic grimace and heads back into the kitchen, like she’s as happy as he is to avoid this discussion. They’ve never had to be part of the ChristmasFest schedule discussion, since they get to go and just enjoy it like normal people. Unlike my family who founded the thing, so my siblings and I have been roped into participating our whole lives.

Mom and Dad always play Santa and Mrs. Claus—Dad’s already got his beard in and ready, though he’ll add the wash-out white hair color to make it uniformly white instead of the varying shades of gray he’s currently rocking—and I’ve been an elf since infancy. Of course, I was more of a prop at that point, but when I turned fourteen, I got put to work alongside Ty and Sarah, my older siblings, and Nora, the youngest, joined us as soon as she was old enough, though Ty was done with college and working by then.

Sarah got out of the elf gig when she became the manager of the Christmas Emporium—the store my parents opened before I was born and the sponsor of the ChristmasFest—and bossy as she is, I’d rather work with her in the

store than be an elf anymore. I'm a senior in college, and I'll be twenty-two in a few months. I'm ready to hang up my uncomfortable elf costume and embarrassing elf name once and for all.

Mom gives Shane a warm smile. "Thank you, Shane. I'm sure Ty will appreciate it."

"I'll head in for that, too," I say, moving to stand. Maybe if I make a quick escape, I can avoid getting roped in. "I'm sure the three of you can handle whatever the Fest throws at you."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Sarah objects. "Where do you think you're going? And why don't you think the schedule affects you?" Too late. And of course it's Sarah to drag me back in. You'd think she'd have some sympathy, since she's had to do the same thing—she was Sassy Tinselbottom for years, after all—but no. Sarah's far more interested in bossing me around than extending sympathy.

Big sister's prerogative, I guess. It's been her favorite pastime since we were kids. When I was like three or four, she treated me like a doll she could dress up, and when I got too old for that, she'd just make me do anything she could.

I make a face at her. "I have to go back to school in a couple days, so I'm not sure how it does?"

Dad snorts, chuckling. "Nice try, kid. Sit down."

While he sounds jocular, I know when I've lost before the battle's even begun.

"I have you on the schedule in Santa's Workshop for a few hours tomorrow and Saturday," Mom says, completely ignoring my obvious attempt at getting out of this.

I groan. "Seriously, Mom? Isn't it about time I retired my elf costume? What if I have other plans?"

Mom gives me a stern look. "If you had other plans, you would've told me already. And since the store and festival pay for school, you can hang up your tights when you start paying for everything yourself. I've given you a few

days off after the end of the semester, but after that you're on the schedule regularly until ChristmasFest is over."

I bite back the sigh that wants to come out at that bit of news. "Why can't I just work the Christmas Emporium with Sarah? You know she'll make me work extra hours there too."

"I have you scheduled in December already as well," Sarah chimes in. "But I'm nice and figured I'd let you sleep in tomorrow and only work as"—I mentally block out her use of my dreaded elf name, imagining a record scratch taking its place—"on Black Friday. You're welcome."

I scowl at her. "Shut up. You know I hate it when you call me that."

She just smirks. "Aww, poor Dylan," she says in a condescending baby voice. "How tragic for you to still have to be called your elf name." She scoffs. "Get over yourself. Mom gave all of us elf names. You're the only one who has a problem with it."

"That's because I'm the only one who gets called it in public every damn year," I mutter.

"Language," Mom scolds. "And that's enough, you two. Dylan, you'll be working as an elf, and that's final. If you really don't want to work, I'm sure you'll be happy to find yourself another job that pays just as well and also handles your rent and incidentals for the remainder of the school year."

I shift in my seat, annoyed, but knowing once again that I'm stuck. "I still don't understand why I can't just work in the store," I grumble. "I don't mind doing that."

"Aw, but Dylan, you're so cute all dressed up as an elf," Sarah says. "And with those cute little ears!" She points at her own ears, and I reach for a throw pillow, but stop when Mom gives me a quelling look.

"Sarah, I already said that's enough," Mom scolds her.

"Ha!" I give my sister a triumphant look, and she sticks her tongue out at me. "Real mature, sis. Is that what you're teaching Sophie? Or is spending so much time with a little kid causing you to revert?"

She narrows her eyes and crosses her arms, opening her mouth to deliver what I'm sure is a scathing retort on the same level of maturity as sticking out her tongue, but Mom cuts us both off before she gets a chance.

"Dylan, you're good with the families and kids, and you have one of the best upsell rates for photo packages, that's why you're continuing your job as an elf."

"So the trick is doing a shit job. Got it."

"Dylan," Dad growls. "Your mother already told you to watch your language. You won't be asked a third time. And if you deliberately do a bad job, we'll take that as you deciding to get a job somewhere else and supporting yourself. This is the deal. You're a senior in college. If you want our financial support, you contribute to the things that provide that support while you're home. It's not an unreasonable ask. And in exchange, we pay your rent at school, you get to save money to pay for nights out with your friends and whatever else you do in your free time. You'll be graduating soon, and your choice will be to come home and work with Sarah year round or find yourself another job. You can live with us if you need to as long as you're actually working, whether for us or for someone else. But I know you were raised better than to act like this, and I'm disappointed you're continuing to protest just because your job includes dressing up in a costume for a few weeks out of the year."

"At least you get to wear pants and not tights that try to crawl up your"—Sarah darts a look at Mom and Dad, her mouth open, and I know the word *ass* is what was coming out next. "Rear end," she pivots, and I hide my smirk, but not well enough to avoid her glare.

Resigned to my fate, I nod. "Sorry for complaining," I mutter, and while I know that's not usually a good enough apology—and Dad gives me another long look to make sure I know it's not this time either—everyone lets it go. Mom hands me a paper with my work schedule for the weekend and after I'm expected back for Christmas. At least she's given me the weekend after finals to get home and relax for a day or two before I hit the ground running, my time split seventy-thirty between Santa's Workshop and the Christmas Emporium.

“Be glad you get to work in the store at all,” Sarah sidles up and hisses while Mom and Dad head to the kitchen. “None of the other elves do.”

“Nora could, though,” I remind her. “She just doesn’t want to.”

“Right, because she thinks being an elf is fun.” Sarah looks me up and down. “You could stand to borrow a little bit of her attitude.”

I roll my eyes, standing, but before I can respond, Dad pokes his head back in. “Dylan. We’re on dish duty, remember? Get in here.”

Grateful to get away from my bossy older sister, I say, “Coming. Sarah just needed to tell me something.”

Dad’s gaze bounces between us, but he nods when I move without hesitation toward the kitchen, accept the flour sack towel Dad hands me, and immediately get to work drying and putting away the china plates and crystal glasses that’ve been carefully set on drying mats.

So much for my plan to retire my elf costume. This’ll be the last year, though. One more year, and I’ll put that elf on the shelf for good. Thank fucking god.

CHAPTER TWO

Lydia

THE KEYPAD BEEPS AS IT RECOGNIZES MY CODE, LETTING ME INTO THE ChristmasFest space. I duck inside, pausing to shake off the snow that's falling this morning in big, fat clumps, a shiver running through me. According to the locals, snow fell early this year. It started in early November before most people had even cleaned up all their Halloween decorations, covering the piles of leaves in the street waiting to be picked up and freezing half the leaves still on the trees. And it hasn't really let up in the intervening month.

It's windy this morning, the cold seeping through my pea coat that looks cute but isn't built for winters like this. That's what happens when you live in Seattle most of the time. You don't have the wardrobe for winters in the interior mountains of the state.

I should probably do something about that soon, though, since I'll be staying here at least until next fall.

My dad's disapproving voice when I told him I was taking the spring semester off from college echoes through my head. *What are you playing at, Lydia? Are you doing this to get back at me for some reason? Because that's not fair.*

No, what's not fair is the way he's been treating me since he and Mom decided to split up, acting like every decision I make is some kind of personal reflection on him. Or an attack.

He's accused me of taking Mom's side. Of Mom coddling me. He told me he wouldn't pay for anything until I go back to school. Told Mom to do the same.

Of course, she refused.

Mom had given me a sympathetic look before leaving the room while dealing with Dad on that phone call, but even in her bedroom with the door closed, I could hear her. She lives in a small two bedroom condo—when she moved there she said it's so she doesn't have to worry about yard work but she made sure she'd always have a room for my older sister Brooke or me to stay in when we visit—and there's just nowhere I couldn't hear them arguing. So I'd put on my coat and borrowed her boots to go for a walk.

I've at least acquired my own snow boots now, and they do a decent job of keeping my feet warm on the walk to my new job as an elf in Santa's Workshop for the ChristmasFest.

It's not a long-term gig, honestly, but with Dad's refusal to help me out still ringing in my ears, it feels good to be earning my own money, even if Mom insisted it wasn't necessary for me to get a job right away.

The other reason I like working here is that it's a good distraction.

When Mom and Dad announced their divorce at the beginning of October, it threw me for a huge loop. I tried to keep up with school, I really did, but them divorcing was so unexpected, so out of left field, that I didn't know how to cope with it and I ended up tanking my midterms. As much as I tried to, I couldn't ignore it and pretend it wasn't happening or that it didn't really affect me.

And no one seems to understand my issues. I mean, I'm in college—or I was, at least—not a little kid. Shouldn't I be able to suck it up and deal?

But I couldn't. Not really. I managed to salvage the disaster of my midterms as much as possible, at least to the point of passing all my classes so that when I do return, I won't have to repeat anything. Even that took every ounce

of energy and willpower I had, and by the time the semester ended, I knew I wouldn't be able to turn around and do it all again in a month. I knew before then, honestly. I've been planning to withdraw from school since before Thanksgiving, and spending that holiday with my dad—I'd spend Christmas with Mom in her new place—clinched it. The way he kept pressuring me about everything definitely didn't help anything.

The real reason it affected me so much more than anyone expected is because I feel sort of responsible. I know, I know—it's ridiculous. How could I be responsible for my parents' marriage falling apart? I even saw one of the campus counselors a few times who told me as much. Not in those words, of course, but the idea was the same. It's not my fault my parents are splitting up.

But I feel like it's my fault they stayed together when they obviously weren't happy and probably hadn't been for a long time, though they hid it so well that I had no clue.

We've just become different people who want different things, Mom had said when I finally got up the guts to ask why about a week after they'd sat down with me on a video call and announced their decision to split up. They'd said it would be amicable, but that hasn't turned out to be very true, especially now that I've moved in with Mom in Arcadian Falls after a dismal first semester in college.

Apparently Mom wanted to do more, see more, have a new career. Or maybe the career change was more because of the divorce than the reason for the divorce. I don't know all the details. Either way, she ended up moving to Arcadian Falls and becoming the event coordinator at an old orchard a few miles outside of town.

She took over at the end of the apple season in late October only a week before Halloween when the last event coordinator had to quit suddenly due to a personal emergency. Mom stepped in and made their Halloween party the best they've had in years, according to Stephanie, the owner.

I'm happy for Mom. Really, I am. I'm just ... feeling a little lost. Like everything I thought I knew has turned out to be a lie, even though I know that's dramatic. Either way, I feel like pushing through last semester didn't

make things easier, and my grades, which were always As and Bs in high school, suffered, and I barely scraped by with Cs.

Plus, I don't actually know what I want to major in. Dad is convinced I need a degree in business and will go to law school to become a corporate lawyer like him, but even after just one semester, I know that's not what I want. Of course, telling him that also went over *super* well. He'd tried to convince me that taking gen eds would still be worthwhile, but when I'm too wrapped up in my own family drama to pay attention, it seems like a waste of money.

So now Mom's a party planner, and I've become an elf. I'm the first one in the building, entering through a side door. While I've only been working here a few days—I got hired almost as soon as I got into town last week and started over the weekend—I've figured out that I like opening better than closing. There's something special about being the first one here. It's hushed. Expectant. Full of possibilities. It's all the best parts of Christmas—garlands draped on the walls, twinkle lights threaded through them, and just before it opens, they'll start playing Christmas carols over the speakers. The few vendor booths I slip past on my way to the locker room near Santa's Workshop boast signs and decorations as well, making me smile. From what I gather, the elves are the only ones who use the locker room.

A low grunt behind me clues me in to the fact that I'm not alone anymore. Turning, I see a guy in a blue puffer coat, a backpack slung over one shoulder, a beanie pulled low over dark brows that are pulled together in consternation over dark eyes that study me coldly.

With his straight nose, full lips, and high cheekbones combined with the broodiness of his whole demeanor, I'd typically find him attractive. But he clearly finds me annoying.

I offer him a bright smile that I'm sure looks a little strained around the edges. "Hey." I sketch a wave with a mittened hand. "I'm Lydia." Hooking my thumb over my shoulder, I inform him, "I'm an elf."

That receives another grunt, and he brushes past me, dismissal clear.

"Well, okay then," I mutter under my breath, heading for the locker room behind Santa's Workshop. I'm already wearing the green and white striped tights and green stretch velvet dress that make up the majority of my

costume. All I have to do is take off my coat, change out my snow boots for elf shoes, and add the ears and hat to complete my costume. It's cute and fun, and I enjoy dressing up every day. The reactions from the kids make it that much better. The littlest ones love my pointy ears and always want to touch them.

Once I've stashed my things and finished off my costume, I'll head into Santa's Workshop to make sure everything is ready for today's kids—filling the baskets with mini candy canes to pass out and organizing my favorite stuffed animals and puppets to get smiles out of the babies and toddlers. There's an elf puppet and reindeer stuffy that are my favorites, and I like to make sure they're in a safe and easy to reach spot. Nora usually makes sure the computer is logged in and set up, but she's not on the schedule today. I don't know the other person who's scheduled. It said Elfie, which made my coworker Nora giggle yesterday when I asked her about them, and she'd just given me a smile and a cryptic, "You'll see."

Pushing into the locker room at the back, I'm greeted by the sight of light gray cotton stretched tightly across someone's backside. A male someone's backside.

At my squeak of surprise, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Broody straightens, pulling forest green pants up over the aforementioned boxer briefs, twisting to look over his shoulder and give me a nice view of his muscles rippling under the bare skin of his torso.

I throw up a hand to shield my eyes. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know anyone would be in here. Or, you know, using it as a changing room." Head down, I turn around and fumble for the door, when his low voice slides over me, a rueful chuckle riding the words.

"My fault. Shoulda been faster. Just didn't want to walk to work in thin high waters and tall socks, even if my boots would've covered the socks." Fabric rustles, and his voice sounds muffled. "You don't have to leave. I'm decent now."

Dropping my hand, I turn to find him tucking a striped shirt into the top of the pants, his back still to me. When he adds a vest to his ensemble, pulls the green and white striped socks and elf shoes that look like larger versions of

mine out of his backpack, it dawns on me. “Oooh. *You’re* Elfie.”

The look he throws me could shrivel grapes into raisins on the spot. “Don’t call me that,” he barks.

I hold up my hands, palms out. “Sorry. That’s who’s listed to work today on the schedule.” I see why Nora found it funny.

“My name’s Dylan,” he grumbles. “My family thinks it’s hilarious to use the elf name Mom gave me when I was a baby.”

Mom I mouth, putting it together. “Your mom is Mrs. Claus?” I clarify.

He jerks his chin in a nod, sitting on the bench to put on his socks and shoes, then shoving his backpack into a locker where his coat already hangs. I finally move to do the same, selecting a locker that’s reasonably far from him so he doesn’t think I’m trying too hard to avoid him *or* be close to him, opening it with a clang and setting my tote bag inside while I take off my hat, coat, and mittens, then I pull out my shoes and elf hat from my bag.

“You must be the new girl,” he says as I sit on the adjacent bench to unzip my boots and put on my elf shoes.

“That’s me.” It comes out sounding like a sad attempt at being chipper, and I grimace to myself. I’m not sure what the right tone to strike with him is. I mean, I walked in on him changing, called him a name he hates—though that’s the name on the schedule, so that’s hardly my fault—and I can’t tell if me being here is specifically irritating him, or if that’s just part of his charm.

And by charm, I mean not that at all.

“Are you one of those, ‘OMG being an elf is the greatest job on earth!’ types?” He affects a high, prissy voice. “I get to spread Christmas cheer to everyone! Singing’s my favorite!”

Shoes on, I spin to face him, finding him standing in front of the mirror to put on the elf ears and hat to complete his costume. He looks ridiculously good in the elf outfit, I have to admit. It’s unfair, since he should look goofy. But also, he’s being kind of a dick.

“What if I am?” I ask, the challenge in my voice unmistakable. At first I was

making an attempt to be polite, despite my accidental bumbling, but if he's going to be a dick, why bother?

He glances at me out of the corner of his eye, condescending amusement tugging at his full lips as he settles his hat just so. For someone who seems like he doesn't much like this gig, he sure is being particular about making sure he looks the part. "Then you'd get along great with my sister Sarah. She thinks it's her job to make everyone's season as merry and bright as possible, whether they like it or not."

"And you prefer to impersonate the Grinch, I take it?" I shoot back. Though now I'm curious about Sarah. She sounds like she might be nice. Does she come around Santa's Workshop too? If so, maybe I could make a new friend. If I'm going to stay here for a while, knowing someone other than my mom, my mom's boss, and this dick would be nice. Well, there's Nora, too. She's my age and seems nice, but she grew up here and already has a robust social life, if her stories are anything to go by. I'm not sure she's looking to add a local friend, especially since she's going to college in Portland.

He gives me a disdainful look, crossing his arms. From anyone else, I'd expect an eye roll, but he seems too full of himself to stoop to that level. For my part, I barely manage to contain my own. "So because I don't think prancing around dressed as an elf and getting called Elfie Tinselbottom at twenty-one years old is fun, I must be a Grinch. Is that it?"

When he gives his full elf name, I burst out laughing, which only causes his look to turn even more sour. Which, of course, only makes me laugh harder. Shaking my head, I wave a hand. "So-sorry," I splutter, feeling anything but remorseful. "I'm sorry." I manage to control myself enough to get out, "It's just you"—I wave a hand up and down to indicate him—"looking like that, going by a name like Elfie *Tinselbottom*." I collapse in a fit of hysterics as I repeat the name. It's just too much.

I'm lying sideways on the bench cackling, when I hear a locker door slam. I straighten up, laughing less, though still giggling, as he stomps out the door, though the hydraulics that keep the door from slamming probably dampen the effect he was going for.

"Oh my god," I mutter, carefully wiping the tears from under my eyes. I'm

still giggling as I retrieve my ears and hat from my purse, doing my best to straighten my face as I put them on in the mirror, but a burst of giggles keeps popping out despite my best efforts.

I know laughing at him isn't going to help my relationship with this newly discovered coworker, but even if I'd been the picture of professional politeness, I'm not sure it'd make much difference. I might as well enjoy myself when and how I can.

CHAPTER THREE

Dylan

IRRITATION DOESN'T EVEN *BEGIN* TO DESCRIBE THE FEELING COURSE through me. Frustration. Humiliation. Anger.

Dread.

Because I'll have to spend the next four to eight hours with the cheerful girl who not only enjoys her temp job as one of Santa's elves but who also delights in my humiliation as much as my sisters. The way she fell over laughing when she said my elf name has my cheeks burning as I stomp from the locker room to Santa's Workshop.

I'm the first one here, of course. Mom and Dad always show up in costume, and they don't arrive until right before their first scheduled appointment.

Standing in front of the tall desk, I power on the computer, tapping my fingers impatiently as I wait for the ancient machine to go through its processes. I've been telling my parents we need to upgrade for years. I even found a bunch of Black Friday sales this year—*again*—and sent them the links. But do they listen to me?

Of course not. Because who listens to me anyway?

They don't listen when I protest. They don't listen when I have good ideas,

like upgrading this dinosaur that I swear is as old as I am. The only way to get them to listen, it seems, is to do exactly what they say—find a way to support myself.

Only one more semester, and I'll do exactly that. I've been working part time at Johnson and Weaver, the architecture firm where I did a short internship last summer. They brought me in as support staff, but it's a good in for after I finish my degree in the spring. They've practically guaranteed me one of the paid internship spots I'll need to complete my training and take the licensing exam.

At least people there respect me. And while I might be support staff at this point, so I do a lot of grunt work, they don't treat me like a joke, and when I'm tasked with researching projects for the staff architects, they listen when I tell them what I've found. Randy, the architect I shadowed last summer, even asks my opinion on the projects, how I'd run them, letting me have a taste for what it'd be like to be an actual intern there. Of course, he doesn't always go with my ideas, but he takes the time to explain why he's choosing to do what he does. And when he *does* incorporate my suggestions, he always credits me and tells me I have good instincts.

Such a different experience than my family, who seem to take particular pleasure in giving me shit and pretending like my thoughts and feelings don't matter.

And now there's this new chick adding to the mess.

Greeeeat.

Even if she looks cute in that elf costume—her slim, willowy figure and short dark hair making her look like she could actually be a real elf—the last thing I need is someone else busting my balls while I'm home.

She's quiet when she comes to the Workshop area, studiously avoiding me while she straightens the stuffed animals, fills the candy cane baskets, and flashes the lights to make sure they're working and in the right positions.

“You wanna do the camera or do I need to do it?” I ask gruffly once she's satisfied the lights are working properly.

She turns to me, surprise lifting her eyebrows until they almost disappear

under the brim of her elf hat. She lays a hand over her chest. “You’re giving me the option? I figured you’d just tell me what to do since you’re obviously the one with tenure around here, being Santa and Mrs. Claus’s son and all.” Then she adds under her breath, “A disgruntled one at that.”

My lips tighten, and I’m tempted to call her out for the last bit—because I definitely heard it, even if she didn’t really mean for me to—but decide to ignore it for the sake of trying to get through the day with minimal drama. It’s not off to a great start, and we haven’t even opened yet.

Vendors are starting to filter in to the big open space where the ChristmasFest is held, flipping on their own lights, opening drawn curtains over their booths, arranging and filling in depleted inventory. It’s a big multi-use event space the town uses for concerts and festivals all year long—Arcadian Falls loves a good festival. When my parents got the town to agree to start the ChristmasFest, they also agreed to use the funds raised from booth fees to contribute to the expansion and upkeep of the town hall space. They did a big renovation and expansion when I was in high school, adding the locker room and additional storage spaces and upgrading the look of the main space.

According to Mom, it’s been a good ChristmasFest so far. For some people, my family included, they make the majority of their income from this one event, from Black Friday to Christmas Eve while ChristmasFest runs. The Christmas Emporium, our store that anchors the event, is open year round, but even so it’s no surprise that the bulk of our sales happen in the lead up to Christmas.

I survey my fellow elf coolly. What did she say her name was? Lila? Lilly? Something that starts with an L. “How long have you been working here?”

“I started over the weekend,” she answers, her tone crisp, her gaze as cool as mine as she stands by the camera.

“Have you worked the camera yet?” God, I hope so. I’m fine with dealing with parents and can put on enough of a polite face to fool them, but I’m pissy enough about being here at all that there’s no way I’ll be able to make a screaming toddler smile.

Sarah was always the best at that. She’d coo and make silly faces and wave the stuffed animals and puppets around, and if she couldn’t always get a

smile, she usually at least got them distracted enough to stop screaming so she could get a few shots.

Dad helps too, of course. He's always been amazing with kids. Dogs, too, but kids have always flocked to my dad. We had the hangout house growing up, and my parents never minded. All my friends loved my dad as much as their own. My siblings' friends too, as far as I can tell. Sarah's friend Olivia is proof enough of that. She was always at our house, and now even more so since she and Ty are together. When they got together last year, Mom sighed with happy tears in her eyes and said, "She's always been part of the family. Now it's official."

Never mind that they were barely dating at that point. They were together, and that was enough for Mom to consider Olivia her daughter-in-law, in spirit if not in fact. I'm not entirely sure what the deal is with Olivia's parents, but Olivia seems perfectly happy to spend all their holidays with us with fairly minimal visits to her parents while they're in town. A vast difference from Ty's last girlfriend, who'd barely deigned to visit at all, and when she did, made sure the visit was as short and unpleasant as possible for all concerned.

I could see Mom wanting to adopt this new elf too. She has that lost, sad, waifish quality that makes Mom's radar perk up.

L-name elf nods in answer to my question. "Yes. I've done the camera the last couple of days. Nora showed me." She lifts her chin a fraction. "She says I'm a natural, and Mrs. Claus has loved all the photos of mine that she's seen."

I jerk my chin in a quick gesture of acceptance. I don't need a full resume of her photo taking abilities. "Cool. You do camera, then. I'll deal with the parents, take the payments, and manage the line."

She stares at me for another beat before swallowing and clearing her throat. "Okay."

We both turn to busy ourselves with getting things ready for the day—it's not much and it goes a lot faster with both of us, so we're finding things to do. Sarah's straightening the storybooks in the basket next to Santa's bench inside the fake gingerbread house. I'm dusting off the already clean counter, then examining all the decorations to make sure nothing's coming loose or

falling off. We have a hot glue gun and super glue stashed under the counter to make quick repairs if needed, but it's still early enough in the season that everything's fine.

L-name elf's mention of Nora tells me that they've likely been working together the whole time she's been working here. Which explains why she likes to get here even earlier than me to make sure everything's ready. For all I know, Nora told her that was her job when she opens or works a full shift. Of course, I'm used to working with Nora or with random people who don't care that much, so I'm usually the one coming in and making sure everything's ready to go. I hate scrambling to find stuff or being unprepared when parents or kids are around.

I might not enjoy being an elf the way my older sister did—probably still would if she weren't so busy running the Christmas Emporium—but I'm not going to do a shit job. And, at least on my shifts, I'm not letting anyone else do a shit job either.

The conversation with my parents on Thanksgiving floats through my head where I complained that the reason I still have to do it is because I do a good job, but even I know that I was just bitching and wouldn't follow through on the veiled threat to do poorly. I don't have it in me to do a half-assed job of anything. Even when Sarah dragged me to her now-husband's house a couple years ago and told me he'd asked her to hang Christmas lights for him, I made sure it looked perfect even after he came stomping up demanding to know what we were doing, making it clear that he had *not*, in fact, asked Sarah to do any such thing. And while I did abandon the job before I'd finished, it'd killed me to do it, and even then, I only managed it because I was certain I'd be forced to take it all down whether I finished hanging all the lights or not.

Apparently Sarah finished—and when we drove by after, it wasn't super obvious where my work ended and hers began—and Shane left them up the rest of the season. Of course, by the time it was time to take them down, I was back at school in Seattle, and Sarah and Shane were a real couple, not just her antagonizing the next door neighbor who apparently wasn't displaying enough Christmas cheer for her liking.

To be fair, there was a lot more to it than that, what with it being his first

Christmas as Sophie's guardian. And Sarah had decided to take them on as a special project to make it a great Christmas despite the recent loss of their parents in the car accident the summer prior, but I knew none of that when she hijacked my evening and made me put Christmas lights on the guy's house.

After my newest coworker and I straighten everything and double and triple check all the supplies in Santa's Workshop, we're saved from standing around in awkward silence by the ChristmasFest manager announcing the doors opening. It doesn't matter that it's a weekday and the public schools don't let out for Christmas break for two more weeks, there's an immediate flood of people with several families making a beeline for Santa's Workshop.

Of course, Santa and Mrs. Claus haven't made it to the throne yet. They like to make a grand entrance. I'm sure they're somewhere nearby, though.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, Dad's voice booms, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" from somewhere behind Santa's Workshop.

Preschoolers look around, a few letting out excited squeals, and parents jiggle their babies higher in their arms, fluffing dresses and straightening shirts in preparation for Santa's arrival.

I glance at my fellow elf, and she's looking around at the kids and families who're already in our line, beaming at all of them. She's as thrilled to be here as I am annoyed at being forced to be an elf for another Christmas, and despite the contagious excitement surrounding us, something about that realization makes me even more irrationally annoyed.

Why can't they hire someone who's as disaffected as I am who's still willing to play the part and do a good job?

I'm not out here trying to piss on everyone's Christmas or anything. I think if Christmas weren't the family business, I'd enjoy it as much as anyone else. But I've never had the chance to put that theory to the test, and from where I'm standing, I don't know when I'll be able to.

I mean, I should be a few months into my paid internship next Christmas, so I'll be meeting the requirements that I pay for myself to get out of working the Fest. And in that future reality, I won't have a whole month off like I do

now. I'll probably have a week at most to spend with my family. Surely they wouldn't make me work then ...

Ty doesn't when he comes home, though he has started painting a mural in the Christmas Emporium again, which he does for free. But Sarah *asked* him to, not ordered, and he enjoys that kind of thing.

I'd happily design a new Santa's Workshop for them whenever they want, though there's nothing wrong with the current one. It's just, there's not much call for architectural planning in our family's line of business.

But that's all assuming things go as planned. What if they don't? What if I end up moving home and working with Sarah?

I barely suppress the shudder that runs through me as Dad finally appears, Mom on his arm, both of them waving broadly to everyone in their red velvet costumes. Dad makes a show of taking off his leather mittens, letting out another, "Ho, ho, ho!" as he takes his seat. Mom hands him a book from the basket.

"Before we get started," Dad booms, "how would everyone like a story?"

The kids yell, "Yeah!" and scattered applause fills the space.

L-name elf—Lydia? Maybe it's Lydia. I really need to find out—ushers some people forward to gather around Dad, gesturing others to fill in behind them so the kids can hear and see the story. I step out of the way, gesturing a few more people in, taking up my spot behind the computer and waking it up so I can see the name of the first appointment, wishing, not for the first time, that I either actually enjoyed this or could get out of it altogether.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lydia

MY FACE LIGHTS UP WITH A SMILE AS SANTA AND MRS. CLAUS APPEAR ON the dais holding Santa's oversized throne. I can't help it. This is my favorite part of the day.

The kids clap and squeal, thrilled that Santa has finally arrived.

I know that they're just normal people who live here in Arcadian Falls, making their living like everyone else, who've somehow decided to make their livelihood making kids happy.

Honestly, if I could choose something that makes people half as happy as they make these families, I'd consider that a good career.

The problem, of course, is deciding what that should be.

I stand, as rapt as the children, as Santa reads them a Christmas-themed picture book. I don't care what anyone says, there's something magical about all this, and I'm thrilled I get to be a part of it.

After the story's finished, I survey the gathered families, trying to pinpoint who'll need extra work to coax a smile out of. A few of the youngest toddlers look apprehensive, staring solemnly at Santa from the safety of their parents' arms, a finger in their mouth—or nose—dressed in varying degrees of

Christmas finery—from poofy dresses and suits to Christmas onesies and T-shirts. There’s even a little boy in his own Santa suit, his blond curls peeking out from under his Santa hat. He’s adorable, and everyone’s commenting on how cute he looks.

Dylan’s at the computer, checking people in to get their pictures taken with Santa, having the people who don’t have appointments forming a line on one side, while the people with appointments line up to the other. Someone starts crying, and I glance back to see one of the kids in the non-appointment line pointing to where Santa sits on his throne, a dark haired boy in a red and green argyle sweater vest and bow tie striding up.

I take up my spot behind the camera as Santa helps the boy into his lap, and I confer briefly with the parents about which props they want to use—the storybook or the Rudolph plush—and whether they want a silly face picture.

The mother’s face pinches. “We only get to choose one for prints, though, right?”

Nodding, I offer her a reassuring smile. “Yes, but all of them will be available online for you to download, and you can always order additional prints later.”

She decides on the storybook and the silly face photos, and the little boy smiles happily as I snap the pictures after he’s told Santa that he wants a new LEGO set and Hulk action figures.

There’s a steady flow all morning, and I’m grateful when Dylan puts up the sign that says Santa’s on a break. Santa and Mrs. Claus disappear the way they came in with another, “Ho, ho, ho!”

I straighten up the books and stuffies while Dylan replenishes the candy canes, and then we head for the locker room together.

“How’re you holding up?” he asks, his voice more gruff than amiable, but I decide to take the question at face value. Dude’s grumpy, but he showed up that way, so it has nothing to do with me. And even if it does somehow have something to do with me, that’s still one hundred percent a him problem. I’ve done nothing but exist and do my job, and if he has a problem with that, it’s on him.

“Good,” I respond, offering him my sunniest smile. “Mornings are my favorite.”

He grunts. “You sure singing’s not your favorite?”

The question catches me by surprise, and I laugh. “No. And I promise that I won’t start singing Christmas carols at the top of my lungs to try to infect you with some Christmas cheer, either.”

He nods, his hands in his pockets. “Thanks. ‘Preciate it.”

“But you have to try not to be such a sourpuss all the time too.”

His eyebrows jump in surprise when he looks at me. “Sourpuss? I don’t think I’ve ever been called that before.”

I arch one brow, disbelief written all over my face. “Maybe not to your face. But if this attitude”—I circle a finger around his face—“exists on a regular basis? I’m sure plenty of people have thought so.”

Shaking his head, he mutters something under his breath that I don’t catch.

“What was that?” I ask archly, but he just shakes his head.

“Can we tone down the cheerful elf routine at least during lunch? If you can do that, I’ll do my best not to be such a”—his mouth twists in a combination of distaste and amusement—“sourpuss.”

I cackle at the way he repeats that word, like it’s made of undiluted lemon juice and cayenne pepper, but nod. “Deal.”

“How was work today?” Mom asks when I get home.

“Good.” I pause, taking off my boots, then hanging up my coat and scarf, carrying my tote bag to my room.

“I’ve got a beef stew on the stove and rolls in the oven!” Mom calls down the hall.

“Sounds delicious. Let me change and I’ll be right out!”

I swap out my striped tights and green velvet dress for soft gray lounge pants and a Fair Isle print thermal, adding fuzzy red socks to keep my toes warm. It's snowing again, but my hat kept my hair dry and my ears warm, though my cheeks and nose are still pink from the cold walk home. I don't mind, though. With the snow falling like we're in the last scene of a Hallmark Christmas movie, it's magical.

Growing up in Seattle, snow was a rare and dubious treat. Being so close to the coast keeps the winters warmer and the summers cooler—usually—so when it snows, it's the just-barely-below-freezing-really-wet-and-really-slick kind. And it snows just enough to cover everything and make the hills into a bobsled run, sending cars careening all over and crashing into each other.

But also—snow! I always thought the snow gave a magical fairytale quality to the world when it happened. It was just best to stay home on those days if you could.

I always loved when it snowed, but my parents never quite shared my enthusiasm. Which is why it's kinda funny Mom moved somewhere that it snows so much. But she seems to have adapted. "They have the infrastructure," she said when I brought it up the other day. "Deicer and snow plows and people who know how to drive in it. It's a whole different experience. Besides, I grew up in Montana. I'm used to snow."

And that's why I love the snow so much, too, I guess. We'd go visit my grandparents in Kalispell for Christmas every couple of years, and I'd get to build snowmen and go sledding and do all the fun snow activities I never got to do at home. It *was* magical.

Once, Grandpa took me out snowshoeing under the trees after dinner, and that's still one of my favorite memories, crunching across the snow under the light of an almost-full moon, the snow reflecting the moon's glow enough that we could see just fine, the hush of the woods at the back of their property, the contrast of the warmth of my snow gear and the cold, December air while their boxer ran along beside us, darting away and back again.

Sighing at the memory, I head into the kitchen where Mom's stirring the pot of stew. She turns at my approach, a smile lighting her face as she holds out an arm for a hug. She has a section of her shoulder length bob clipped back

with a small sparkly barrette, showing off the gray streak in her otherwise dark hair. At fifty, she's decided that she'd show off the silver in her hair, accenting it with the blingy silver barrettes, rather than try to hide it. With her dedication to sunscreen and skincare, she has that ageless look about her, which is underscored by her choice of classic styles that show off her trim figure, though right now she's also wearing soft lounge pants—in navy instead of gray—and an open, knee-length robe of the same fabric over a soft pink V-neck tee.

I slip under Mom's arm, giving her a quick squeeze before getting down bowls for the stew. She left all our old dishes with Dad, opting to get a new set for her new place. These are dark purple, which set off nicely against her off-white and natural linen placemats and napkins when we bother to set the table, which she did the first night I was here. But since then we've developed an easier routine of eating on the couch, chatting about our days and then picking out a Hallmark Holiday movie to watch to unwind.

"Tell me one good thing and one bad thing about your day," Mom says as she pulls the rolls out of the oven.

I smile, setting the bowls on the counter and getting out two of the cloth napkins she keeps neatly folded in a drawer. We've been doing this since I was a kid at school. At dinner, we'd all go around and share one good thing and one bad thing about our days.

"Hmm. It's hard to pick just one good thing."

Mom gives me a warm look. "I'm glad you're enjoying your job. I'm sure it can get stressful with so many families and little kids, but that doesn't seem to bother you at all."

I shake my head. "So far, so good. I haven't had any truly awful parents to deal with and the kids ..." I shrug. "They're just kids. Like you said, it's stressful and overwhelming, and they don't really know how to deal with that. I like when I can get a smile out of a kid who's been upset." I smile, thinking about the kid today who really made me work for his shy grin. I ended up doing my version of the tango with the elf puppet, singing and doing dramatic steps. It distracted the kid enough to stop crying, and when I whipped my head around and made a silly face, he grinned, and I pushed the

button in my hand and captured the image. It was perfect.

“What are you thinking about?” Mom prompts. “That seems like the good thing.”

When I tell her the story, she laughs as I demonstrate my tango in the kitchen using a wooden spoon in place of the puppet.

“The bad thing,” I say, letting the humor fall away, wistfulness taking its place as I put the wooden spoon back in the crock next to the stove, “is my newest coworker. Or I guess, I’m *his* newest coworker, as his parents are the ones who own Santa’s Workshop and act as Santa and Mrs. Claus.”

Mom’s eyebrows raise, and she hands me my bowl of stew, ushering us into the living room, the rolls in a small, napkin covered basket in her other hand. “What happened?”

I shrug, carefully setting my bowl on the coffee table before flopping onto the couch. “He’s just ...” I shrug again, sorting through all my feelings and impressions about him. Grumpy? Hot? Annoyingly watchful? I couldn’t quite decipher the face he made when I caught his eye after the impromptu tango, but it didn’t look positive. That plus his lunch comments about me needing to tone down the ‘cheerful elf routine’ left a sour taste in my mouth, and I’d left at the end of the day with a cursory goodbye that pushed the bounds of politeness.

“He doesn’t want to be there,” I say at last. “And it shows.”

“Oh no,” Mom says after swallowing a mouthful of stew. “Is he mean to the kids or something? Because that’ll just make your job more difficult. I can see why that would make him the bad part of the day.”

Brows crimping together, I shake my head. “No, he’s actually really good at interacting with the families, though I don’t think he’s as good at getting the kids to smile—especially the shy or upset ones—and he knows it, because once he determined I knew how to use the camera, he told me I could do that and he’d do the other part.”

“That doesn’t sound bad, though,” Mom says. “You like taking the pictures, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“But?” she prompts at my unenthusiastic agreement.

Another shrug. It seems like all I can do about Dylan is shrug. Honestly, that’s pretty accurate. A shrug means so many things—acceptance, confusion, uncertainty, resigned ambivalence—and it encapsulates all my feelings so well. “But it’s more fun when Nora’s working. Sure, she’s a little more flighty than Dylan—who I pissed off the minute we met by calling him Elfie—” Mom bursts out laughing, and I hold up my hands in self defense. “That’s how he was listed on the schedule! I didn’t know his real name or that being called Elfie would make him mad! If it pisses him off so much, *why* is it on the schedule?” I run a hand through my hair, giving the strands a tug, and I know it makes them stand up, because Mom reaches up and smooths them down.

Shaking my head, I take a bite of my stew, contemplating as I chew and swallow. “It’s a fun job, you know? The kids, the families, Santa and Mrs. Claus themselves ...” I wave my spoon around. “All of it. It’s so festive and cheerful, and here comes Elfie, stomping in and frowning at everyone and everything. I half expected ‘You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch’ to start playing the moment he walked in.” Mom’s cackling, and her mirth is infectious. Covering my growing grin with the back of my hand, I shake my head. “Honestly, when it did come on over the speakers at one point today, I had a hard time not shooting him pointed looks.” I straighten my spine, dropping my shoulders and smoothing my face into calmness. “But I kept it professional. I didn’t tell him what I was thinking—that I’d expect him to be the Grinch’s son rather than Santa’s.”

Sighing, Mom shakes her head at me, though she’s still smiling. “I’m sorry, sweetie. Maybe he was just having a bad day?”

“Maybe,” I concede, though I don’t think that’s it.

“Just keep being your usual self,” Mom suggests. “I’m sure you’ll win him over.”

I hum noncommittally. I’m not sure that’s true, considering he asked me to tone down my usual self at lunch. But there’s no point telling Mom that. Instead, I reach for the remote. “What should we watch tonight?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Dylan

I END UP WORKING WITH LYDIA FOR THE NEXT THREE DAYS IN A ROW. I confirmed her name from the schedule, because I didn't want to look like an ass asking her to tell me what it is again when she clearly remembered mine.

"Isn't she great?" Nora says as we watch Lydia taking pictures of a fussy toddler. She's playing peek-a-boo from behind the camera, a reindeer plush with weighted feet draped over her shoulder. She jumps out so quickly that the stuffed animal falls off her shoulder, and she makes a big dramatic show of picking it up and brushing it off. It looks like all her attention is on what she's doing, but when the lights flash, it's obvious that she was keeping an eye on the kid after all and saw the smile. The lights flash a couple more times while the tot points and reaches for the toy, which Lydia scampers out and hands to him, then takes another shot of the little guy showing the toy to Dad, who's making appropriately appreciative faces.

My dad's great with kids, yet another trait of his that I didn't inherit. Honestly, I think the only thing we have in common is our desire for plans and order. He's the reason the Christmas Emporium and ChristmasFest took off like they did. Mom's the Christmas lover, though Dad's no Scrooge, who thought it would be a good niche for the little town intent on bringing in more tourism. But Dad's the one with the eye for detail and planning sense who

crafted the business plan and got things profitable, working construction in the warmer months to make up for the seasonal slowdown of a Christmas-based business.

He was able to quit construction when I was in elementary school, because the store and ChristmasFest made enough that we didn't need the extra income anymore. It made it so Mom and Dad could arrange the schedule so one of them was always home with us until Nora was old enough to let Ty or Sarah babysit for short stints after school.

I know my parents are right that I should be more grateful for the store that's given my family a good life and a place in the heart of this community. And it's not that I'm *ungrateful*, exactly. I'd just prefer a more behind-the-scenes role. But Sarah's got all that covered. And I don't want to take it from her—she loves the Christmas Emporium and has always wanted to take over running it—I just wish I could work there full time on my school breaks instead of here.

Having extras like Lydia only makes it more obvious to me that I don't belong in Santa's Workshop. I could never act as ridiculous as she does on a regular basis all in the name of getting a kid to smile. And she's not self-conscious about it at all.

Why would she be? All anyone says to her is how wonderful she is at her job. And she is. There's no denying it.

I grunt in response to Nora, who rolls her eyes at me as she finishes making sure all the last client's photos are uploaded to the website where the family can download them later. "Dude, seriously," she says, eyes on the computer. "You need to get over yourself. Life is what you make of it." Turning to me, she lays a hand on my shoulder. "This isn't a bad gig. It's only a few weeks. And it pays well. Besides," she drops her hand from my shoulder, "this is your last Christmas as a college student. You really want to be a grumpy Grinch and ruin the holiday for everyone?"

When I give another grunt, she sighs. "Guess so," she quips. "See ya later." And with that, she's gone, waving at babies and high-fiving preschoolers as she heads past the line to take off. She and I are splitting a shift today, and apparently Lydia has the dubious pleasure of working all day. More hours

means more money, obviously, but it's all day *here*. An enclosed area with the same fifteen Christmas carols on repeat, screaming kids, loud and sometimes rude parents, red and green and glitter fucking *everywhere*. Who can really blame me for getting tired of it after years of doing this every Christmas?

Meanwhile, my friends get to relax, watch movies, hang out, maybe go to a Christmas party or two, and only brave these kinds of venues for short stints to get a few gifts.

That sounds fantastic to me, but even after I'm done with college, there's no chance of getting that kind of Christmas. Mom and Dad work all the way up to Christmas Eve, with even longer hours on Saturdays, because the Fest opens earlier—ten instead of noon—and still stays open until eight.

A wide smile stretched across her face, Lydia turns to glance at me, and when she sees I'm the one at the computer instead of Nora, the smile dies. It's almost painful to watch a glacier descend across her features as she gives me a nod of greeting. I nod back, turning away to greet the next family in line. "Merry Christmas." I give the mom my best customer service smile. "Which package are you getting?"

The mom studies the menu while Lydia comes over and says the little girl in her plaid Christmas dress can come tell Santa what she wants for Christmas. Once the mom tells me her selection, I process her credit card, turning to watch as Lydia works her magic, the coldness that came over her at the sight of me melted under the natural warmth she offers everyone else.

It's fine, I tell myself. I don't want her to try to win me over with her sunny personality and warmth. I'm the one who told her she didn't need to use the cheerful elf routine on me, right?

Right.

But for some reason watching her interact with everyone else and only offering me monosyllables irritates me all day long. I just can't figure out why.

Nora sticks her tongue out at me at the kitchen table the next morning as we eat our breakfast. “Stuck with you all day, bro,” she says.

I raise an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, *you’re* stuck with *me*? I think you meant that the other way around.”

She tilts her head like she’s considering my statement, humming thoughtfully, then she shakes her head definitively. “Nope. Definitely meant it the way I said it.” She sips her coffee, studying me. “Seriously, though. Did something happen at school? I know you’ve never been excited about the elf thing, but you seem more pissy than normal.”

Shaking my head, I stuff the last of my breakfast burrito in my mouth and wipe my hands on a napkin before balling it up and dropping it on my plate. Mom makes a batch of hearty breakfasts, like burritos and sandwiches, that she stores in the freezer for all of us to eat during busy times, and ChristmasFest definitely qualifies, though she did it during the school year when we were all growing up too. In elementary school, we were recruited as assistants for the batch cooking, and by the time high school hit, we were given a slot in the rotation. I’m scheduled to make next week’s breakfast on Sunday night.

“School’s fine,” I answer after swallowing, reaching for my own mug of coffee. I take mine black, not all sugary and tan like Nora’s. I study her as I take a sip, then set my mug back on the table. “You don’t get tired of it?”

She quirks an eyebrow. “Tired of what, exactly?”

I wave a hand, taking in the decorations dripping from every available surface. Mom decorates for Christmas as soon as the Halloween decorations come down. She says Canadians don’t wait until late November, so why should she? “All of it. The constant Christmas, the elf costumes, the stupid elf names she gave us as babies ...”

Nora makes a *meh* face. “Not really. It’s just how Mom is. She likes Christmas, and she has fun with decorating and naming things. I think it’s sweet.”

“Sweet,” I repeat flatly.

Rolling her eyes, Nora grins and stands up, walking to a line of ornaments

hanging off the edge of a cabinet. Our family has so many that even the biggest tree would be overwhelmed, so Mom hangs them everywhere. “Like these.” She touches a few of the ornaments. “I made these in elementary school. Mom still keeps and displays them. And these”—she touches a Christmas tree made of painted popsicle sticks and colorful pompoms then a cinnamon stick reindeer—“are ones you made. You don’t think that’s a good thing?” Propping herself against a clear spot on the counter, she lifts her mug to her lips, her eyebrows once again arching inquisitively.

I shrug a shoulder. “I mean, sure. That’s nice. I guess that’s not the part I’m tired of.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nora grouches. “We all know you hate being called Elfie. But seriously, man. You need to get over yourself. No one thinks you’re less masculine because Mom gave you a stupid elf name when you were a baby. We all have them.”

“Right, but did you get mocked mercilessly in middle school for your elf name, Sugarplum?”

Her brow creases. “Well, no. Though the Tinselbottom part did get a few snickers when people heard that.”

“Exactly.” I point a finger at her. “But you’re a girl, and you love all that cutesy, girly shit.

She mouths the words, “cutesy, girly shit,” but I ignore her and keep right on going.

“And guys drooled over you, probably making gross puns about the Tinselbottom part.” In fact, I know they did. I heard some of them and even had to threaten a few guys to quit saying disgusting things about my little sister.

She frowns, but I still don’t stop.

“But I’m a guy.” I jab my thumb into my chest. “And *Elfie Tinselbottom* doesn’t exactly inspire thoughts of masculinity and athletic prowess.”

Scoffing, she rolls her eyes. “Right, and sexual harassment is so much better than some assholes making fun of you.”

It's my turn to frown. "I protected you, though. I made sure everyone knew that harassing you like that wouldn't end well for them."

She resumes her seat at the table, sighing. "And you think that ended it?" She shakes her head. "They just made sure it was sneaky enough that they couldn't get caught. And what about after you left?" Another shake of her head.

A wave of anger roils through me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She raises a hand, palm up. "And what would you have done? Driven all the way here multiple times a week to beat up some jackass who thinks sexual harassment and flirting are the same thing?"

Grinding my teeth, I clench my hands into fists. "Maybe? Who was it? I want names."

Shaking her head, she flicks her hand at me. "It was years ago, Dylan. I'm over it. You should be too."

I force myself to take a few deep breaths and calm down. "Fine. But doesn't that just prove my point? You dealt with that for years, hell, maybe you still do and you just don't say anything anymore because you've realized it won't change. Doesn't that make you want to stop altogether? Resent the fact that you still have to?"

"Do you think," she says slowly, "that I wouldn't have to deal with that from any customer facing job? Or from just ... existing? That's part of the deal of being a woman, Dylan. It has nothing to do with being an elf every Christmas. If I worked retail or as a waitress or basically anywhere a teenager could get a part time or seasonal job, I'd still have to deal with it. Maybe not gross guys offering to put tinsel on my bottom or whatever, but only the specifics would change, not the substance."

That brings me up short, and I let out a sigh. "Do you think Lydia deals with that too?"

Her eyes twinkle, her eyebrows lifting and her lips pressing together in suppressed amusement, though she tries to hide that behind her coffee cup. "I doubt anyone offers to tinsel her bottom, but given that she's young and pretty and exists in public places, yeah, I'm sure she's dealt with guys saying

gross things to her before. Pretty much everyone I know has.”

My fists clench involuntarily, and Nora sets her coffee down again, her amusement plain on her face. “I didn’t think you liked Lydia.”

“Who said that?”

She laughs. “Uh, you? She told me you asked her to tone herself down while you guys are on break.”

“No I didn’t.”

Another chuckle from my sister. “Sure, dude. Whatever you say.”

“I didn’t!” I protest again, running every interaction we’ve had through my brain. Did I?

“Okay,” Nora says with fake affability, standing and patting my shoulder. “I’m not arguing with you.”

“What did she tell you?” I demand.

After rinsing her mug, Nora turns to face me, arms crossed, still clearly entertained by this. “I told you. She said you asked her to tone it down when you were on break. Something about her being too cheerful?” She shrugs, dropping her arms and heading out of the kitchen. “Don’t worry, bro. I’ll be my usual self all the time, just for you.” She disappears through the doorway, but then pokes her head back in. “All. Day. Long.”

“You sure about that?” I shoot back, needing the last word. “Or are you going to con Lydia into taking half your shift like you usually do?”

Her laughter floats back through the house. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

CHAPTER SIX

Lydia

MY DAY OFF IS GOING TO BE EPIC.

At least that's what I think when I wake up at the luxurious time of 12:05 pm. Mom'll be at work until at least six, if not later. She's deep in the throes of planning multiple Christmas parties, both for local groups as well as companies coming in from out of town to treat their C-suite executives and their families to the town's festivities. It's my first day all to myself in ... I can't remember. Ever, maybe?

I know there were times in high school where I was home alone hanging out by myself, but it was never for an entire day. A few hours, tops.

And it was different, too, since I was still in school. After the stress of college and the divorce and Dad getting mad at me for quitting school, a day of lounging on the couch watching as many movies as I can and eating junk food is exactly what I need.

Except by about four o'clock, just as it's basically dark, my day of lounging and movies has gotten stale. But what should I do with myself?

I've been in town for a week, so it's not like I have friends. I could go out somewhere, but ... where? It's a little early for dinner, and I'm not that

hungry anyway. Besides, eating in a restaurant by myself just seems kinda sad.

In books and movies, the glamorous single heroine always decides to get dressed up and go out to a bar in this kind of situation, but I'm not old enough for a bar, and despite my roommates' insistence, I've never tried to use the fake ID she got me for my birthday in November. We might both have dark hair, but beyond that, I don't look at all like the forty-year-old woman whose picture has been paired with the name Natalia Milosevic on the piece of plastic. When I asked why she got me a Russian name, she shrugged and said, "It was between that or Latina, and you're way too white to pull that off."

I couldn't argue with that reasoning. I am way too white. I barely even get tan at the height of summer.

Something like that might—*might*—work in a sketchy bar in a big city like Seattle, but in a town the size of Arcadian Falls? Sure, it's full of tourists for ChristmasFest right now, but I still have my doubts that anyone would let me into a bar. I've always been told I act mature for my age, and maybe someone would believe I'm twenty-one if I told them, but no one would believe I'm the forty listed on the fake ID, and the minute I got out my real one, the game would be up.

So. What then?

I stand up, fold the throw blanket I'd been lounging under, and place it neatly over the back of the couch, then I straighten the pillows, collect the remains of my snacks and dispose of them in the kitchen, all while contemplating what I should do. Moving into my room, I stare into my closet, debating what to change into. I'm going to walk, because we live close enough to the main strip that driving is ridiculous anyway but also because Mom has the car, and while my plan is still mostly nebulous, that's where I plan to end up. It's dark, though with the snow and cloud cover, there's a purply quality to the light reflecting off the snow and clouds that's a lot brighter than nighttime would be otherwise.

I decide on fleece-lined leggings and an oversized sweater. With my boots and coat I'll be plenty warm and still look cute if I end up inside somewhere

and take my coat off. Though I still don't know that I'll do more than just walk around downtown and head back home. Once I'm changed, I get on all my winter gear, put my phone and keys in my coat pocket, and head out the door.

My breath puffs in front of me as I pick my way along the sidewalk. They're mostly clear, but a skiff of snow has fallen at some point this evening. It must've been recent, because I'm the first person to walk on this stretch of sidewalk, my boot prints perfectly outlined in the snow that just barely covers the concrete. Glancing over my shoulder, I smile at the sight, but as soon as I turn onto Main Street, the thin layer of snow is no longer visible, trampled by the near constant foot traffic during ChristmasFest. I'm sure it's quiet once everything's closed, but during business hours, there are always people about.

Walking along, I peer into the various shops and businesses. It's mostly souvenir shops and restaurants through here. One street over is the town park with its gazebo. The gazebo and trees are bursting with lights, and baskets of poinsettias hang from all the streetlamps downtown. At the end of the street on the other side is the lake, which I haven't really been to yet since it's not exactly lake weather. At the end of this street is the big town hall that gets converted into the market space for ChristmasFest every year.

My feet take me in that direction, almost without thought. It's like I can't stay away, even on my day off. It might be nice to check out, though. I haven't been through and looked at the vendors. And while I haven't gotten paid yet, I do still have enough money in my account that I could maybe get my mom a present while I have the opportunity, and maybe a keepsake for myself. Something to help me remember this time, no matter how short it ends up being. Because even though I'm planning on staying here for the next several months—nearly a year, really, because even if I only take one semester off, I wouldn't go back to school until August—being here feels important. Formative. Like it'll have long term significance. Arguably if it's so important, I shouldn't need a trinket to remember it, but I *want* one, and that's a good enough reason. That's what Mom keeps saying, anyway. That she's finally doing what she actually wants rather than what she's always been told she should want and that she'd like me to have that realization while I'm still young so I can have a full and happy life the whole time.

The unspoken counterpoint to that, of course, is that Mom has been largely

unhappy her entire adult life, fitting herself into the roles she's been told she should play rather than what she actually desires to do. I have to admit that she does seem much happier in general here. Sure, there are moments where she's sad—especially after she's been on the phone with Dad or with her attorney—where I come home to find her with a glass of wine in hand and evidence of recent tears on her face and she holds out an arm and says, “C'mere, baby girl. I could use a hug,” just like she always did when I was little and needed comforting. Only this time, she's the one needing comforting. Maybe when I was a kid, she needed it some of those times too? Or just as much as I did?

The thought stops me in my tracks when I'm nearly to the door, and I start moving again when a couple carefully steps around me with a murmured, “Scuse us.”

“Oh! Sorry.” I step to the side and let them and a family pass before resuming my route. It's only at the last second that I make myself go in the front door instead of continuing around to the employee entrance at the back. It feels a little funny to do that, but it's a good distraction from the sudden shift in my understanding of my childhood and how it must've been for Mom.

Another wave of guilt ripples over me at the renewed realization that she stayed unhappy for so long so that I could continue my carefree existence. And maybe it's selfish, or at least self-absorbed, of me to make their divorce about me, but it's hard not to think that I'm a major contributor to my mom's longstanding unhappiness.

She's an adult, my therapist's voice floats into my head. She's responsible for her own choices. If she decided staying was the best choice, she's the only one who could make that call. And now she's decided leaving is the best choice, and that's also only up to her. Not you. You are not responsible for your mother.

“I am not responsible for my mother,” I whisper to myself, the words lost in the noise and clamor that overtakes me as soon as I open the doors to ChristmasFest.

Coming at it from this angle is an entirely different experience. When I work the opening shift at Santa's Workshop, the noise gradually grows around me

so that I barely notice it until I leave and walk out into the sudden quiet. Even when I start in the middle of the day, enough filters into the locker room that it's not such a shock going into the main event space. Plus, I'm there to work, so I have something specific to focus on.

Now I'm just part of the crowd.

I drift slowly from booth to booth, looking over the ornaments and gift ideas, hoping something will jump out at me for my mom. I'm hoping I can find something to help round out her condo. She got all the essentials right away—dishes, furniture, linens—but is taking her time with artwork and general decor, so there are still several blank walls. She only has one thing on the walls I recognize—a painting she fell in love with when we went to Victoria, BC the summer before my older sister Brooke went to college. Right now the Christmas decorations are making the space seem less bare, but once January hits and the tree comes down, she'll need something to warm up the space.

There's a sign vendor that has some fun stuff, but those kinds of things aren't really Mom's style. She likes clean, classic lines and rich colors, and her taste in artwork runs bolder than I realized. I think she toned that down before in deference to my dad.

My jaw clenches at the thought of Dylan asking me to “tone it down” for him. Maybe I shouldn't anymore. Maybe I should just be my usual self, and he can suck it.

Or maybe I can just continue to largely ignore him. That seems the easiest and most likely scenario. It's not like I'll have to interact with him regularly after ChristmasFest is over. Our time together will end soon enough.

But I won't end up in a relationship with someone like that, that's for sure. I don't want to find myself thirty years from now waking up and realizing that I haven't been allowed to be myself for years.

With that in mind, I step back from the farmhouse decor stand in front of me with its beige and brown color scheme—though to be fair, it has pops of red in trucks and plaids in deference to Christmas—and scan the space to see if anything looks like it might be up Mom's alley. With Santa's Workshop tucked away in the back, it's hard to see much when I'm at work, but I thought I'd seen something ...

There!

Yes. It's a little out of the way too, but there's a booth with swirly, colorful ornaments on a slowly rotating rack to catch the attention of shoppers, but it's the wall of artwork that I'm most interested in. But when I get close and I see the price of the large centerpiece print hanging on the wall, my breath catches. It's not unreasonable, but it's definitely out of my budget.

My hesitation must show on my face, because the woman running the booth says, "I also have prints over here." She touches a basket off to the side, and I give her a grateful smile.

"Oh, perfect." It might not be the large centerpiece display, but a print in a nice frame, a mat around it to make it bigger ... that could work. It could add to Mom's gallery wall. There's not much there now, though Mom picked up some Christmassy fabric and put those in frames and embroidery hoops to add to the few photos of Brooke and me she has up, and I know she'd like something fun to replace the fabric placeholders once it's time to put away the holiday decor.

I flip through all the prints of the abstract work once, then I go through it again more slowly, stopping to study the ones that caught my eye the first time through. I narrow it to three, studying each one and imagining it in Mom's living room. Finally, I pick one out—it's a study of blues and greens that swirl together in a soothing and interesting way with a little pop of orange here and there that keeps it interesting. I think Mom'll love it.

The artist appears to be about my Mom's age, and she gives me a warm smile, putting on a pair of reading glasses as she picks up her phone to process the order. "Oh, good choice. This is one of my favorites."

We chitchat for a moment as I pay, and I accept the bag she offers me to carry my purchase and head back into the fray.

I'm close enough to Santa's Workshop that it catches my eye, and I head that direction, not really sure why or what I'm hoping to find there.

To my surprise, Dylan's working the camera while Nora does the computer and line management. When I work with Dylan, he always has me taking the pictures.

“Hey!” Nora says when she spots me, her voice full of genuine warmth. “What are you doing here? It’s your day off!”

Chuckling, I step closer so we don’t have to shout over the families waiting to see Santa. “I just couldn’t stay away.”

She bats her eyes and clasps her hands over her chest. “Awww. You just love us so much you can’t get enough, huh?”

“Something like that,” I say with a grin.

She spots the bag in my hand. “Oooh. What’d you get? Anything good?”

I sneak past the line and sidle up next to her, showing her the print.

“Nora,” Dylan snaps, and I look up to see him glaring at us. “Customers!”

She casts me an exasperated look. “I was watching for them,” she mutters under her breath for my ears. “They’re still collecting their kid from Santa. Sheesh.”

Biting my lip to cover my amusement, I step away so Nora can show the family the pictures and print out the one they pick, efficiently and cheerfully finishing the interaction by handing them their photos in an envelope printed with the website and code where they can access the rest and sending them off with a wave and, “Merry Christmas!”

Dylan makes a production of rearranging the basket of stuffed animals he has at his disposal for the little kids, but he obviously won’t need them for the older elementary aged kids talking to Santa right now. “Got too bored on your night off, huh?” he asks, his usual grumpiness making it sound more like an accusation than a genuine question.

“Are you here to suck the Christmas cheer out of all these kids and their families?” I cross my arms and cock a hip. “Are you really an eldritch creature, and this is how you stay young and beautiful?”

That surprises a laugh out of him, and he straightens. “Young and beautiful, huh?”

My cheeks heat, and I roll my eyes to cover it. “That is what ancient joy-sucking eldritch monsters usually want, isn’t it?”

His half grin is almost disarming. “I wouldn’t know.” He glances at the kids talking to Santa. “Duty calls.”

As he’s turning, I quip, “Gotta suck as much joy as possible, am I right? You have to get enough to keep you going for eleven months, after all.”

He ignores me, but his shoulders shake and his voice quivers with suppressed laughter as he calls the attention of the kids, counting down to take the pictures.

Turning away, I catch Nora watching us, and she gives me a knowing grin, but I just shake my head at her. Whatever she thinks she knows, she’s wrong.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dylan

I'VE JUST SAT DOWN ON THE COUCH AFTER MY LONG WEEKEND SHIFT WHEN Dad comes in wearing flannel pants and his newest Christmas sweater. This one is blue with a snowman on it, with a “real” scarf that dangles off.

“I didn’t realize you had an ugly sweater party to go to already,” I tell him when he appears.

“Ha. Ha,” he says. “Hilarious. Just for that, you can come help me shovel.”

“Aw, man,” I protest. “I’m tired. And I just sat down.”

Dad shrugs. “I’m tired too, but the snow won’t clear itself. Come on. If we do it together, it’ll get done faster, and your mom’ll have hot cocoa and the shepherd’s pie warmed up and waiting for us.”

Sighing, I stand and follow him to the garage, resigned to the chore. Honestly, me getting conscripted into shoveling has nothing to do with my comment on his sweater. It would’ve happened anyway, and it was only wishful thinking that he’d let me relax for a few minutes first. We’ve been gone all day, and it’s snowed about six inches since this morning, most of it in the last hour.

He fires up the snow blower, and I grab the shovel to clear the walkway and

sidewalks, scraping up the snow that got driven over that the snowblower can't get up after he finishes with the driveway.

When we're done, he gives me a side hug. "Thanks for the help, Dylan. I appreciate it."

"No problem, Dad." That makes him chuckle, probably because I was acting so put out when he told me to help him, but he accepts it.

Dad was right about the shepherd's pie. As soon as we're back in the house, the smell has my mouth watering. When we get to the kitchen, Mom greets us both with hugs and kisses.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she says to me as I bend so she can kiss my cheek. "You make such short work of it with the two of you."

"You're welcome, Mom."

"Aww, such a sweet mother-son moment," Nora coos sarcastically as she sets mugs on the table.

"Oh, you hush," Mom scolds her, though there's no heat behind the words. Nora just smiles in response and continues setting the table while Mom brings over the food.

Once we've all served ourselves and taken the first few bites, Mom says, "Now, we need to discuss some upcoming scheduling. There's a party at the Hudgins House this week with some fancy, out-of-town business people. They've requested a Santa appearance, so we'll be there for about an hour in the evening on Thursday. Since it's off-site, it'll obviously pay time and a half and set up and tear down is included. I'm planning on scheduling Lydia since she's great with kids and I know she wants as many hours as I'll give her."

Mention of Lydia has my ears perking up, and I remember our exchange earlier today. I bury my smile at the way she teased me in a bite of dinner, keeping my eyes trained on my plate as Mom continues. "I'll need at least one of you to be there, since you both know how to set up and tear down the portable set the best."

"Not it!" Nora shouts, sitting up straight and touching her finger to her nose.

“I already have plans with Joanie and Stacey that night.” Turning to me, she bats her big eyes at me. “I know I’m scheduled to work that day, but if you could cover the afternoon for me, I’d really appreciate it, Dylan.” She clasps her hands in front of her, holding them out to me in supplication. “Pleeeeeease,” she wheedles, and I can’t suppress a sigh of annoyance at her antics. “Pretty, pretty please, Dylan? With cherries on top?”

When I don’t immediately respond, she picks up her fork again. “It makes the most sense anyway,” she says, “since you’d have to come load up the camera and lights. This way, you can load the portable set in the truck before you come take over, then get the camera and lights before you and Lydia go to the party.”

Mom and Dad are both nodding. “She makes a good point,” Dad says.

My brows pinch. “Wait, Lydia’s working all day, *and* at the party?” And that means she’ll be helping me load the big pieces of painted plywood that get screwed together to form the backdrop for Santa’s chair. He uses a padded bench covered in red velvet for these kinds of events rather than the throne he sits on at the ChristmasFest. There’s also a variety of smaller pieces—potted trees, garland, and the usual props of books and stuffed animals—to round out the set and make it look good. I hope Mom remembers to tell her she’ll be helping with that part too, because setup and breakdown is a two person job.

Mom nods, swallowing. “But I’m going to offer her the next day off, or at least the morning if she still wants to work part of the day.”

I grunt. I guess that isn’t so bad. Glancing at Nora, I catch her hiding a grin, and I narrow my eyes at her.

“So you’ll do it?” Dad asks, and surprisingly, it’s a genuine question, not the kind where you know the answer he expects and you better give it, or else.

I shrug. “Yeah, fine. I’ll cover the afternoon for you, Nora.” I don’t have plans, anyway. I didn’t keep in touch with my high school friends like Nora has, so I don’t have much of a social life when I’m home.

“Good. It’s not like you have anything else to do,” she snickers.

“Be nice,” Mom admonishes, and I let it stand at that, because anything I’d add would only get me a similar response from her, if not worse.

I actually don't mind working the special events as much as the ChristmasFest, especially these kind with rich tourists. They generally tip us really well on top of the extra pay from Mom and Dad. Plus, it's only a handful of kids instead of the constant churn of the long lines at ChristmasFest.

I think Dad enjoys those kinds of events more too, because he gets to spend longer talking to each kid, reading them stories and really engaging with them, which is his favorite part. Which is yet another reason he's so happy when Sarah and Shane come over, because he gets to dote on Sophie now that his own kids are all grown up. He might be a bit young to already be a grandpa, but he's the best grandpa a kid could ask for. And I know Sophie loves bragging to her friends that her new grandpa is Santa, even if she's nearly to the age where she'll learn the truth soon if she hasn't already.

Usually I end up working extra events with Nora or Sarah. We're the easiest for Mom to schedule for extra hours since she can just tell us we have to do it. It's interesting that she's choosing Lydia instead. Maybe she already knew Nora had plans?

But the conversation has moved on, so I decide not to worry about it. Lydia's good at her job, even if she doesn't like me that much. I'm sure we'll be fine.

I don't see Lydia again for a couple more days. I'm off on Sunday—Mom tends to give us each at least one weekend day off—and then she and I split a shift on Monday. We pass briefly as I come in, but don't speak. In fact, she barely even acknowledges me, instead passing the camera to Nora, where she says something that makes Nora laugh, then she waves—at Nora, not at me—and leaves.

So it's not until Tuesday that we work together again. Nora and I open, but Lydia takes over at lunch. Once again, she's warm and friendly with Nora while giving me the barest of greetings, polite and perfunctory, but far from the happy, smiling creature she is with literally everyone else.

What'd I do to deserve this?

I mean, I know she accused me of nourishing myself by sucking the Christmas spirit from young children—to keep me young and beautiful, she said. Which means she thinks I’m good looking. “Beautiful” isn’t the first word I’d choose for a compliment, but I’ll take it. It’s definitely not an insult.

As much as I want to find out what I said to make her treat me like a stranger instead of a coworker, I don’t have time. We’re slammed all afternoon, and I’m stuck watching her do her silly faces and dances to make kids smile—and I can’t keep the smile off my own face at her antics either—wishing the kids and their parents Merry Christmas and genuinely meaning it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lydia

MRS. CLAUS COMES UP TO ME AS I FINISH WITH THE LAST KID OF THE NIGHT, giving me a relieved grin. “Another one for the books,” she says.

I return her smile as I finish shutting off the camera, checking to make sure everything’s in order for the morning. “Yup. It was a good day, though. Busy, but that’s all part of the fun, right?”

Mrs. Claus beams. “Exactly. Now, I wanted to catch you before you leave. There are a couple of things coming up I want to make sure you know about.” She hands me a red envelope, my first name written in cursive on the outside. “We host an open house Christmas party the weekend before Christmas every year. Well, technically not exactly this year, since Christmas is on a Monday.” She leans in close, setting her hand on my arm, like she’s sharing a secret. “We couldn’t do it on Christmas Eve eve, after all. That would be cutting it too close, wouldn’t it?” She pats my arm and takes her hand away. “So it’s the weekend before that, the sixteenth, after we’re done here, we’ll all be heading to our place for dinner and cookies. We’d love to see you, even if you can’t stay long. And I know you’re living with your mother while you’re here, and she’s welcome as well!”

I slide a finger under the flap of the envelope, freeing it from where it’s

sealed just at the point. “Oh, thank you,” I say sincerely. “That sounds lovely. I’m sure we’d both love to come. I don’t know Mom’s schedule—I know she’s busy this time of year too—but if she’s free, I’m sure she’d enjoy it as well. It’ll give us both a chance to get to know some more people here.”

“Oh, wonderful.” She clasps her hands in front of her chest, and while I know she’s a normal person and Dylan and Nora’s mom, when she’s in costume and acting like this, it’s hard to see her as anyone other than Mrs. Claus. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. And that brings me to the second thing I wanted to talk to you about. On Thursday night, there’s a party out at Hudgins House, some out-of-towners and their families, and they’ve hired us to make an appearance for their children.”

I nod, knowing exactly what group she’s talking about. “They’re having several events while they’re here. They’re keeping my mom busy organizing all the things they want. I’m sure she’s the one who contacted you about Thursday night.”

Mrs. Claus’s face brightens. “Oh yes! I knew her last name sounded familiar, but since you’re both so new in town and this time of year has me so distracted, I hadn’t put it together.” She pats my arm again. “Oh, this is perfect. We need two elves to help with the event, and I put you down since you mentioned when we hired you that you’re saving up and want to work as many hours as possible. Since it’s an extra event, you get time and a half. And”—she leans in close again, and this time I think the information is more low key than her party planning tidbits—“these types of groups tend to tip very generously.”

My heart leaps at this information, because with Dad saying he won’t support me if I take a break, I’m putting away as much money as I can. Mom’s not charging me rent or anything, but I won’t want to live with her forever, and I want to be able to chip in on groceries and cover my own clothes and extras. Plus, if Dad’s going to use money to try to control me, the sooner I can remove that leverage, the better.

“That sounds wonderful,” I gush. “I’d love to.” I realize she’s informing, not asking, but still.

“Oh, good. Perfect. When we have extra events, I usually give the elves time

off after, since they can run a little late sometimes. So the only other question I have is if you think you'd like the whole day off or just the morning?" She pulls out her phone and frowns at it. "I gave you Saturday off last weekend, so if you take the whole day on Friday, you'll work both Saturday and Sunday. But if you take a half day Friday, then you can have all day Sunday off. Do you have a preference?"

My brows crimp. "Umm, I think I'll do the half day Friday." I'm pretty sure Mom's off Sunday, and it'd be nice to spend a day with her.

Mrs. Claus's face brightens and she taps on her screen. "Perfect! I'll get the schedule finalized tonight and post it tomorrow so everyone can plan accordingly."

As she's turning away, it occurs to me that she didn't say who else will be working the party. "Oh, Mrs. Claus?"

She pauses, turning to glance at me over her shoulder, amusement lighting her face at my calling her that instead of her real name despite the fact that no children are still around, the space nearly empty, with only a few vendors still here closing up. "Yes, dear?" A thoughtful look takes over. "You know, I've given all my children elf names. Should I give you one too?"

Surprised, my brows wing up. That must be where "Elfie" came from. I've wondered about it for the last week, but asking Dylan is definitely off the table, and the one time I asked Nora, she laughed so hard she couldn't answer and then we got busy. "Sure. If you want to."

That makes her grin. "Sorry. Did you need something?"

"Oh, right. Yeah. You said there'd be two elves. Who else will be at the event?"

Her gaze shifts over my shoulder, and I turn to see Dylan standing there, his expression not quite a scowl, but not exactly *not* a scowl. "Dylan will be helping you that evening." She turns all the way around to face us, realizing she hasn't given me all the details I'll need. "He'll drive the truck with the set." She gestures at the Workshop around us. "It's not this elaborate, but it does take some time and teamwork to get it all put together and taken down again." She leans in close, a conspiratorial smile on her face. "But I know

you love this kind of thing as much as I do, so I'm sure you'll have no trouble helping Dylan set it up perfectly. You'll need to leave straight from here so you have time to get it all done, though. Will you need a ride, dear?"

"Um ... I'm not sure." We live close enough that I walk most places and haven't needed my own car, so I've been sharing with Mom. "I'll let you know if I do."

She accepts that with another warm Mrs. Claus smile. "Please do."

With that, she turns and leaves, slipping into the space behind the Santa's Workshop set where she and Santa leave their things.

I watch her leave, aware that Dylan's likely still scowling at me. Turning, I see that I'm right. *Greeeeat.*

I was looking forward to working the special event.

But knowing I'll have to do it with Dylan, Santa's grumpiest elf?

It doesn't sound so fun after all.

CHAPTER NINE

Dylan

AFTER I FINISH CLEANING UP FOR THE NIGHT, I DRIFT OVER TO THE Christmas Emporium. I'm not ready to go home. Not yet, at least.

Although when I knock on the locked door to the store, and Sarah opens it with a smile and, "Oh, good. I was going to come look for you in just a minute. I need your help with something," I start to rethink my choices.

At my groan of protest, she frowns, her mouth turning down at the corners and her brows knitting together. She looks me up and down in the joggers, coat, boots, and hat I wear to and from the elf gig. "What's wrong? Are you mad at me?"

I blink at that. "What? No. Why would you think that?"

Shrugging, she lets her arms fall to her sides. "Usually you split your time between here and elf-duty—and I thought that was the plan at Thanksgiving—but Mom has you scheduled as an elf almost every day." She straightens something on a shelf next to her, not looking at me as she says, "It made me think maybe you didn't want to work here this year or something."

I let out a sigh at the undercurrent of hurt in her voice. Sarah might be my bossy big sister, but she loves me, and when she's not bossing me around, I

like her too. “No, Sarah. I’m not mad at you. Mom’s probably punishing me for complaining about being an elf by making me *only* do that this year, since it’s likely my last year anyway.” I cross the store and head behind the counter, propping myself on the stool she keeps there. If she’s going to put me to work, I might as well sit while we talk about it. Who knows when I’ll be able to get off my feet if I don’t?

She follows me, propping her elbow on the counter and her chin on her hand. “What’s got you so glum, baby bro? I know elfing isn’t your favorite, but you’re not usually this grumpy about it.”

I snort out a laugh, though I’m not really amused. “You’re at least the third person to call me grumpy in the last week.”

Her eyebrows raise. “And what does that tell you?”

Dropping my gaze to the counter, I set the backpack carrying my elf costume on the floor and let out another sigh, scrubbing my face with my hand. “That I’m being a dick to everyone?”

That makes her laugh, straightening so she can nod. “Yeah, pretty much. You’ve always been more serious than the rest of us. I mean, Ty’s on the serious side too, but his is more in the distracted, creative-type way. You’re more somber and analytical. Studying everyone and everything.”

I wait, expecting her to continue, but she doesn’t. “And?” I prompt. “That’s a problem because ...” I roll my hand, inviting her to elaborate.

Her brows pinch again as she studies me, then she shakes her head. “It’s not a problem. At least not for me. I think sometimes it gets in your way, though. It makes it difficult for you to enjoy the more fanciful things like getting paid to dress up as an elf every year.” She shrugs. “And even if you don’t really *enjoy* it, it’s a job, right? And it pays decently? It’s not like Mom and Dad ever made us work like this for free. Couldn’t it be a lot worse?”

I spread my hands, palms up. “Just because something could be worse, does that make me wrong for wanting better? I *don’t* like being an elf. I could have a little fun with it when I was fifteen or sixteen, but doing this every year?” I shake my head. “Don’t tell me you don’t get it. I know you were thrilled when you didn’t have to do it every day, even though you didn’t really mind

it when it was part of your job. And that first year when Nora conned you into filling in for her? You were pissed. Don't deny it."

Her frown smooths away, and a small smile peeks out. "You're right," she agrees. "I was pissed. But that's also the reason I met Shane so ..." She raises one shoulder and lets it fall.

"So now you're okay with it," I fill in. She nods. "There's just one problem, though," I point out.

"What's that?"

"Your story is like a one in a million chance. I'm not going to meet the love of my life working as an elf. And even if I did hear some kid telling Dad a sad story,"—I lay a hand on my chest—"never in a million years would I decide to take it upon myself to do anything about their Christmas. *That* is most definitely not my job." I still can't believe that worked out for her, to be honest. She overheard a six-year-old Sophie asking Santa to get a message to her parents as her only Christmas request. Apparently her brother had told her that all the fairytale beings know each other and assumed angels were included, so she figured Santa should be able to do that. In true Sarah fashion, she elbowed her way into their lives, bringing presents, braiding hair, and somehow deciding she needed me to decorate the outside of Shane's house.

She hums, diverting her attention from me to straighten the front-of-counter displays. "That's true." She grins, still not looking at me. "God, you were so pissed when I made you hang those lights on his house."

"I still am!" I lightly smack my palm on the counter for emphasis, and that just makes Sarah laugh more.

When she raises her eyes to mine, her smile is soft, but she's looking at me like she sees through me. "I get it, Dylan. I do. You're ready for the next chapter to start, and you're chafing at the restrictions and barriers still standing between you and it. I'll talk to Mom and see if she'll let me steal you a couple times a week. Would that help? Or is there something else bothering you?"

"That would help. Thank you, Sarah. You said you were going to ask for my help with something. Somehow I don't think it's chatting while you

straighten displays.”

She purses her lips. “I mean, I *do* enjoy chatting with you while we straighten displays, so if you wanted to help out so I can get out of here faster, I wouldn’t be sad. But no, that’s not what I wanted.”

Since I genuinely don’t mind helping her, I hop off the stool and come around the counter. “Why don’t we work while you tell me what you need.”

She gives me a bright smile and wraps her arms around my torso. “You’re the best, Dylan.”

“That’s not what you were saying when I came in.”

She waves that away, stepping back and pointing at the display she wants me to start on. A few boxes of ornaments are tipped over on their sides, and the unboxed ones hanging on hooks are a bit mixed up, so I set things to rights, moving down the aisle as Sarah talks. “That’s because you were all mopey and annoyed the minute I opened my mouth. This version of you is much more pleasant. Seriously.” She pokes her head around from the end cap to look at me. “You know I love you, man, but when you’re in a mood, you’re no fun to be around. If you need to talk, though, I’m here. Pop by whenever you need.”

“Thanks.” It comes out sounding more like a grumble than a genuine expression of gratitude, but Sarah knows me well enough to know I mean it.

“So you know about that event Mom and Dad got hired to work this week, right?” she asks.

“Yeah. Mom has me taking the set over and working the event too.”

“Oh, right. Okay. The new event coordinator over there is needing additional decorations and someone to set it all up. She’ll be on hand, of course, but it sounds like it’s a bigger job that has to be put together a little more last minute than they’re equipped for, and I was wondering if you’d help me go decorate the day before? I’ll pay you, of course,” she hurries to say. “Maybe not as good as Mom and Dad do for the elf part. And you’d only have to deal with me and her and whoever she has on staff helping. It’s hanging ornaments on a tree and running Christmas lights around the room and stuff. Nothing difficult. We just need more hands.”

“Can I wear normal clothes?”

That makes her laugh. “Of course. We’re *prepping*. We’re not going to be at the event. Well, I mean, I guess you will, but not until later. Actually, since you’re the one setting up the Workshop, it’ll be really handy to have you there. That way you can tell Kim—she’s the event coordinator—how much space you’ll need and where the best place to set it up is.”

I grunt in response, and we’re both quiet a moment as we continue straightening the display racks. For mid-December, things aren’t in too bad of shape. Sometimes it looks like a hurricane’s been through the store. “Was it slower today than normal?” I ask, pitching my voice loud enough so Sarah can hear me wherever she might be.

“No. Busy as ever. In fact, I think we’re ahead on profit for this year.”

“Oh, nice,” I say appreciatively. “Did you get Shane to come in and straighten up on his lunch break then?”

She laughs. “No chance of that. It’d take his whole lunch break just to get into the store at that time with the crowds. But I’ll take your curiosity over how the store’s in not-so-bad shape as a compliment. I straighten throughout the day as much as I can, and any slow-ish moment where no one needs my direct attention, I’m doing this. What needs restocking in that aisle?”

I walk back down the aisle, telling her what needs replenishing, and we head back to the stock room together to grab what’s needed.

“So,” she says, her voice suddenly sly and putting me on high alert as we carry boxes of ornaments back out to the front. “Tell me about the new girl. She seems nice.”

When I grunt in response, she smacks my shoulder. “Seriously, dude. What’s with the caveman routine?”

I make a show of rubbing my shoulder, even though it didn’t hurt at all. “Ow. And what are you talking about?”

She makes a dumb face and grunts and points and says, “Me man. Me not use word. Me just make noise.” Then she rolls her eyes as she goes back to replenishing the shelves. “I’ve been getting grunts from you all night. Use

your words, bro. You can do it. It won't hurt. I promise."

I snort. "Says you."

That makes her laugh again, and I grin, but she's not so easily distracted. "So what's the problem? You like her and she's not giving you the time of day?"

"No," I protest immediately, my voice more sullen than I intended, which only makes Sarah laugh more.

"Ohhhh. I see how it is."

"No you don't."

She pauses, studying me for a moment, and I know I'm scowling. I just can't help it, though. "Then enlighten me," she says softly, though there's no disguising the challenge in her voice. When I don't immediately answer, she says, "You know I only want to help, right? And besides, who else are you going to go to for advice about girls? Nora?"

That makes me chuckle, and she bumps me with her shoulder. "There we go," she encourages. "Nothing against Nora, of course, and maybe she would have something helpful to contribute at this point in her life, but have I ever steered you wrong?"

Sarah's who I went to in high school whenever I needed advice about girls. My parents too, at least some, but only if whatever Sarah suggested didn't work as well as I wanted it to.

"Well, there was that one time with Jenny Nash ..."

"Oh my god!" she explodes, setting down the ornament in her hand and turning to face me with her hands on her hips. "That was *one time!*" She brandishes a finger in my face. "Once. Are you ever gonna let me live it down?"

"Nope," I assure her with a grin. "Never. When we're old and you die—since you're older, you'll obviously die first, right?—I'll give your eulogy and remind everyone of the time that you told me Jenny Nash would love it if I surprised her by trying to do the *Dirty Dancing* routine at Homecoming, but instead I embarrassed her and she dumped me."

Sarah looks at me out of the corner of her eye. “I’ll have you know that the average life expectancy for women is longer than for men, so there’s a good chance you’ll die first.”

I let out a dramatic gasp. “Sarah! I can’t believe you’re hoping your baby brother will die first!”

She reaches over and backhands my arm again. “That’s not what I said and you know it! Now quit pretending you don’t need advice about the new girl and tell me what the problem is.”

Pausing, I shake my head. “There really isn’t a problem. We just don’t get along.”

“But you wish you did,” Sarah says confidently.

I consider that for a moment. “I mean, it’s always nice to get along with your coworkers, isn’t it?”

That has her arching an eyebrow. “Would you say you get along with Nora?”

“That’s different. She’s my little sister.”

“And you’re my little brother, but we get along okay.” I give her a doubtful look, and she laughs. “Fine, we get along okay when I’m not giving you shit. But your relationship with Nora isn’t that different, it’s just that you’re the older sibling there. Still, I get your point. You know Nora, and you can choose to make nice or piss her off on purpose, because you know how to push her buttons. With a random coworker, you don’t necessarily want to do that.”

“Exactly.”

“Why don’t you get along?”

I sigh, turning to face her, my half of the shelf replenished. She finishes with the last of her side, then picks up the box and motions us to the next section with a nod of her head. “She’s just not nice to me.”

“Like how is she not nice?” she asks, setting down the box. “Does she call you mean names and stuff? Or talk to you like you’re stupid?”

“No.” I shake my head. “That’s not what I mean. She’s not *mean* to me. She’s just not nice. Like with Nora and Mom and Dad, she’s so *nice*. Kind and warm and happy to chat. But with me, she’s just barely polite. That’s it.”

“Uh huh,” Sarah says, her mouth flat. “Okay. And what’d you do to her?”

I bristle at the accusation. “Nothing!”

“Yeah, no.” She brushes off her hands. “I’m not buying that.” She points at me. “Remember, I’ve known you your whole life. I know how you are. Either she did something that annoyed you or you were in a bad mood in general and you took it out on her. Was she always coldly polite to you? Or is there a point where it started?”

I think back over all our interactions. “She’s been this way since day one.”

“Right. And what happened on day one?”

Our interaction at lunch that day floats through my mind. “She called me a sourpuss.”

That makes Sarah laugh. “Oh, I like her already and I haven’t even met her. It’s hard to get away from the shop this time of year, but I might have to make an effort so I can get to know her.” When I give her a sour look, she draws a circle in the air near my face. “I bet that’s exactly how you looked at her that day. Were you in a bad mood about being an elf? Or did she do something specific to get that reaction from you?”

“She called me Elfie,” I grumble.

Clapping with delight, Sarah cackles. “Oh, that’s too perfect. Of course she did. But how did she know about Elfie? Did Nora tell her?”

With another groan, I tell her, “That’s how I was on the schedule the first week. I convinced Mom to use my real name after that, but the damage was done.”

Still cackling, Sarah finishes restocking this section and moves on. I trail after her, but I’m not really helping at this point. “So you were pissy and rude, she called you a sourpuss, and since then she’s been cool with you but nice to everyone else. Does that about sum it up?”

I shrug. “I also told her to tone down her cheerful elf routine when there weren’t people around.”

Sarah whirls on me, hands on her hips. “Oh my god, you didn’t.” I just shrug again. Sarah holds one hand out, the other rubbing the spot between her eyebrows. “Are you seriously telling me that you’re pissy she’s not being nice to you—not mean, just cool and polite and nothing more—because you literally told her to? Are you joking right now?”

“I didn’t tell her to!”

“Yes you did!” Her eyes bulging, Sarah waves her hands in front of her. “That’s literally what you just said! You told her to not be cheerful or nice around you, so she’s not, and now you’re—what?—annoyed that everyone else gets the nice version of her while you’re stuck with exactly what you asked for?” She scoffs and returns to stocking the shelves. “You’re on your own, dude. I’m not sure I see any way to salvage this one, because even if you talk to her and apologize for being a dick, I’m not sure it’d get you anywhere or make any difference.” She glances at me. “You could try, I guess, but ...” She shakes her head. “Maybe try being less of a sourpuss and you won’t find yourself in these situations where the pretty new girl dislikes you immediately because you come across as extremely dislikable.”

When I stand there frozen, unsure how to respond, Sarah waves a hand. “I’m almost done. I can finish up on my own. Go think about what you did wrong and how to do better next time.”

“Now you sound like Mom,” I grumble, and she just shoots me a sunny smile.

“I get lots of practice at the Mom-type stuff these days. But seriously, as fun as this was, you’re starting to bring down the whole vibe in here.” She waves her hands at me in a shooing motion. “I don’t need you infecting my happy little store with your grumpus energy. Go have dinner and get some sleep. Maybe if you start being nice to your coworker, she’ll be a little nicer to you. In any case, there’s only a couple more weeks before it’s over anyway, and then you’ll probably never see her again, so maybe it doesn’t really matter.”

With another grunt that provokes another cackle from my sister, I head to the counter to grab my backpack before saying goodnight and heading out, her

final comments ringing in my ears.

Why does the thought of never seeing Lydia again make me irrationally upset? She doesn't even like me, and it shouldn't matter, because Sarah's right. I'll be leaving, likely Lydia will go back to college too, and I'll only be home for shorter visits once I start working. What are the odds our paths will ever cross again?

And why do I dislike the realistic answer so much?

CHAPTER TEN

Lydia

TUESDAY MORNING, I OPEN AGAIN, AND SINCE I KNOW DYLAN IS WORKING with me this morning, I make sure to show up a few minutes earlier than normal so I beat him here. Since he helps with setup more than Nora does, we'll get through everything faster, which means more time just standing around. But it's worth it to have the space to myself for a few minutes before the hustle and bustle begins.

Every day is packed with both locals and out of towners. And it's not just here at the official ChristmasFest space. The whole town participates, with restaurants offering specials for shoppers who come and show their receipts, live music from local bands and school choirs, horse drawn carriage rides with the horse and carriage decorated with garlands and thick, wool blankets for riders to bundle up in as they're taken around on a tour of the Christmas lights in the downtown area. Maybe Mom and I can go on it Sunday when we're both off. I think that would be fun.

It's kind of expensive—I stopped and asked the other day—but for a once a year treat, I think we can justify it.

I've just finished putting on my elf shoes when Dylan stomps in. Okay, stomps might be overstating it. But really, this guy reminds me of those

cartoons where the character has a storm cloud following them around all the time. Stomping just seems appropriate, though I know he doesn't actually stomp everywhere.

It's kinda funny watching him transform from this sullen, grumpy asshole to the friendly elf persona he uses with customers. He might not get as silly with the kids as I do, but I know my jab about him trying to suck the Christmas cheer out of children wasn't accurate. He's actually a good elf, much as I'm sure he'd hate to hear it.

Although when I implied I was surprised at how good of a job he did, he was kinda offended I'd think he'd do a bad job.

This guy is hard to read. *Which is why you've stopped trying*, I remind myself.

Standing, I smooth down the skirt of my elf dress and give him a tight smile. "Morning."

"Morning," he returns as I pull my ears and hat out of my bag and move to the mirror to put them on.

I'm acutely aware of him standing there watching me, but he doesn't say anything. His unwavering gaze makes me uncomfortable, but I do my best not to betray that feeling, instead focusing on myself and putting my things in my locker so I can slip out and head to the Workshop to start getting set up for the day.

He clears his throat, and I force myself not to freeze in anticipation of whatever surly comment he's planning on making, though I do indulge in wrinkling my nose in annoyance since my back is to him.

"So, uh," he begins, hesitant, "you like to get here early, huh?"

My brow arches involuntarily as I cast a glance at him over my shoulder. "I do," I say, calm and cool, not feeling the need to elaborate.

"Me too," he says after a moment.

I cast a glance at him after I close my locker door, and I'm sure my confusion is plain on my face. After the first day, we haven't engaged in anything that

would approach small talk. All our conversation is extremely utilitarian in nature—exchanges of information about our division of work and nothing else.

He finally steps away from the door, and I'm relieved, because now I don't have to figure out how to get past him. Setting his backpack on a bench, he toes off his boots as he undoes his coat. "So we're working the event at Hudgins House together later this week. Why don't you plan on riding with me in the truck? That way it's easier for us to unload and set up once we're there."

"Oh, uh ..." Crap. I didn't expect I'd have to ride over with him. When Mrs. Claus said to let her know if I'd need a ride, I assumed I'd go over with her and Santa. But maybe this is what she meant?

I do need a ride, though. Mom has to head over before me, so I can't ride with her.

"Sure," I say at last. "That sounds good. Thanks."

He regards me levelly for a moment, then nods, amusement sparking in his eyes. "I'm gonna change now," he tells me, and heat floods my cheeks.

"Right. Of course. I'll, uh, I'll just go." I hook my thumb over my shoulder, and when he starts pulling his sweatshirt over his head, I do my best to muffle the squeak that wants to escape at the sight of his abs, then turn and flee.

His low, rumbling laugh follows me out the door, and I cover my cheeks with my cool hands, willing my blush to go away as soon as possible.

It's been a long time since I've been in the room with a shirtless guy. With Mom and Dad's divorce throwing me off my game so much, I didn't have the bandwidth to date this last semester. I spent far too much time in a cocoon of blankets watching movies on my laptop, actually. And when I wasn't, it was because I was forcing myself to go to class or do homework.

And the couple guys I dated in high school, well ... none of them looked like Dylan. They were all lanky and skinny in the way of high school boys. Dylan, though ... Dylan's a man. With muscles and broad shoulders and no baby fat.

Too bad he can barely stand me. Sure, we work together fine, and now he's apparently willing to give me a ride, but there's a canyon between professional courtesy and actually liking someone.

Which, let's be real, is part of the problem on my end too. If he were actually nice, I might be more interested in getting to know him. But his *tone down the cheerful elf routine* directive makes anything else impossible. Because the "routine" isn't really a routine. It's just how I am. And if he doesn't like who I am, there's no point in trying to get to know him no matter how attractive I think he is.

I'm powering up the camera when he comes into Santa's Workshop and gives me a quick smile. My brows furrow, because I can't remember him ever smiling at me.

He stops, his eyebrows raising. "Everything okay?"

Glancing around, I check the camera again, and nod. "Uh, yeah. Everything's great."

He chuckles, turning to power up the computer. I focus on my opening task checklist and ignore Dylan. I'm not sure what his deal is today, but I'm not going to worry about it.

Maybe he got laid last night. My last boyfriend was always relaxed and happier after sex, and he could be moody sometimes too, especially when he was stressed about school. And since we dated our senior year of high school, there was plenty of school stress to go around.

Or maybe his initial grumpiness was due to lingering stress from finals? I know he's still in college, and if stress makes him grumpy and he had a difficult finals week followed by having to work right away once he got home ...

I guess that could make sense. And if enough time has passed, maybe he's just generally in a better mood because despite working, it's a different type of schedule and less mentally taxing?

Or I'm just making excuses for him and he's really just a dick like I've thought all along and this is ...

Who knows? Some ploy to get back at me for ...?

I guess that's where that theory falls apart.

"I think the stuffed animals are as orderly as they're going to get."

I look up from the basket at the sound of Dylan's amused voice.

He's grinning. "You're acting like you're trying to hack the code to stop a nuclear attack. It's just stuffed animals, and they'll turn into a big pile as soon as kids start showing up."

Setting the toys in my hand down, I stare up at him, hands on my hips. "What's your deal?"

His head jerks, his brows coming down, his smile fading. "What do you mean?"

I throw up my hands. "Are you mocking me right now?"

"What? No." He holds out his hands like he's trying to stop me or slow me down, protesting the accusation. "I'm just saying, organizing the stuffed animals isn't that serious."

I can't argue with him because he's obviously right. I'm just trying to give myself something to do that isn't staring at Dylan or sitting in awkward silence. But if he's not mocking me ...

He smiled. He hasn't grunted at me once. He seems almost ... friendly?

But why?

Narrowing my eyes, I cross my arms and stare at him for a moment. He raises his brows, giving me a half smile. "You okay?"

Sighing, I drop my arms. "Yeah, fine. Is there anything else we need to get ready for today?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. We're all set." Glancing at the clock on the computer, he says, "We still have about twenty minutes before everything opens."

I shift my mouth from side to side, trying to decide what to do for the next

twenty minutes. “Busy schedule today?”

He chuckles softly, like the question is funny. “You could say that. I don’t think we have any available appointments through the weekend. It’ll be a struggle to squeeze the walk-ins between the appointments and keep it on time. Prepare yourself for grumpy kids and grumpier parents.”

“I think I can handle grumpy,” I mutter, and even though I don’t really mean for him to hear me, he obviously does, because he jerks his head in my direction.

But then he relaxes. “Yeah,” he says with an easy smile. “I suppose you can.”

Who are you, and what have you done with Dylan? I want to ask, because if I believed in alien abductions, I might think he’s the victim of one.

Instead, I ignore him, fussing more with the basket of picture books by Santa’s throne, though it doesn’t need it at all. I switch a couple of books around so they’re in perfectly descending order by size, not that it matters, but it’s something to do with my hands.

Behind me I hear Dylan let out a sigh, and I sneak a glance over my shoulder to find him staring at me. When I accidentally make eye contact, he offers me another smile, which I return with a tentative one of my own.

After I finish with that, I turn and watch the other vendors filtering in, lights coming on, displays getting ready, low conversations starting to fill the air as people greet one another and make small talk as they get their booths ready. Normally we don’t have any problem waiting for the doors to open in silence. I wouldn’t call it companionable, but it’s never held this weird charge of uncertainty and anticipation before. I don’t like this. I don’t like it at all.

When the doors finally open, relief floods through me. If Dylan wants to be weird, that’s fine. I’ll have something else to focus on now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dylan

WHEN THE DOORS OPEN AND OUR FIRST APPOINTMENT MAKES A BEELINE FOR us, I let out another frustrated sigh.

My grand plan of getting Lydia to be more friendly to me by being friendly to her doesn't seem to be working. If anything, my friendliness seems to have made her more wary, which is not the result I was going for at all.

I can't help noticing the way she seems eager for our first customers to arrive, waving and welcoming them to Santa's Workshop, complimenting the kids on their outfits—a toddler girl in a red dress and a preschooler boy in a dress shirt with a vest and bow tie that matches his sister's—and asking the parents about their Christmas plans.

See? She's chatty and welcoming to literally everyone except me.

I realize her treatment of me is my fault. Clearly I set the tone, and her comment about knowing how to deal with grumpy people was an obvious dig, but how do I reverse it?

I smiled. I tried to make conversation. I tried to joke around, and I know she enjoys that because she and Nora joke around alllll the time, and instead of acting how she normally does with everyone else, she's even *more*

standoffish.

She spends the morning casting suspicious glances my way. At first I smile back, but that just makes her brows pinch more, and I don't want that to affect her ability to get the littles to smile or have positive interactions with the parents, so I start ignoring her instead.

It feels wrong to do that now that I've decided not to be that way toward her anymore, but I don't know what else to do.

When Dad takes his first break of the morning, I reassure the parents waiting in line that we'll be back shortly—a task I usually leave to Lydia with her cheery charm—then squeeze her arm and tip my head behind Santa's Workshop to indicate we should head back there for our break.

“How're you holding up?” I ask once we're out of sight.

Her delicate pink lips purse and her brow pinches. “Fine?”

Grinning, I ask, “You sure about that?”

She looks away, her arms crossing more like she's trying to hug herself than out of irritation. “I'm fine,” she says. “It's just a normal day. Busy, like you said, but not unusually so.”

“It'll probably get worse once school lets out.”

She nods. “Yeah. I've picked up on that.” Her eyes meet mine, cold and hard. “I know I haven't done this as long as you have, but I've been doing it long enough to notice that's a pattern.”

“Of course. I'm not—”

She puts a hand out, shaking it back and forth to get me to stop and cutting me off. “It's fine Dylan. I'm just gonna go get a drink. I forgot my water bottle in my bag.”

With that, she slips out the back and presumably heads for the locker room. “Dammit,” I curse softly. She left her water bottle behind due to my appearance. She hurried out because I'd started changing.

Honestly, I'd thought she wouldn't care that much. Or maybe she'd joke

around with me. Something.

Instead, I'd sent her scurrying away like a frightened mouse, and apparently made her forget her water, which is important to have on hand when you're on your feet all day and cajoling kids into smiling for their photos with Santa. Talking almost nonstop dries you out. I keep my bottle under the counter where the computer sits so I can grab a drink whenever I need to, and Lydia usually keeps hers by the camera. If I'd noticed she didn't have it before we opened, I would've sent her back to get it from the locker room. There'd been plenty of time.

Apparently me trying to be nice made her forget about it completely.

Fuck.

This is not going at all as planned.

“What did you do to Lydia yesterday?” Nora asks the next evening when she walks in the door. She worked the afternoon shift with Lydia today while I worked in the Christmas Emporium. Sarah apparently works her magic quickly. She can be convincing when she decides to be. It's nice to have that working for me instead of against me for once.

“What are you talking about? I didn't do anything.” I answer from my spot on the couch. I might not've been dealing with kids and parents all day or wearing a silly costume—though Sarah did insist I wear one of the variety of Christmas sweaters Mom's bought me over the years that still live in my room here—but Sarah worked me hard, so I'm tired. As soon as I got home, I stripped off the sweater and collapsed on the couch, the sweater in a heap next to me.

Nora gives me a doubtful look and nods at the sweater. “Mom'll skin you if you leave that there, especially wadded up like that.”

Rolling my eyes at my little sister, I pick it up and turn it right side out, folding it messily, because even if she's annoying, I know she's right. “There. Happy?”

She shrugs. “I’m not the one you need to make happy, but you know that already. Back to Lydia.” Moving in front of me, she crosses her arms and cocks her hip in the pose she uses when she’s trying to stare me down. Not that it works. It’s her best imitation of what Sarah does to bulldoze me into doing what she wants. The difference is, Sarah’s older than me and Mom left her in charge of us as kids often enough that listening to her is almost a reflex. Nora’s two years younger than me. She doesn’t have that advantage.

“What about her?” I ask innocently.

Shaking her head, Nora waves a finger in the air. “Nuh-uh. Nice try. I’m not that gullible. You did something. She asked what was wrong with you yesterday, and since I didn’t know, I asked her what she meant. She wouldn’t give me a straight answer, just said you were being weird. So what’s going on? Why are you being weird to Lydia?”

“I wasn’t being weird,” I protest, running a hand through my hair. “I was just trying to be *nice*.”

Nora’s eyebrows climb her forehead, the only indication of her surprise. “And how are you usually?”

“I dunno.” This time I grip my hair and give it a tug, needing to express my frustration in some physical way, no matter how small. “Just normal, I guess. But for some reason, she’s nice to everyone except me. So I decided to try being *more* nice, and I guess she thinks that’s weird.”

Bursting out laughing, Nora moves around and flops down on the couch next to me. “Wait, hang on.” She holds up a hand. “You’re telling me that Lydia—Lydia who can coax a smile or at least a cute expression out of the most upset toddlers—is *mean* to you?”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “No. That’s not what I said.” I find myself repeating almost the exact same conversation as I had with Sarah the other night, but instead of trying to help me, Nora’s cackling, holding her stomach because she’s laughing so hard.

“Shut up,” I tell her, throwing my sweater at her.

She pulls it off her face, her laughter not even slowing. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she says, not sorry at all. “You have to admit it’s funny though. I’m

not sure what you think normal is, but obviously you were *not* being nice to her before, and you're butt hurt that in response she was polite to you while being friendly to everyone else. The *audacity*."

"Hey—" I start, but she talks over me.

"And then, because you've realized that you fucked up, you think that being mildly friendly *one time*"—she holds up a finger to emphasize her point—"will magically make her treat you like she does me?" She blows a raspberry and flaps her hand at me. "Bro, I love you, but you're delusional. Also, it's hilarious to me that you being nice to her makes her think that you hit your head or something."

Grabbing my sweater, I stalk to my room, Nora's laughter following me out. There's no point in even saying anything. The worst part is, I know she's right. Deep down where I haven't allowed myself to admit it, she understands the situation better than I do, which is extra messed up since I'm the one *in* it.

But I review every interaction I've had with Lydia since she arrived. The first one where she walked in on me changing, called me Elfie, and even after she apologized, I was ... not very nice to her. No wonder she's decided to treat me with detached politeness. At first I was grateful, because I took it to mean she'd just be normal with me and not using the customer service persona she puts on to deal with the public. Her occasional barbed comment seemed to back that up.

It turns out, though, that the way she deals with everyone else isn't an act she puts on. It's just how she is. And I've caused her to put on a cold persona—with a sharp edge when the opportunity presents itself—to deal with my bullshit.

I just don't know how to get her to set that aside and be normal with me once more. And I honestly don't even know why I care so much, since Sarah's right that we'll be going our separate ways soon enough.

But I do care. And since I do, I'm determined to change things before it's too late.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lydia

I'M GEARING UP FOR A BUSY DAY WITH A CUP OF COFFEE AND A HOMEMADE breakfast sandwich. Between working at Santa's Workshop this afternoon and the event tonight, it's going to be a long day. When my phone rings, I assume it's Dylan calling to tell me something about tonight. We exchanged numbers yesterday, which was also super weird. He's been weird all week, though when I asked Nora if anything had happened to him, she'd just laughed like I was making a hilarious joke. I took that as a no, but regardless, something's changed.

He's being ... friendly. That's what I finally decided at the end of yesterday. It just took a couple days for me to figure it out, because he's been *unfriendly* without exception up to this point.

I just can't figure out why. What's his goal with this sudden change in behavior?

Since I don't trust it, I haven't changed my interactions much, aside from my involuntary stumbling over my words in shock from him being something other than the surly, grumpy jerk I've come to expect.

When I pick up my phone, I see my friend Sylvia's smiling face on my screen, and I can't help my answering smile—not that she can see me. I don't

spend any time thinking about the tiny swoop of disappointment that it's not Dylan calling.

"Sylvan Sylvia!" I cry as I accept her call, putting her on speaker as I carry my coffee into my room to make sure I have everything ready for tonight. Dylan said to bring comfortable clothes to wear in the truck since we have to set up the workshop, which means I need to have that packed and ready to go.

"Lilting Lydia!" she responds, and we both laugh at the goofy nicknames we gave each other in high school.

We've been friends for years, and she's one of the few people who wouldn't let me push her away when I tried to withdraw from everyone into my cocoon this semester. She barged into my dorm room and made me talk to her, even if we ended up watching movies eventually. She's the reason I didn't fail out of my classes, though. She set our study schedule and forced me to adhere to it. Sure, I guess I could've pushed her away harder, but that wasn't what I was trying to do, really. I just withdrew, and everyone else let me.

Not Sylvia, though. She knows me well enough to know that pushing her way in is what I need sometimes.

"You sound better than I've heard you in months. Does that mean you're enjoying small town life?"

Sitting down on the edge of my bed, I stop to think about her question, having not really paid much attention to anything other than working and spending time with my mom. I do feel a lot better here, though. "I am," I say after a short pause. "It's nice. The whole town is lit up with Christmas lights, the important things are all nearby so I don't need a car, and the walk to and from work is short enough that I don't get too cold but long enough to enjoy. It's Hallmark movie perfect. Well, mostly."

"Uh oh. Does that mean you're really not coming back next semester and then I'll lose you forever when a lumberjack comes in and sweeps you off your feet?"

I laugh, because she's mostly joking. Mostly. "I'm not sure about a lumberjack, but I really do need at least a semester off."

Sylvia might be Team Lydia all the way, but she definitely doesn't think taking time off is the best choice, though she's more gentle with her criticisms than my dad. I think she's hoping that Christmas break will be enough to make me change my mind and come back.

"Fill me in on the perfect parts, and then tell me why it's only mostly perfect."

I tell her about the town, about how great it is to see my mom finally blossoming, how much fun I have as an elf, and then I tell her about Dylan.

And for some reason, she finds that whole situation as hilarious as Nora does.

"Why do you keep laughing?" I ask in exasperation after I tell her that he's suddenly being suspiciously nice after spending our first weeks being a dick.

"Because," she crows, "you like him."

"I do not!" I protest.

"Uh-huh. Okay. Sure. You like *looking* at him, anyway."

"That's not at all the same thing." My voice comes out as heated as my cheeks. "Lots of hot guys are total assholes. I can ... admire someone's physical beauty without wanting to bone him."

That makes her cackle more. "Okay. I let you go for a couple weeks without pestering you because I knew you needed some time and space to decompress after last semester. But now that I know about this juicy piece of info, I demand that you call me tomorrow and tell me how tonight goes. You'll be stuck with him *all night*. I need to know how you survive."

"I work with him most days anyway," I point out. "It's not like I don't know how to deal with him."

"Nahhh," she scoffs. "This is different. You'll be in a car with him for what, like, an hour? How far away is the place for the event?"

"I dunno," I say, suddenly doubtful. "Not too far. Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes?"

"Right. So thirty to forty minutes of time alllll alone in a car with the guy you

can't stand. I'm gonna need an update."

Shaking my head, I laugh. "Fine. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know what happens. I'm warning you, though. It'll be a boring update."

"We'll see," she says, doubt coloring her voice.

Standing, I resume gathering the leggings and oversized sweater I've decided to bring to change into before we head to the event. "Enough about me," I say, tired of talking about Dylan. "How's your break going?"

The lift from my conversation with Sylvia lasts all afternoon at ChristmasFest, but it fades as soon as I'm in the truck with Dylan.

She's right that being here agrees with me more than I would've ever expected. Or maybe it's just the relief from the stress of school and forcing myself to stay on top of things. Here, my schedule is easy enough, and focusing on the children keeps me from getting wrapped up in my head in a way that school just can't.

Or maybe it's the magic of Christmas in this postcard-perfect town. According to all those Hallmark movies my mom and I watch, Christmas magic can save even the grumpiest, saddest, most depressed person.

Though if that were true, what's Dylan's problem? He's been part of the magic his whole life, and, at least until the last couple of days, I've never had to interact with someone as consistently grumpy as him.

And if the movies are also to be believed, the newly divorced woman who's just moved to town should be getting swept up by the local bartender dressed in flannel, or maybe the town doctor who comes to her rescue when she slips and falls and twists her ankle, or the bakery owner who learns her favorite pastry and has it ready every morning when she comes in ...

Of course, Mom doesn't walk to work, since she makes the trek Dylan and I are about to undertake instead, so she can't stroll past a bakery and stop in daily. And she hasn't slipped on the ice or frequented any bars that I'm aware of. She's making friends at work and taking time for herself, she says.

Perhaps next Christmas, though she won't be quite as new in town by then, so it won't have the same *je ne sais quoi* as the movies.

Not that I expect life to actually be like the movies anyway. Because if this were a movie like that, and I were the protagonist instead of my mom, then Dylan and I would end up together and I'd somehow help him restore the meaning of Christmas.

An involuntary snort escapes at that thought, and Dylan glances my way, raising his eyebrows. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing." I can't tell him what I'm actually thinking. "I was on the phone with my friend earlier and she said something funny. I was just thinking about it. Sorry."

He turns onto the highway that heads out of town. Low gray clouds make it seem like it never really got light today, and now the day-long twilight is giving way to full dark. It's saved from looking dreary by the colorful twinkle lights outlining buildings and trees and the fact that gentle flakes start falling.

"Oh look! It's starting to snow." Even with Dylan's quelling presence, I can't keep the excitement out of my voice. Leaning forward, I look up at the clouds, grinning.

He sighs heavily, like this is the worst thing in the world. "Yippee. More snow."

Sitting back, I scowl at him. "I think all the snow is beautiful."

He glances at me out of the corner of his eye. "And I'm guessing you don't have to shovel it. Nor are you driving in it."

"And therefore I'm not allowed an opinion?" I ask, my voice acid.

A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. "Of course you are. Even if it's wrong." He mutters the last sentence under his breath, but I hear him anyway.

Remembering that this is Dylan, so of course he hates snow just like he hates red and green and trees and poinsettias and joy, I decide to ignore him. Engaging with him is always pointless and just leaves me feeling irritable,

and the last thing we need is two irritable elves tonight.

With Dylan it seems to be a permanent issue, so there's no help for it.

As I turn and stare out the window, determined to do so the rest of the drive, a sense of relief settles over me. This is what interacting with Dylan is supposed to be like. The last couple days where he's been trying to make small talk and be nice have been super weird, and if he'd started off that way, I'd like him. Like *really* like him. But since I know he's actually *not* that way, I don't want to like him, so it's been challenging.

This feels better. This is how our relationship is supposed to go. This I can handle.

After a moment, he sighs. "I'm sorry, Lydia. I'm not trying to be a jerk."

"You just can't help it?" I ask, glancing his way despite my determination not to look at him again.

He cracks a smile, and his smile is a thing of beauty, perfect lips pulling wide, a dimple flashing in the corner of his mouth. This close, I notice a little scar along the edge of his jaw, and curiosity makes me want to ask about it, but I stop myself before the question pops out.

"Exactly," he agrees easily. He shakes his head, his smile slipping away. "You probably won't believe me, but I swear I'm not normally this much of a dick."

My brows jump in surprise. "You're right. I don't believe you."

"It's true, though." The look he gives me is all puppy-dog sincerity, and it's honestly difficult to maintain my disbelief.

"So is it something about me in particular that brings this out?" I ask, because if he's not like this normally, *something* is causing it.

He lets out a bark of laughter. "No. God, absolutely not. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. No, it's being back home that puts me in a bad mood." He leans forward, looking up at the clouds as the snow falls more quickly. "It's really starting to come down. I hope this doesn't keep up for too long."

I look out my window too and shake my head. "The forecast said we'd get a

few flurries, but it shouldn't be anything major."

He chuckles. "A few flurries, huh? Would you call this a flurry?"

With a shrug, I settle into the center of my seat again. "Honestly? You guys have all these words to describe snow I've never used before. I'm not entirely sure I know what a flurry is compared to regular snowfall."

That makes him grin. "Grew up on the coast, huh?" He glances over to catch my nod, slowing to go around a hairpin curve in the road. "Well, a flurry is usually a light, short snowfall. This looks more like a storm, and if I had to guess, it'll go on for a while. Maybe not. *Hopefully* not. Because if this continues, getting home might be interesting."

I frown. "But that's why everyone around here drives trucks, right? With four-wheel drive? I can't tell you how many conversations I've overheard between dads in line talking about their four-wheel drive trucks and whatever, comparing the merits of an extended cab truck with a Suburban or a four-wheel drive minivan."

Dylan chuckles. "I'm sure you have. And yeah, the truck should be fine. It's not me that I'm necessarily worried about, though. Even if I can drive safely in the snow, I can't stop someone else from running into us."

Oh. I hadn't thought about that, I guess. Frowning still, I look at Dylan again. He doesn't seem to be struggling with the snow that's falling now. There's plenty piled up on the side of the road from previous snowfalls, and it's getting a new white coat to cover the dirty top layer, but the roads are still clear—black in the headlights with the double yellow line going down the middle just as it should be.

"What is it about being here that irritates you so much?" I ask after a moment, curiosity getting the better of me.

He lets out another heavy sigh, and I wonder if he'll actually talk, or just give me some rude answer to shut me up.

Not answering at all seems to be a possibility as the silence stretches between us, and I'm about to turn back to the window when he says, "I just feel like I'm stuck in a tiny box here, you know? Like I've grown into a different person the rest of the time, but when I'm home—especially at Christmas—I

have to fulfill this prescribed role. Like I have to put on a costume and play this character, only the clothes don't fit anymore. They dig in at the waist and are too short, and I feel stupid and wrong but no one believes me when I say I need something else."

When he's done, we both sit in silence for several minutes. I'm not sure how to respond to that at all. It's such a vivid description, and it makes me think about my mom. Is that how she felt? And for how long?

Finally, I clear my throat. "I'm sorry. That sounds difficult. No wonder you're in a perpetual bad mood."

A rueful smile twists his mouth, and he glances my way. "Thanks. I'm sorry I made you feel like you couldn't be yourself around me the first day."

"Oh, uh ..."

He holds up a hand, though he returns it quickly to the steering wheel as we navigate another switchback. "I know I've been a jerk to you. I didn't mean to tell you not to be yourself. I was just trying to say that you didn't need to put on a happy show for me like you do with the kids and parents. But I realize it wasn't a show. That you *are* just being yourself with everyone, and I don't want you to feel like you can't be yourself with me. In that vein, I just want you to know that you don't have to go out of your way to put distance between us. I mean you can if you still want to," he adds quickly, though I hadn't tried to say anything. "Obviously. Shit." He shakes his head and taps the steering wheel with his hand. "I'm making this worse, aren't I?" A glance my way doesn't seem to give him any direction though. "Look, just, I'm sorry, okay? I'm trying to not be an ass. And I'm sorry that I was. I'd like it if you could forgive me and we could be friends, but I know that Christmas is less than two weeks away, so it's totally understandable if you don't."

"Dylan," I say, needing to disrupt his rambling flow, because if he doesn't stop soon, I'm going to start laughing, and it's clear to me that he's being sincere. He glances at me. "Thank you for your apology."

His shoulders relax, and he sits up a little straighter. Then he gives me a side-eye look again, his mouth once again curving. "You're very diplomatic, because I notice that you didn't say you forgive me."

Laughing, I relax into my seat. “Nope. I didn’t.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dylan

EVEN THOUGH WE RIDE THE LAST FEW MINUTES TO HUDGINS HOUSE IN silence, it's not uncomfortable. And I don't know if we've reached some kind of truce, but I feel better for at least having apologized for my part. At this point, I guess it's up to Lydia how she decides to proceed going forward.

Maybe she'll stop acting like I have a traumatic brain injury for being nice to her, though, and that's progress.

When we arrive, I unsnap the truck bed cover and we start unloading right away, with me passing the smaller pieces down to Lydia to take in, leaving only the large unwieldy pieces for us to carry in together. She's efficient and quick to jump in where I need her while I'm assembling everything, which I appreciate.

Once everything's put together, I stand and brush off my hands, offering her a smile. "Thanks."

She ducks her head like she's still not quite sure what to make of me—so maybe the apology isn't enough to get us to at least a comfortably friendly place—and nods. "Sure. No problem." She hooks a thumb over her shoulder, still not meeting my eyes. "I'm just gonna grab my things so I can change."

“Yeah, cool. I’ll come with you. Let me just grab ...” But she’s already scurrying away. “The changing rooms are down the hall!” I call after her.

She waves and yells back. “I know! My mom works here! I got it!”

Kim, the event coordinator I met the other night when I was here helping Sarah decorate the space, approaches me, her hand held out for me to shake. She’s wearing a simple black sheath dress tonight, her dark hair pulled back on one side revealing a stripe of gray. “Dylan,” she says warmly when I take her hand. “So good to see you again.” She looks around. “And where’s Lydia? She said she’d be working here tonight too.”

And that’s when I finally put it together—Kim is Lydia’s mom. I know Lydia said her mom works at Hudgins House, but given the nature of our relationship so far, we haven’t exactly filled each other in on the details of our lives. She’s pieced together that my parents are Santa and Mrs. Claus and that Nora is my sister based more on context clues and things they’ve said than from any amount of conversation with me. And likewise, the things I know about her—that she’s from Seattle and goes to school there, that her parents are divorced, and her mom recently started working here—are gleaned more from conversations I’ve overheard her have with other people.

“Oh, uh ...” I say like a moron, looking around as though Lydia will pop up out of the floor. Though apparently it works, because she just about does—coming through the door, though, since she’s human and not a real elf with magic. “There she is,” I say, indicating her with a nod of my head. “It’s good to see you too, but I need to get changed as well so I’m ready when the party starts.”

“Of course!” Kim says, releasing my hand and turning toward her daughter, arms extended for a hug.

Lydia glances at me before stepping into her mom’s arms, and I have to force myself to look away, annoyed that I’ve been caught ogling her. But that green stretch velvet dress she wears as an elf clings to all her curves, and it’s short enough that even her green and white striped tights do nothing to hide the fact that she has great legs.

Head down, I escape from the room in much the same way Lydia did a few minutes ago, heading out to the truck to retrieve my backpack. The cool air,

the wind blowing snow around and making me hunch my shoulders against it, is as much of a wake up call as I need.

What am I even thinking? I offered one meager apology. She still thinks I'm brain damaged when I'm acting like a normal person because I've been a little shit the whole time she's known me. It's not like I can ask her out, no matter how attractive I might find her.

And if I'm being honest with myself, which apparently I am now, I know why it bothers me that she's nice to everyone and barely polite to me. It's because I think she's pretty, and I'd actually like to get to know her better. In other circumstances, while I might not be full of charisma, I can still carry a conversation and be charming enough that I've had no trouble dating before now when I've made the effort. Though since I've been working so much between school and my job at Johnson and Weaver, I haven't had the time or energy to put forth the effort, and the girl I started seeing in August dumped me by the end of September because I wasn't available enough for her liking.

Trying to start anything with Lydia would probably be a bad idea for much the same reasons, even if she could stand being in the same room with me when we're not working. I'll be going back to school in a few weeks—I'm sure she will too—and while we'll be in the same city, Seattle's a big place with more than one university, I don't even know which one she attends. If by some miraculous chance it *is* the same one, that wouldn't make any material difference. It's not like my schedule is going to be significantly better in the spring semester than it was in the fall. And that's already killed one relationship.

It wouldn't be worth the effort of trying to make anything work with anyone else. That's what I decided months ago, and there's really no reason to change my mind.

As though Lydia would even agree to go out with me.

And then there's that. See? I'm being even more stupid than I've been for the last several weeks. Probably I should've just kept up my asshole routine and saved myself the trouble.

Except if I could've done that, I'd be doing it right now instead of trying to get on Lydia's good side.

Sighing, I grab my backpack and stomp back into Hudgins House, using the snow accumulated on my boots as an excuse to vent some of my frustration that way.

Once I'm changed, Lydia and I are kept busy getting the camera, laptop, and rest of the set ready to go before the group arrives. Kim is in and out, checking on our progress, offering help if we need it, but she's obviously relieved when we reassure her we're fine.

My shoulders pull tighter as the start time draws closer, but when the families arrive, I relax. There are only about seven or eight kids, and even though we're booked for an hour, it definitely won't take Dad the whole time to take pictures with all the kids. Sure, he'll read some stories, and I'm sure we'll work the whole time, but it'll be far more low key than a standard day at ChristmasFest.

The kids seem to range in age from about ten or eleven to babies, and I notice a young woman standing off in the corner who I at first assume is an older teenaged or adult child of one of the couples, but when I see the mom pass the baby off to her after a few minutes, I realize she must be the nanny.

The kids predictably go nuts when Dad comes in, booming his signature, "Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!" Lydia and I have our hands full herding the kids toward the foot of Santa's chair while Mom passes out sugar cookies.

The littlest ones are wide-eyed, and I can't help smiling. Lydia catches my eyes, raising her brows, though whether it's in question or surprise, I'm not completely sure. Probably she's thinking about the day she asked if I feast on children's Christmas joy to keep me young and beautiful. But one of the moms says something to Lydia, dispelling the moment, and then I'm kept busy entertaining the kids while Dad talks to each one and Lydia takes pictures.

I burn through the basket of storybooks—I'm regretting thinking I'd only need a handful of the cache we keep at ChristmasFest—and start the kids singing "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer."

Once I start singing, Lydia glances over her shoulder at me, and this time, unless I'm very much mistaken, the look on her face isn't one of surprise or sardonic amusement, but something more like ... warmth? Or admiration?

Like she's impressed that I'm capable of doing my job like this. Which rankles, even though it shouldn't, because it's not like she's seen any evidence that I'd willingly entertain kids, has she? Whenever we've worked together, she's the one doing the entertaining. I mostly deal with the parents, and I certainly don't sing.

Not that she does either, but I definitely could see her doing it.

With the constant activity, the hour's over before we know it, and Santa, having taken pictures and listened to each kid for far longer than they'd get at ChristmasFest, hushes everyone so he can read "The Night Before Christmas" before he and Mom wave goodbye, give a few high fives, and slip out the back.

Kim slips up next to me while I'm watching them leave. "You did wonderfully with the kids," she says quietly.

I offer her a polite smile and turn to start cleaning up. "Thanks."

She touches my arm lightly with her fingers to get my attention, and when I straighten, I notice Lydia has come over. Kim glances between the both of us. "Mr. Gossman—the man in charge of the group—was very impressed. And he's wondering if you two would be willing to stay longer and entertain the kids?"

Straightening in surprise, my gaze darts to Lydia. "Oh, uh ..."

"I know it's last minute," Kim rushes to say, "and he's offering to pay you both quite well." She quotes me a price per hour that makes my eyebrows lift and my eyes widen.

Lydia meets my eyes, her own wide, and I remember her comments about needing to save money. Pursing my lips, I shrug and gesture to her, indicating that it's her decision.

"Well, um." She glances around then refocuses on Kim. "I'm up for it, if ..."
She looks at me again.

"Sure. We can keep them up here at the front where Santa was. We've used up all our books, but ..."

Kim smiles, relief evident on her face. “Kids don’t usually mind hearing the same stories more than once. And we have some puzzles and games that I can get out for you.”

“What about paper?” Lydia asks. “And pencils or crayons or something?” She glances around. “Some of them might be interested in drawing.” Her eyes dart my way. “We could divide the group if we need to—stories with Elfie”—my eyes narrow when she calls me that and her grin widens—“and drawing with—”

“Holly,” I interrupt, spitting out the first Christmas related word I can think of. Thanks to the garlands wound with bunches of holly draping the walls, I didn’t have to think hard. But she needs a last name. “Holly ... Sparkleflakes.”

She suppresses her laughter, but her grin is irrepressible and her eyes are bright with amusement. Considering the fact that the only smiles I normally get from her are when she’s making fun of me, I’m thrilled to have made her want to laugh for real. “Alright, Elfie Tinselbottom.” Kim snorts, and I cringe, but Lydia doesn’t care, still grinning like she’s having the time of her life. “I’ll be Holly Sparkleflakes.”

“I’ll grab the paper and whatever drawing or craft supplies I can come up with. What about scissors?” She glances at the kids. “You’ll probably have to help and share, but you could do snowflakes?”

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Lydia says. “Thanks, Mom!”

Kim darts away, stopping to talk to one of the men, then leaving the room. Lydia steps forward, her fingers catching my sleeve and dragging me along with her. “Did everyone have fun seeing Santa?” she asks loudly, and the kids cheer in response. “And I know Santa loved talking to each of you. Sadly, he had to go. Christmas is almost here, you know, and he’s very busy getting ready for his busiest night of the year. But Elfie and I,” she gestures at me, “will be hanging out with you for a bit longer. Who wants to hear more stories?”

A little over half the hands shoot up, mostly the younger ones.

I step forward, taking over. “Great. You guys stay where you are, and the rest

of you can go with Holly.” I gesture to Lydia. “She’ll be showing you how to make snowflakes.”

A few of the kids look around and as we’re shifting, one of the ones that said she wanted stories changes her mind and goes with Lydia instead. When Lydia catches my eye, she gives me a warm smile, and while I’m not sure what exactly has changed in the last hour or so, I’m happy it has.

I return her smile with one of my own, then pick a book from the basket and sit in Santa’s chair.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lydia

MY SKIN TINGLES AS I LEAD MY CREW OFF TO THE SIDE, ARRANGING THEM IN a semicircle where we'll be out of the way but still have plenty of room to play with paper.

Dylan gave me an elf name.

Maybe it's silly—I mean, the name is definitely silly—but it makes me feel included. I know only the Daniels' kids have gotten elf names, and maybe it's not totally official since I wasn't named by Mrs. Claus—er, Mrs. Daniels—but it feels significant somehow.

And I don't know if it's the fact that Dylan apologized, though it certainly helps, or the way he's been so amazing with the kids all night, but I can't maintain my cool, polite facade with him when he's being like this. I mean, seriously. Who would've guessed the grumpiest elf in the world would be so good with kids? And when he started singing Christmas carols with them? My heart melted.

Which I guess is why I've resisted acknowledging his niceness for what it is, choosing instead to see it as some kind of game or manipulation. Because if I can continue casting him as the bad guy, then my physical attraction to him can't turn into anything more. Anything more would be setting myself up for

disaster, and I've had enough of that lately.

It's hard to resist a guy who's good with kids, can handle light teasing, *and* is hot. How is that even fair? I've seen his abs, and don't even get me started on his smile ... those dimples. Gah!

He shouldn't be allowed to be hot *and* nice. It's just too much.

Turning to face my group of kids, I push thoughts of Dylan out of my mind, giving my mom a grateful smile when she returns with a pile of paper, pens and pencils, and a couple pairs of scissors. "I hope this is enough," she whispers as she passes them to me. "It's all I could scrounge at the last minute." Turning so the kids can't see her, she presses her lips together and shakes her head. "I offered to get craft projects or some activity for the kids, but they assured me that just Santa would be fine. And now look? I should've trusted my gut."

"We're fine, Mom," I reassure her in a whisper, giving her arm a squeeze.

"You're the best, sweetheart. Once they serve dinner, you're off the hook, okay?" And then she's gone, whisking away to ensure everything else runs smoothly.

I think we all should've known better than to think Dylan and I would be off the hook once dinner is served. After Dylan runs through all the stories again and I've helped everyone make a snowflake, showing them how to fold the paper and letting the older kids share one pair of scissors while I help the younger kids, it's time to eat, and Mom approaches me, consternation obvious on her face. "They're asking if you'll stay and eat. Fortunately the catering crew always makes a few extra plates just in case something happens, so there's enough for you two to eat. I hate asking you to do this. I'm sure you have other plans." At this, Mom's gaze darts to Dylan, because she knows I don't. "And of course you can say no. But if you stay, you'd be helping me out so much."

"I don't mind staying," I say before Dylan can answer. I toss him a glance. "I can handle them on my own if you want to go. I'm sure Mom can give me a ride home."

Mom nods when I glance her way. "Of course."

He seems to consider that, then shakes his head. “We still have to break down the set, anyway. It’s easier if there are two of us. I can stay to finish helping with the kids, then we can load up, and I’ll drive you home as planned.”

Before I can respond, Mom says, “Thank you both so much,” in a whoosh, and hurries away.

Dylan lets out a soft chuckle. “Your mom’s a great event coordinator, but I get the feeling she hasn’t worked at this kind of a place before.” At the quick shake of my head, he nods, glancing at the people gathered around tables, getting their kids settled as the catering staff brings out food. “Tell her that these kinds of groups do this a lot.” He meets my eyes. “This isn’t the first time an elf gig turned into babysitting duty.”

We end up staying all the way until the end, entertaining the kids with endless games of Ring Around the Rosie and Duck Duck Goose. Dylan makes all the kids an origami crane out of the leftover paper, and they’re all thrilled, the little ones racing to their parents to show off their treasures.

When Mom approaches us, my shoulders hitch, involuntarily bracing myself for her to tell me they want us to stay even longer for some reason, even though they look like they’re getting ready to leave. “You guys are lifesavers,” she says. The group starts singing “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” and Mom hands us each an envelope. “Here’s your payment for tonight. I wrote you checks from Hudgins House to make it easier on everyone, but Mr. Gossman insisted on a cash tip as well, so that’s in there too.” I open my envelope, eyes widening at the crisp one hundred dollar bill nestled inside along with the check for our evening of babysitting. “I’m sure you’re more than ready to break down the set and go, but they’ll be done after the song. If you don’t mind waiting ...”

A grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, Dylan nods. “Of course. No problem.”

Mom gives us another grateful smile and rushes off again. Dylan settles on the ground, reaching up to tug on the hem of my skirt. “Might as well get

marginally comfortable. It could take a bit longer than they say for them to clear out.” He glances at the clock on the wall. “We’ll give them fifteen minutes. If they’re not done by then, we start discreetly taking out the small things, and once we’ve done all the discreet breakdown we can, we start taking everything apart. If they don’t want the kiddies to see that, it’s on them at that point.”

Chuckling, I settle myself on the floor, pulling both legs to one side so I don’t flash everyone in my skirt. “Sounds like a plan.” We sit in silence, but it doesn’t feel strained or awkward like it sometimes does with Dylan. It’s comfortable.

Imagine. Being comfortable with Dylan. Who’d’ve thought?

This job is over at Christmas, I remind myself sternly. And after that ... well, I’ll probably take the week between Christmas and New Year’s to relax a little, and then I’ll figure out what to do with myself next. Find another job, though I’m not sure what kinds of jobs there are around here during the off season.

Just as I’m about to follow that rabbit trail down an unappealing hole—what if I can’t find another job? What if there are no jobs here in the off season? What if I have to wait until summer to find something else, and that’s only seasonal too, and I don’t want Dad’s help anymore, but how will I afford to go back to college when I decide I want to—Dylan stands, and I realize that people are starting to file out. It’s not a mass exodus or anything, but the group is already smaller. “Let’s get started,” Dylan says quietly. “Driving home’s already gonna suck.”

I toss him a questioning look. Is that a dig at me?

“The snow,” he explains, setting the basket of books and stuffed animals off to one side. “I overheard someone say it’s been snowing all evening. The roads might be difficult.”

I nod, then give him a sly smile. “Right, but that’s why you’ve got your big four-wheel drive truck, right? Can’t those handle just about anything?”

He chuckles, grouping the small fake Christmas trees in pots we brought off to one side and taking the garland off the backdrop walls while I take down

the camera equipment, stowing everything carefully in the padded cases.

Once everyone's gone, Dylan touches my arm. "Let's change into normal clothes before we load everything into the truck. I don't want to wear this stuff outside."

Glancing down at my own costume, I nod. "Good idea."

Once we're in normal clothes, the atmosphere seems to have changed entirely. While it was festive and fun just moments ago, returning to the mostly disassembled Santa's Workshop set looks sad, and Dylan's warm and friendly demeanor is subsumed by focused determination.

I stay quiet, helping with whatever he needs, piling up the small things so we can carry out the big pieces first then fetch and carry the rest—the unloading process in reverse.

Partway through that, Mom comes in and sees that we haven't started loading up yet, still caught up in disassembling the big pieces, me holding the walls while Dylan lies on the floor with the power drill, taking them apart. Mom gives me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry to keep you both so late. Everyone else is gone. Do you want me to help?"

Dylan sits up, putting the screws and bolts in his hand into a little baggy, glancing at Mom's dress and heels. "We've got it," he assures her. "But thanks for the offer."

She glances down at her own attire and gives him a rueful smile. "I do have boots to change into," she says.

Shaking his head again, he stands, taking the weight of one of the walls while I move to support the other. "We've got it. We're almost done."

"Okay." She lets out a sigh of relief. "I've had a really long day. Lydia, if I leave the keys with you, would you lock up?" At my nod, she steps closer, handing me a key ring with a tag on it, then holds up a finger, her face stern. "Make sure you lock the door. Don't lose the key. And give it back as soon as you get home."

Grinning, I nod. "I will, Mom. Don't worry." Dylan relieves me of the wall, and I give my mom a hug. "Go home. I'll see you there soon."

With one final wave, she disappears, and Dylan and I start loading up. We work like we've been doing this sort of thing for ages, our actions in sync with little need for negotiation or commentary. Even so, I'm relieved when I climb into the cab of the truck, not having to do anything but sit here until we get home.

The truck's been running while we loaded up, so it's toasty warm when I get in, though the windshield is covered with snow. Didn't Dylan clean it off before we started loading the back? I thought he did.

He opens the driver's side, his hat wet with snow, his face almost grim. "Pass me the brush, would you?"

I fish the extendable brush out from under my seat and hand it to him. "Am I hallucinating, or did you clean off the car already?"

He cracks a small smile. "No, you're not hallucinating. I cleaned it off. It's coming down pretty hard." His lips press into a thin line, and he looks around. "The truck should be able to handle it, though."

"Is there anything else I can do?" I ask, not really wanting to stir from the cozy cab, but willing to help if it gets us on the road faster. From the look on his face, that seems like a smart move.

But he shakes his head. "Nah. You're fine. This'll only take a minute."

The snow disappears from the windshield in a few big swipes from each side, and I see him check the headlights and side mirrors too before climbing in and handing me the brush to stow at my feet. After buckling, he takes a deep breath, puts the truck in reverse, and carefully pulls out of our parking spot.

We bump over the ruts in the snow in the parking lot, and I grab the handle above my door. Dylan glances my way. "You might wanna just hang onto that until we get back into town." He adds a little smile that makes me uncertain if he's joking or not, but either way, I keep ahold of the handle. It's too bumpy not to.

Once we're on the road, it doesn't get much better. The snow looks like it's almost as deep as the bumper, though we can still see ruts from the last car to leave. They're just dents, though, not the clear tracks you'd expect since it hasn't been *that* long since Mom left. Has it?

“What kind of car does your mom drive?” Dylan asks quietly.

“A Jeep.”

He nods, blowing out a slow breath. “Good.”

I shoot him a look. I haven’t really been especially concerned about his ability to get us out of here, but that comment seems concerning. “We gonna make it?”

His lips press together again, but he jerks his chin. “We should.”

That’s less reassuring than I was hoping for, but it seems to be the best I’m going to get right now.

My grip on the handle tightens, more from anxiety than from the need for stability, but having something to hold onto makes me feel better.

Until Dylan slows—not that we were going fast before—and we come to a stop. I’m about to ask what’s going on, when I realize the snow in front of us has a big strip of brown in it. Squinting, I try to make out what I’m seeing through the fast falling snow. “What is that? Is that ...”

“A tree,” Dylan answers, voice grim. “Maybe—hopefully—a large branch. Stay here.”

He parks and hops out before I can say anything, striding through knee deep snow. He walks back and forth in front of the headlights before pausing to pull on a pair of gloves. Brushing snow off the tree or branch or whatever it is, he bends to examine it, and I bite my lip, hoping he’ll just drag the thing out of the way and we can move on.

But when I see him give it an experimental push, it doesn’t look like it’s budging. Straightening, he stands for a moment staring down at the obstacle, then he looks back at me in the truck, though I doubt he can see me with the headlights shining at him.

Lowering my window, I lean out into the strangely hushed, snow filled forest. The snow immediately catches in my hair and eyelashes, and I blink it away. “Can I help?”

I hear him let out a sigh, then he shakes his head. “No.”

Well then.

When he turns and makes his way back to the truck, I close the window again, waiting for him to get back in. After opening the door, he brushes himself off as best he can before climbing in again. “We need a chainsaw. It’s too big and too embedded in the snow to move without cutting it up. I’ll call Dad and see what we can do.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dylan

I DO MY BEST TO IGNORE THE PALE, PINCHED LOOK ON LYDIA'S FACE AS I pull my phone out of my pocket.

Dad answers on the first ring. "Dylan? What's wrong?"

"Downed tree."

He curses, which is unusual for Dad, and does nothing to reassure me. When I saw how hard it was snowing, I was worried we'd find someone else stuck on the side of the road. My biggest concern was Kim, Lydia's mom, since she was the last one to leave before us. But when Lydia said she drives a Jeep, I'd relaxed a bit. The snow's deep and the roads suck, but with four-wheel drive and high clearance, she should be fine. We should've been fine too, but ... tree.

"Anyone else stuck?" Dad asks when his stream of invective trails off.

I swallow. "No. Just Lydia and me. At least not this side of the tree. We were the last ones to leave. Her mom gave us the keys to lock up since we had to finish taking down the set and load up still, and she'd been there all day."

"How much gas do you have? Do you have the emergency blankets in the truck still? Is Lydia dressed?"

I have to stifle a snort at his last question. I know what he means, but his phrasing is funny. “Over half a tank, yes on the emergency blankets, and we have boots, coats, hats, and gloves, but no other snow gear.”

Dad grunts, thinking. “Let me make a couple of calls. I’ll see what I can do. Meanwhile, stay dry and warm as best you can.”

Since my legs are already soaked, I can’t reassure him I’ll stay dry, but I just say, “Okay,” and hang up.

Lydia looks at me, eyebrows raised. “Now what?”

Sighing, I look at my phone. “Now we wait.”

We don’t have to wait long, even though it feels like a small eternity where I turn on the windshield wipers every so often so the snow doesn’t bury us completely.

Dad calls back less than ten minutes later. “All the emergency crews are out right now. I don’t know when they’ll be able to get to you. You should probably turn off the car, get out the blankets, and huddle up together to stay warm. You can turn it on to warm up every so often, but you don’t want to run out of gas before someone can come. And it might be longer than just waiting for someone with a truck and a chainsaw, since we don’t know how long that’ll take. By the time they get there, it might be too deep for even a truck.”

“Shit.” Normally that’d earn me a mild scolding to watch my language, but given the situation, Dad doesn’t say anything.

I look over at Lydia, who’s watching me with wide eyes, her lips pressed in a tight line, the corners of her mouth pulling down. Even if she can’t hear what Dad’s saying, my response gives away that he doesn’t have good news.

The snow’s getting deeper, but it’s not impassable yet. “We have the keys to Hudgins House. I think we can turn around and make it back. We’ll hole up there for the night. Tell them to call me when the road’s clear.”

Dad lets out a relieved breath. “You think you can get yourself turned around without getting stuck?”

I look out the windows again. “Yeah. We haven’t been stopped that long. We’ll go slow and be careful, but we can get back to the place. Even if we have to hike back part of the way, we’ve got the blankets and changes of clothes”—we can always change back into our costumes if we absolutely have to, after all, and I just might change into my pants at least to get out of my wet jeans—“plus the building is heated and there’s a kitchen. We might be able to scrounge up some food.”

“Good. Okay. That’s good. Do that. I’ll keep in touch with the rescue teams and let you know when they get to you.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Be safe,” he says before we both hang up.

Dropping my phone in the cup holder in the center console, I look at Lydia. “I guess we get to spend the night at your mom’s work,” I tell her.

She gives me a tight smile, and I appreciate the effort. At least she’s not hysterical or freaking out. “Yay,” she says in a small, faux cheerful voice. “Sleepover.”

That makes me chuckle as I put the car back in gear. “Hang on. This might get a little rough.”

At least when we arrive at Hudgins House this time, we don’t have to unload the whole truck. I pull the wool blankets Dad makes me keep in the truck from behind the seat, handing one to Lydia. “They’re a little scratchy, but they’re warm,” I tell her, and she gives me a wan smile.

“We might be able to find some other blankets or something inside, too,” she says as she pops open her door. “We can look, at least.”

She has the keys ready when we get to the door we left from not so long ago, though at this point it feels like it’s been ages after white knuckling the drive out and back and the empty parking lot with our earlier tracks almost covered. The snow’s still coming hard and fast. Dad might’ve sounded mildly optimistic about us getting out sometime tonight, but I have a feeling we’ll be

here until morning at least.

Once inside, she fumbles around for a light switch and pulls her phone out of her pocket. “I’m going to let my mom know what’s happening, and I’ll go see what she has in her office. You want to look around and see if you find a good spot to spend the night? Then we can look for blankets. Worst case, they should have tablecloths. If nothing else, we can use those as a layer between us and the wool blankets, right?”

“Good thinking.” I watch her disappear down a hallway, her phone pressed to her ear, her shoulders hunched as though to ward off the cold. Or maybe just the stress of the evening.

Once she’s out of sight, I turn and head to the event room we were in. I’m not sure what I expect to find there, but it looks a lot like it did when we left, round tables still set up, but the dishes cleared and table linens stripped and gone. There’s nothing here, but at least it’s a familiar room. We could stay in here if I don’t find somewhere better.

Crossing the room, I push through into the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets as I go to see what’s available.

I meet up with Lydia again in the front lobby. She has her arms crossed tightly over her chest, and she looks a little lost. Her face brightens a bit when she sees me, and that sends a shot of warmth into my chest, spreading and making me feel better. Maybe it’s stupid to care about her feelings toward me at this exact moment, but I like that she’s happy to see me, even if it’s just because I’m the only other person here.

“Mom says we can raid her snack drawer. And she told me there should be some throw pillows and a couple of decorative blankets in one of the decor closets. We should do our best not to get them visibly dirty, but at least they’ll help us be more comfortable.”

“Score.” I offer her the most encouraging smile I can. It seems like Lydia’s trying to make the best of things. I can match that, at the very least. Being stuck all night with someone who can only complain will make us both more miserable. I don’t want to be that person either. “Did she say where those closets were?”

Lydia laughs softly. “She just said in the hall. The problem is, I’ve only been here like one other time, so I don’t really know my way around.”

“Well,” I say, clapping my hands together. “You’re in luck. My sister got married here, so I know my way around pretty well.” I hold out my elbow, offering her my arm like an old fashioned gentleman.

She looks at me, surprised, but then she dissolves into a smile and another soft laugh, hooking her arm through mine. “Lead the way, good sir.”

There’s no rush, after all, so we take our time opening every single door and exploring all the rooms and closets of Hudgins House, finding anything and everything we can to make the night better. Plus, the hunt is a distraction from the fact that we’re trapped here for an unknown amount of time.

About halfway through our explorations, our arms laden with the blankets and pillows Kim had mentioned, Lydia stops and bites her lip, looking at me. “Did your dad say when he thinks they might get the road open again?”

I shake my head and sigh. “No. There’s no way to know, honestly. With the plows and emergency crews already working overtime, it could be a while. Since Dad knows we’re safe here, that’ll bump us lower down the priority list. They’ll be working harder to get to stranded people who are hurt or in danger of hypothermia.”

Blinking hard, she looks away and nods. “Right. That makes sense.” Her exhale is shaky, then she barks out a laugh. “I never thought I’d say this, but I’m really glad you’re here.”

That makes me laugh too. “Me too. I mean, not that we’re stranded. But if I have to be stranded after a gig, I’d rather it be with you than Nora.”

She bats her eyes at me and lays a hand over her heart. “Awww. So sweet. You really know how to make a girl feel amazing.”

That has me laughing. “Says the girl who qualified her statement with her disbelief that she’d say she’s glad to be stuck with me.”

Grinning, she points at me. “Touché.”

We end up making our camp in one of the women’s dressing rooms. It’s

cozier than the men's, though we pull the cushions off the couch in the men's dressing room and bring them into the women's to add to the ones we find in there. When I offered to stay in the men's dressing room and give her the women's to herself, she shook her head in a quick negative. I didn't argue, because I don't really want to be alone either.

She pulls the cushions off the couch in the women's dressing room and arranges our collection on the floor in front of the couch, spreading a blanket over them, then arranging the throw pillows so they're propped against the couch like it's a headboard and we have a big bed on the floor. Once she's done, she surveys her work with her hands on her hips. "There. I think that'll be comfortable enough. What do you think?"

I kick off my shoes and crawl onto the bed she's made, propping myself against the couch with my hands behind my head and letting out an exaggerated sigh. "Perfection."

"Hey!" she protests. "Your jeans are still wet! Don't get our bed all gross." Even though she's grinning as she says it, she nudges my legs with her toe until I move them off the blanket.

Holding up my hands in surrender, I stand. "Fine. Good point." The damp fabric is pressing against my legs, and now that I'm not hunting for bedding, I'm more aware of it than ever. "I'll take them off."

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" She holds out her hands to stop me. "Dude! You can't just strip in front of me like that." She gestures between us. "Even if we are getting along better today than we have before now, we don't have *that* good of a relationship."

Laughing, I scoop up my backpack, shooting her a look. "Number one, I wasn't just going to strip. I'm going to change into my elf pants. They'll be more comfortable for sleeping anyway. And number two, I'll go change in the men's dressing room. Though it's not like you haven't seen me in my underwear already."

Her cheeks get pink at the reminder that she's seen me changing more than once, and she eyes the makeshift bed she's created, like it's just occurred to her that we'll be sleeping on there together tonight.

“Hey,” I say softly, but she shoos me away.

“Go change.” Her voice is subdued now, but it’s still a command. “I’ll go raid Mom’s snack drawer, and we can decide how to ration our supplies.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lydia

WITH MY ARMS WRAPPED PROTECTIVELY AROUND MYSELF, I LEAVE THE cheerful warmth of the dressing room and go into the cold, empty hallway. The thermostat's on an automatic timer that makes it cooler at night, and with no one other than Dylan and me here, it's chilly, and I'm glad I wore my thick, oversized sweater today. It's cozy and warm, and paired with leggings, it'll be comfy enough for sleeping.

I jingle the keys in my hand, needing there to be some noise other than the sound of my own breathing and footsteps. It's weird being in a place that's designed to host large groups when it's empty. And in other circumstances, I might find it fun or even peaceful, but since we're stranded ...

It just seems like something out of a horror movie. I know there's not an axe murderer lurking in the dark corners—at least my logical brain knows that—but the part of me that's worried it'll take longer than a few hours for them to clear the road for us to get out of here is worried about monsters in the dark.

I'm glad I'm not here alone—that would definitely be worse—but if I got to choose someone to be stranded with, it definitely wouldn't be Dylan. He's been fine today—great, even—but the prospect of sharing the couch-cushion bed with him has my gut clenching for different reasons than my atavistic

fear of the dark.

Sleeping with someone feels so ... vulnerable. And even if we're more friendly now, the last person I want to be vulnerable with is *him*.

I don't get a choice in the matter, though, so the sooner I can make myself come to terms with it, the better. Or at least distract myself with finding food.

Which doesn't take me long, despite the slow pace of my steps to get to Mom's office. It unlocks easily, and the snacks are all in her bottom desk drawer like she said. I find an empty box that hasn't been thrown away yet and stack everything edible into it plus a couple bottles of water she has in there. I'll help her replenish it tomorrow when we're not trapped anymore.

For a snack drawer, she's pretty well stocked—granola bars, protein bars, trail mix, and crackers. Mom usually likes to snack on fruits and veggies too ...

A smile spreading across my face, I move down the hall, opening more doors. We didn't go through the offices because we were focused on the storage places to see what we could find to use as bedding. We checked the catering kitchen too, but came up empty there. But I forgot that Mom mentioned there's a breakroom with a fridge and sink and microwave for employees. If Mom has anything refrigerated, it'd be there.

It's three doors down from her office, and I have to try a few keys to get the door unlocked, but when I do, I let out a whoop of triumph. There are a few Lean Cuisines in the freezer—which, once again, I'll replace if we eat them, especially since I don't know who they belong to—some yogurt, some sliced cheese, and some lunch meat in the fridge. With the crackers, it's like DIY Lunchables. No Capri Suns or Oreos to follow it up, sadly, but we can make do with water and trail mix. At least it's the good kind with M&Ms.

Retrieving my box from Mom's office, I toss the cheese and lunch meat in as well.

The walk back to the dressing room we've claimed is less ominous, and Dylan's waiting inside, lounging on the bed and scrolling on his phone when I return, his shins and bare feet peeking out from the jagged hem of his green elf pants.

“Dinner is served!” I announce with a wide smile. “Or second dinner?” I amend. “Snack, I guess.”

Dylan looks up, surprised and happy at my entrance. “Oh yeah? What’d you find?”

I set the box down at the foot of the bed as he gets up on his knees, coming to the edge. “I found the employee break room and raided the fridge.” Passing him the cheese and lunch meat, I pull out the box of crackers. “Maybe not steak au poivre, but definitely better than nothing.”

Chuckling, he takes the crackers, then climbs to his feet. “Hang on.” And he disappears out the door.

Shrugging, I open the box of crackers and pull out a handful to munch on while I wait for him. It’s been a long night, and even though we had dinner earlier, it was a while ago, and I’m hungry.

Dylan returns a moment later and bows deeply, laying a piece of paper towel from the bathroom in front of me. “Your place setting, mademoiselle,” he intones, then he lays another piece on the floor and settles in front of it with a grin.

“Thank you, kind sir,” I say, equally solemn, though I can’t fight back the grin. When we’re like this, the prospect of being trapped here until at least morning doesn’t seem so bad. But morning’s still a long way off.

He makes grabby motions at the box of crackers, and I pass it to him. After setting a handful on his paper towel, he opens the packages of cheese and lunch meat, placing them between us so we can each grab what we want.

“Honestly,” he says after a moment, “the catered dinner wasn’t too bad, but this hits the spot even better.” Then he frowns. “I just wish there were something to drink.”

“Oh!” I hold up a finger and rummage through my box, producing the bottles of water and passing one to him.

“Yesss!” He takes his and cracks it open, then holds it aloft in the universal gesture of a toast. “To the best scrounged-up second dinner we could ask for while trapped in the snow.”

“Here, here!” I tap my bottle to his and we both drink deeply, his eyes dancing merrily as he watches me.

Maybe tonight won’t be so bad after all.

“You getting tired?” Dylan asks, checking his phone, his back leaning against the counter in the employee breakroom. It’s almost eleven now, but I shake my head, wrapping my arms around myself. We’ve finished our snack and returned to the break room to put the cheese and lunch meat back in the fridge.

“Nah. I’m kind of a night owl.”

He nods, surveying the space. “Me too,” he says absently, moving closer to the one cup coffee maker. “How about some hot chocolate before we settle in for the night?” He holds up a box of Swiss Miss and wiggles it back and forth.

“That actually sounds really good.” I start opening and closing cabinets until I find some paper cups we can use, and Dylan dumps a packet of hot cocoa mix in each one.

The silence stretching between us feels more oppressive by the moment. It’s not so bad when we have something to do—eating, finding something to sleep on, loading the truck, even him driving us here doesn’t seem like doing nothing in the same way that standing here waiting for the coffee maker to splutter hot water into our cups does.

“We should play two truths and a lie,” I blurt out, causing Dylan to glance at me in surprise, his eyebrows high, but his lips twitching in a way that makes one of his dimples pop.

Then he crosses his arms, leans against the counter, and squints up at the ceiling, his face screwed up in thought. “Okay. I’m studying architecture, I hate the color green, and ... I like to go parasailing every summer.”

Squinting at him, I consider his answers. “I know the first one is true, because you’ve mentioned it before ...” I shake my head. “You don’t hate green. It’s

probably your favorite color.”

He makes a buzzer sound. “Sorry. Wrong answer.”

My eyes widen. “Seriously? How can you hate green? What’s wrong with it?”

He holds up a finger, like he’s about to count off his reasons on his hand. “Ever heard of baby poop green? Isn’t that answer enough?”

“Fine, that shade of green is gross, but what about forest green?”

He shakes his head, his hand dropping. “If I were a tree, it’d be fine, but I’m not. And anyway, d’you know why trees are green? It’s because that’s the only color of light they can’t absorb, so they reflect it back. Which just goes to show that there’s something wrong with green. Plants don’t even want to convert it into energy. It must be gross.”

I’m laughing at that reasoning. “Is that actually true?”

He nods, grinning, and I can’t be sure if he’s telling the truth, so I narrow my eyes at him. He raises his hands defensively. “I’m serious!” he exclaims in the face of my disbelief. “That’s why plants are green. It’s the only spectrum of light they don’t absorb and photosynthesize. My high school biology teacher was a plant nut, and she told us all kinds of random facts like that. That one stuck with me.”

“You really go parasailing every summer?”

He nods. “Since I was fifteen. I went with a friend the first time because it seemed scary and daring.” Shaking his head, he gets a little wistful. “It’s not, though. There’s an adrenaline rush when the wind first catches you and pulls you up, sure, but after that it’s remarkably peaceful, like you’re just floating along in the air, getting to look at everything. It’s really cool. You should try it sometime.”

I look at him thoughtfully. “Maybe I will.”

He swaps the cups under the coffee maker, stirring up the first one and glancing at me over his shoulder. “Alright. Your turn.”

Crap. Okay. I need to come up with something good. “I’m not going back to

school in January, salmon is my favorite food, and my best friend from high school is still my best friend now.”

Eyes narrowed, he turns to survey me. “You’re going back to school after the break,” he says definitively, and something about the way he says it makes my heart quail a little as I shake my head, even though I really shouldn’t care what he thinks.

My dad hasn’t been able to get me to change my mind. Why should I care if Dylan’s upset about my plans? What right does he have to be upset anyway?

His face goes slack. “Wait. Seriously? Why not?”

Sighing, I shrug. “Last semester was rough.”

He studies me for a minute. “Nah. Nope. No. That’s a worse answer than why I don’t like green, which, by the way, I don’t actually need a reason for. People are allowed to not like colors. What happened? Unless ...” His face goes blank. “Were you ... attacked? Because I guess if ‘rough’ is an understatement for that, that makes more sense.”

“Oh my god, no. I wasn’t assaulted,” I assure him.

Relief makes his shoulders drop. “Jesus. Okay. Good.” He stirs up the hot chocolate in the other cup and passes it to me, gesturing for me to precede him toward the door. “Rough how, then?”

I toss him a glance over my shoulder. “Not that I need to justify my reasons to you ...”

“Fine,” he grunts. “That’s fair. But I still want to know what happened.”

I bob my head in understanding, blowing on my hot chocolate to cool it a little before taking a tentative sip. The warmth is comforting, the smooth sweetness bursting on my tongue the perfect contrast to our late-night snack. “My parents split up in October.”

He doesn’t say anything, and when I glance at him, he’s watching me, clearly waiting for me to elaborate.

Sighing, I lead the way into the dressing room, toeing off my boots and settling on the edge of our couch cushion bed before continuing. I shrug. “It

threw me off really bad. I thought ...” I look at him, then away. “I didn’t know there was anything wrong between them. Mom says they grew apart while raising my sister and me, that while we were home, they had us to focus on, but once I was gone ...” I shrug again. “Apparently me leaving—I’m the youngest—removed any reason they had to stay together. So they divorced. They said it would be amicable, but ...” Pressing my lips together, I give him a meaningful look and shake my head, which he answers with a sympathetic smile.

I sip my hot cocoa before continuing, halfway hoping Dylan will jump in and say something so I can stop talking about this. “I just feel responsible, you know?”

That has his eyebrows lifting, then pulling down and together, a furrow appearing between them. “Responsible how? Responsible for what, exactly? Their divorce?”

“Yes?” I lift a hand and let it drop. “No. I mean, I know. It sounds stupid. But it’s like ... they would’ve broken up years ago if I weren’t around. My mom ...” I meet Dylan’s eyes. “She’s so much happier than I’ve ever seen her. I didn’t even know she was unhappy before, but it’s obvious now. She’s ... alive in a way I’ve never seen. And I just feel like she could’ve had that all along, you know? If not for me.”

His brows still furrowed, he studies me over the rim of his cup as he sips his cocoa. “Right. So. That sucks, though I think we both know that’s not actually your fault, but sometimes feelings aren’t logical. You’re gonna have to find a way to let go of that, though, because even if it’s kinda true, the fact is, your mom chose to stay for her own reasons. Maybe you moving out and going to school helped make it easier for her. Or maybe she didn’t realize how unhappy she really was until you were gone.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “The school counselor said pretty much the same thing.”

He nods. “See? There you go. Any time the thought pops up that you’re at fault for anything, remind yourself that it’s not true. I still don’t quite understand why that means you’re not going back to school, though.”

Draining my cup of cocoa to buy time turns out to be a mistake, because once it’s gone, I don’t have anything more to hold and sip and fiddle with. I stand

up and take it to the trash can in the corner, my thoughts and emotions roiling as I consider how to respond. When I drop the cup into the empty plastic bin with a loud thunk, it seems like some kind of punctuation. Like it's putting a period—or maybe an exclamation mark—on all the fragmented thoughts swirling in my head, solidifying into something like, *How dare he? How is this any of his business? I don't need to justify myself to him!*

Whirling around, I cross my arms, though the effect is lost by the need to brush stray strands of hair out of my face. My bangs are getting long, my pixie cut growing out and getting shaggy. Since I haven't found a place to get my hair cut here, I'm apparently growing it out by default and it's at that annoying length where it's long enough to get in my face, but not long enough to stay back. And right now, it's driving me crazy.

“Look,” I start, sounding every bit as defensive as I feel, “I need a break, okay? I don't know why you even care. *You're* not paying for my degree. You barely even know me!”

Dylan frowns and studies his cup of hot chocolate, while I'm left breathing hard, surprised by my own vehemence. I hadn't quite meant to respond like that, but with the last phone call I had with my dad too fresh, I'm tired of defending myself, of explaining my reasoning.

“You're right,” he says at last, his voice gentle. His eyes flick up to mine, soft with some emotion I can't name. “You're right,” he repeats, louder. “It's not my business. I have no vested interest in your education. I guess ...” He shakes his head, refocusing on his cup. “I knew you were working hard and saving money. I assumed it was for next semester. But it doesn't really matter. Like you said, we barely know each other. I'm sorry for upsetting you.” He drains his cup as well and gets up to throw it away.

When I take a step back, moving out of the way of the trash can, he reaches out and stays me with a hand, and heat zings up my arm from where he touches me. He jerks his hand away, like he felt it too. “Sorry,” he mutters. “I ...” He looks at the door. “Sorry.” And then he leaves.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dylan

I COULD KICK MYSELF FOR BEING SO STUPID. THOUGH, TO BE FAIR, I HADN'T realized I was straying close to a sensitive subject. She's the one who volunteered she wasn't returning to school. I'd thought we were playing a get to know you game, so I asked why not. In retrospect, I can see how my comments came off as judgmental and put her on the defensive, though.

"Stupid," I mutter, pushing into the men's bathroom. So much for our progress tonight. I should just keep my mouth shut and leave her alone, take her home once we get clear of this, and let her live her life however she sees fit without any input or interference from me. She doesn't want to be friends with me. She definitely wouldn't want to hang out with me outside of work, though I've actually enjoyed our time here tonight.

If I had to pick someone to get trapped overnight with, I couldn't pick anyone better than Lydia. She made a game out of searching for bedding. She's the one who had the idea of combining all the couch cushions to give us a comfortable sleeping space. She found food and drinks for us, keeping up a lighthearted commentary and making dry jokes the whole time.

And now I've ruined it.

After using the bathroom, I take a few deep breaths. Storming in the same

way I stormed out isn't going to help anything. And she'll think I'm pissed at her instead of realizing I'm mad at myself.

When I get back to the dressing room, she's sitting on the makeshift bed with her arms wrapped around her knees, her face drawn and pale like it was in the car when we realized we weren't going to get home tonight. My heart lurches at the sight, and I want to do whatever I can to make her feel better.

"I'm sorry," I say again, sounding calmer than before I left. "I didn't mean to upset you. I shouldn't have—"

She waves away my apology, giving me a wan smile. "It's fine. Don't worry about it. I'm fine."

The way she says that doesn't sound like she's fine.

Standing, she brushes her hands down the backs of her legs like she's brushing off dirt, even though nothing in here is dirty. She seems more nervous than she did earlier, though, and I once again have the urge to kick my own ass for messing up the easy truce we'd reached over the course of the night. We were allies against the overbearing adults in the parties, keeping the kids entertained with inadequate supplies and preparation, then in finding ways to be comfortable during our night—hopefully it's just one night—stuck here.

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom," she says quietly. "Then we should try to sleep."

"Okay." The word scrapes out of me, and I clear my throat, trying again. "Sounds good."

Another wan smile as she slips past me.

I busy myself nudging the couch cushions closer together while she's gone—they'd separated a little from us climbing around and getting up and down on them—resettling the blankets so they're smooth and inviting. I place the extra tablecloths and wool blankets we'll be using as covers at the foot of the bed. I normally sleep in minimal clothing—boxers or workout shorts and nothing else—but it's chilly enough in here that I'll be leaving on my hoodie, pants, and socks tonight, even with the blankets. We're in no danger of hypothermia or freezing to death, but when I checked the locked thermostat, it read fifty-

nine degrees, so it's not exactly comfortably warm.

Lydia returns, rubbing her nose, her fingers just peeking out from the arms of her sweater.

I gesture toward the bed. "Which side would you like?"

She glances at me as though startled, then looks at the bed, her lower lip caught between her teeth. "Oh, uh, this side's fine." She gestures at the side closest to her, then climbs onto it.

Standing at the foot of the bed, I pick up the tablecloth-turned-top sheet and shake it out.

Startled, she props herself up on her elbow. "What are you doing?"

I spread it out over her, turning the gesture into a bow. "Your covers, mademoiselle."

She giggles, and the sound eases the fist around my heart that demands I make her feel better. She doesn't protest as I spread the wool blanket over her as well, then she watches me as I spread my own covers on my half, then climb underneath them.

Shifting around to face me, she tucks her hands under her face. "Thank you," she says in a small voice after a moment. When I quirk a brow in silent question, she gestures with one hand, making a circle over us. "For the blankets. For making tonight bearable. I don't know what I would've done if I'd gotten stuck alone." She sucks in a breath and shakes her head. "Sorry for going off on you about the school thing. My dad's been harping on me about it. He's mad, and like you, he doesn't get it, and nothing I say seems to matter." She pauses, pressing her lips together, her eyes staring past me as she considers her words. "It's like he doesn't *want* to get it." Her eyes refocus on mine. "Does that make sense? And I'm just so tired of going around in circles about it, trying to make myself understood to someone who refuses, and the prospect of rehashing everything again just made me mad. While you did sound a bit more judgmental than I'd prefer"—her voice has an edge, but she shoots me a grin to alleviate the sting—"you didn't deserve the level of response you got. I appreciate your apology, and I'm sorry too."

I take a moment, considering her words and the best way to respond before

saying anything. The last thing I want to do is put my foot in it again, though I'm relieved that I didn't screw up everything. Finally, I reach out a tentative finger, brushing it over her wrist. "I could tell I'd touched a nerve, and, as you said, I was being judgmental. It seemed like your response was due to something more than that, though. Thank you for telling me."

She nods, covering her nose with her hand, moving away from my touch with the motion, and I pull my hand back. "My nose is so cold," she whispers-wails.

"Awww," I say in a big show of sympathy, pulling her blankets up higher. "Poor thing. Cover your face with your blanket and try to sleep. Hopefully we'll wake up to good news."

Nodding, she tugs the blankets up high over her shoulders and around her face, turning onto her other side. "Dylan?" her soft voice floats back over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're here."

"Me too," I whisper, her words warming me as I listen to her breathing grow deeper and more even, the sound of it eventually lulling me to sleep as well.

I wake to a loud beeping sound outside and awareness of low light filtering in through the windows. Making a grumbling sound of protest at being woken up, I also become aware that my hip hurts, but I'm otherwise in a warm little cocoon with Lydia pressed up against me, her ass nestled against the morning wood straining to get to her through my boxers and pants.

I should move, I tell myself, but despite the fact that we're lying on the floor, the couch cushions having apparently separated in the night so that we're both in the gap between them, I don't want to move.

I'll move when she wakes up, I promise myself, deciding that if she's sleeping through what sounds like a snowplow in the parking lot, she clearly needs the rest. I have no idea what time it is, but it's bright enough that it's obviously

daytime, and the plow getting here is a good sign. That means the road is clear too.

That shouldn't make me sad, but it does, because that means that once Lydia wakes up and realizes we can go home, the magic of the last night will dissipate like a puff of smoke, and possibly our truce with it.

So no, I'm not going to move. I'm not going to risk waking Lydia up. Not when I'm reasonably confident that we'll go back to stilted politeness once this is all over.

But then she's moving, shifting around in my arms so she's facing me, blinking up at me with sleepy eyes.

I hold my breath, waiting for her reaction. Is she going to freak out? That seems like a strong possibility.

But instead she snuggles into me and relaxes with a sigh, and I let out a slow breath of relief.

Then she stiffens, her head yanking back, her hands pushing on my chest.

I let her go, trying to roll back, but I'm stymied by the cushions behind me and the blankets tangled around us both, wrapping around us like a burrito and keeping us locked together.

She's struggling, apparently not awake enough to figure out what the problem is or how to get out of it. Reaching behind me, I yank at the blankets a couple times, getting enough slack that we can separate, then I pull them off and sit up, scrubbing my face with my hands.

Yeah, I should've just moved when I woke up and realized we were spooning.

Lydia sits up more slowly, yawning widely and shaking her head. "Sorry. I woke up and didn't know where I was or what was going on." She leans forward to look at my face. "Did I whack you?"

Chuckling, I shake my head. "No. I'm fine. No harm, no foul." Looping my arms over my knees, I return her gaze, taking in the crease of the pillow on her cheek, her hair sticking up all over, and I can't help smiling. She's

normally so put together that seeing her all sleep-mussed only makes her more adorable.

Her brows wrinkle, but there's a half smile creeping up her face as she rubs at her cheek under my regard. "What? Did I drool in my sleep or something?"

"No. You ..." I clear my throat. "You're good." I wanted to say, *You're perfect*, but I feel like that might be too much, too soon.

"Good." She lifts her arms above her head, stretching, then she blinks at me. "What time is it?"

Leaning back, I fish my phone out from under the cushions that got pushed on top of it during the night to check the time. "Are we just going to ignore the fact that we woke up spooning?"

When I glance at her, she has her eyes narrowed. "I'd planned to. But I guess not. Is there something that needs to be addressed?"

Sitting up again, I study her and shake my head. "Guess not." When I look at my phone, I see two missed calls from Dad, plus text messages.

I type out a response letting him know we just woke up and will be heading out soon. "It's just after eight thirty. The snow finally stopped, and they've moved the tree and plowed the road, so we can head out as soon as you're ready," I tell her, my gaze never leaving my phone.

She hums, but doesn't say anything, and when I look over at her, she's regarding me solemnly. "There are no events today, and with the party yesterday, everyone is taking a long weekend."

My eyebrows jump. "Meaning ..."

She shrugs. "Meaning, no one will be here today. We can stay as long as we want."

Setting my phone down, I watch her. "And how long do you want to stay?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lydia

MY BREATH CATCHES AT DYLAN'S LOW, ALMOST GROWLY QUESTION. How long *do* I want to stay?

Indefinitely?

I mean, no, not really, but I'm not quite ready to give up whatever this is between us. Not yet. Not when I don't know what it means.

I'd planned on just ignoring it, whatever it is, and moving on, but then he brought up the fact that we woke up cocooned in blankets and wrapped around each other. And I felt how hard he was.

It's been a long time since I've been with anyone, and Dylan obviously finds me attractive. And he's not nearly as awful as I'd first thought—assuming the last eighteen hours or so are anything to go by. The last few days, if I'm being truthful. And isn't it admirable to realize you're the problem and go about trying to fix it?

When I lean closer to him, he meets me in the middle, his arm circling my waist and pulling me close. His lips part as his eyes study my face, zeroing in on my mouth. I swallow, my tongue darting out to wet my lips.

"I really don't want to piss you off, Lydia," he whispers.

Feeling daring, I wrap my hand around the back of his neck. “Then don’t,” I whisper, pulling his lips to mine.

His full lips are soft against mine, but nearly motionless. Afraid I’ve entirely misjudged the situation, I start to pull back, but his arm tightens around my back, and he kisses me with a ferocity that surprises me despite the fact that it really shouldn’t. It’s entirely in keeping with his character for him to kiss like this.

His lips part, and I follow his lead, sliding my tongue against his, tilting my head for a better angle. He growls, a low sound that rumbles out of his chest, vibrating against my own.

Then he’s shifting around, taking me with him, lying us down on one of the cushions, his lips never leaving mine. His hand roams up and down my side, slipping under the hem of my sweater, and he chuckles when he encounters the soft cotton of the cami I’m wearing beneath it, his laughter ending our kiss.

With his forehead pressed to mine, he opens his eyes, his face taking up my entire field of vision, and I have no complaints. It’s a beautiful face—high cheekbones, level brows perfect for scowling, a bump in the bridge of his nose that makes him imperfect enough to be relatable and interesting, that square jaw that flexes every time he gets impatient or frustrated, and warm brown eyes that study me with naked lust tempered by genuine affection.

Since when does Dylan actually like me?

The lust isn’t surprising. We’ve both been physically attracted to one another all along. But affection?

Before last night, if you’d asked me how he feels about me, I’d say he thinks I’m annoying but manages to tolerate me, and I do my best to stay out of his way to make it easier on him.

Was last night enough to shift that into actual fondness?

I suppose it was for me. Because I *like* this version of Dylan, the one who laughs and jokes and kisses me like a man dying of thirst in the desert.

“We should clean up and get out of here,” he says at last, his voice still low

and rumbly, but soft like he's trying not to break the spell of us lying here wrapped around each other, even our legs twined together.

I must make some kind of unhappy face, because he lets out another soft chuckle, his hand cupping the back of my head as he brushes a kiss across my lips. "Not because I don't want to keep doing this—I definitely do—I just think we should do it somewhere ..."

"Warmer?" I supply when he seems to have trouble finding a word. Because despite his closeness, once out of the blankets, my extremities have started to become chilled again, and not that I expect we'd be wanting to remove our clothes already—I don't think I want to move that fast—I'd definitely prefer somewhere above sixty degrees.

Another soft laugh. "Yes. Warmer. More normal." Rolling onto his back, he looks at me and scrunches up his face. "Just ... better."

He does a sit up, curling upward, then stands, holding out a hand to bring me to my feet. Once I'm upright, he pulls me close and tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear, making me aware that my hair must be sticking out everywhere. Mornings aren't my best time. It takes a bit of water and hair product to tame my hair so it's not standing on end. But Dylan doesn't seem to find it ridiculous. "After we put everything away, I'll take you home. Then maybe we can meet up later? For dinner or ...?"

"Dinner sounds good," I say, lips curling in a smile. "I'm working this afternoon, though."

Dylan's eyes widen. "Shit. We really better get you home then. You might want a nap before you have to go in."

His finger slides along my jaw, tipping my chin up so he can brush one more chaste kiss over my lips, and when he steps away, I can't help covering my mouth with my fingertips like I'm trying to capture the feeling of his kiss. Our first kiss seems to have unleashed something in Dylan, and now he doesn't want to stop kissing me. Not that I'm complaining.

I don't linger, standing there watching him with my hand over my mouth, partly because I don't want him to think I'm a weirdo mooning over him and partly because he's already folding up the blankets. I need to help put

everything back in order.

It doesn't take long to get the cushions back on the couches and everything else put away. I text Mom that we're able to get home now and that I'll be there soon while Dylan takes a call from his dad checking up on us.

He does one last scan, making sure everything's put to rights, then he holds out a hand to me. "Ready?"

Somehow his question feels like it's about more than just heading home. Like taking his hand and walking out is a turning point, and this'll start a new chapter in my life.

Maybe I'm being overdramatic—it wouldn't be the first time someone thought so—but I realize I *am* ready. I'm ready for new things and to see where life takes me. Where this thing with Dylan might go.

Nodding, I grin at him and take his hand, walking into the winter wonderland together.

I'm loath to get out of the truck when Dylan drops me off outside of Mom's condo. We spend a stupid amount of time kissing and saying goodbye and him telling me he'll see me tonight.

Finally, after ten minutes of this, I open the door and slide out, turning to wave at him before I go inside.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're home," Mom says, standing from the couch and wrapping me in a hug as soon as the door closes behind me. "I was so worried."

I return her hug. "I was fine, Mom. Hudgins House might not be set up for overnight guests, but we managed. I'll need to replenish your snack drawer, though. And whoever's lunch meat and cheese was in the fridge. But we had food and shelter and blankets, and even though it was a little chilly, we weren't trapped outside in the snow."

She steps back, giving me room to take off my boots and coat, and offers me

a relieved smile. “Thank god for that. And don’t worry about the food. I’ll replace everything. Stephanie wouldn’t care anyway, especially since you two were trapped.” We must’ve eaten Stephanie’s meat and cheese.

“Now.” Mom gives me a meaningful look. “How was being trapped with the coworker you dislike the most?” My cheeks heat, and I let out a rueful chuckle that has Mom’s brows raising. “It sounds like there’s a story here. Let’s have some coffee. Did you eat anything for breakfast? How does French toast sound?”

“That sounds great, Mom. How about I take a shower while you make breakfast, and I’ll fill you in when I get out?”

Mom sends me a narrow-eyed look, though she’s smiling. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Laughing, I head down the hall to my room. “Okay.”

The shower gives me time alone to straighten out my own thoughts, plus the warm water soaks into my bones, combatting the chill that seemed to settle there once we got up and moving this morning.

Memories of Dylan’s kisses have me smiling, my hands trailing over my body, dipping between my legs briefly, imagining how hard he felt pressed against me. But I shake myself out of that. There’s not time now, with Mom waiting with coffee and breakfast—nearly brunch since it’s after ten. This’ll have to hold me through work, though I’ll be sure to bring a snack for the midafternoon break.

And then ... I’ll have dinner with Dylan. That has me smiling wider, planning out what I want to wear today so I have something cute to change into after work. He said he’ll pick me up at ChristmasFest, so I need to have it ready.

For now, I put on a pair of lounge pants, a thermal tee, the oversized cardigan I wear at home when I’m cold, and my big, fuzzy slipper socks. Suitably warm and cozy, I make my way out to the kitchen, taking a seat at the

breakfast bar.

Mom sets a mug of coffee and a plate of French toast stacked three high in front of me, then hands me the container of maple syrup. “Alright. I’ve been as patient as I can,” she says as she dredges a piece of bread in the egg mixture and places it in the skillet. “Give me all the details.” Straightening, she holds up one hand. “Well, maybe not *all* the details.”

Laughing, I pour syrup over my stack of French toast and cut my first bite. “We ... came to an understanding.”

Her eyebrows climb her forehead. “What kind of understanding?”

While my cheeks are hot and I’m sure a fiery red, I meet my mom’s eyes. “The kind where he kissed me and we’re going to dinner tonight.”

Mom lets out a combination laugh and whoop. “Okay. This is good. But how?”

I back up and tell her how he’s been making an effort to be nicer all week and how good he was with the kids last night, and talking it through helps me untangle all my feelings even more, boiling it all down to an odd mix of elation and concern.

Setting my fork down, I rub my hands on my thighs. “I like him, Mom.” I sound almost plaintive. “At least, I like the version of him he’s been the last little while. And maybe that’s a more accurate version of him, or maybe knowing his grumpiness wasn’t really anything to do with me makes it different.”

“But?” Mom prompts, sitting next to me with her own pile of French toast and mug of coffee.

I sigh. “But there are a couple of things I’m worried about.” Planting my elbow on the counter, I hold up a finger. “What if he really is an asshole? Or he’s the type who swings wildly from one extreme to the other?” I shake my head. “I don’t know if I can handle that.”

Mom nods, chewing thoughtfully. “And the other thing?”

Shrugging, I pick up my fork again and cut another bite. “I’m not sure it

matters that much. He'll be going back to school in a few weeks."

Mom studies me a moment. "Where does he go to school?"

"Somewhere in Seattle. I think maybe UW? He only has one semester left, then he'll be doing an architecture internship for the next few years." He told me about his current job and how he's basically guaranteed the paid internship after he graduates, and it's clear he's excited about his future. I'm excited for him, but it also just makes my lack of direction stand out in high relief.

Nodding, Mom purses her lips and hums.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demand with narrowed eyes.

She shakes her head. "Nothing at all, sweetie. What are you planning on doing once ChristmasFest is over?"

I blow out a breath. "Start looking for another job."

She nods. "Well, it seems like whatever problems there might be with Dylan will take care of themselves. And there's nothing wrong with having fun with a boy for a few weeks while you're both in town." She bumps me with her shoulder, her eyes lighting up with her smile. "You're young. You have your whole life ahead of you. And trust me, I know people always say life is short, and they're not wrong, but life is also long. You have plenty of time to figure out what you want and find someone to share it with. Or not. Marrying young isn't necessarily a wise choice."

My heart lurches, because I know she's speaking from experience. Mom was only twenty-one when they married, and she didn't even graduate college. She put her dreams on hold to follow my dad. He'd graduated and then they'd gotten married in the same month, and they'd moved to Seattle for him to go to law school. She'd worked and they'd scraped by until he'd passed the bar and started working at a big corporate law office. Then they had Brooke and me, and Mom was a mom. She eventually completed her degree, but not until I was in high school.

Obviously at one point she thought marrying Dad was what she wanted. Where did it all go wrong?

She lets out a sigh and bumps me with her shoulder again. “Don’t mind my dire warnings,” she says. “Follow your heart, and do what makes you happy. I’ll always be here to be your safety net, okay?”

Leaning into her, I give her a hug. “Thanks, Mom. I love you.”

She kisses the top of my head. “I love you, too, baby girl.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dylan

I OPEN THE DOORS TO THE MAIN EVENT SPACE FOR CHRISTMASFEST, AND FOR the first time in I don't even know how long, I don't feel assaulted by the sounds and sights and smells—cheerful Christmas carols piped in over people talking, a sea of bodies with kids darting in and out, Christmas lights and garland festooning the walls and booths, the warm smell of sugar and spices from the places selling baked goods right near the entrance. They're positioned there on purpose, the welcoming smell immediately enticing people inside.

Well, other people. I usually feel stifled by the cacophony.

Not today, though.

Today it feels festive. Exciting. Fun.

Partly because I didn't have to work today and partly because it's nearly closing time so the crowds are thinning. But mostly it's because I'm here to pick up Lydia and take her to dinner.

My stomach growls at the smell of the cookies, and on a whim, I decide to buy a couple. We can munch on them on the way to dinner, or we can save them for dessert. Of course, once I get there I can't decide which one I think

Lydia will like best, so I opt for two Snickerdoodles and two beautiful iced cookies—a Santa and an elf. Seems fitting. I would've gotten two elves, but they only had the one left this late in the day. Only the one Santa too.

I move slowly through the crowd, taking the time to browse a little as I head toward Santa's Workshop. There's no rush. There's still nearly half an hour until it shuts down for the night.

When I get close to Santa's Workshop, I'm surprised by how deep the crowd is. Lydia and Nora are busy, so I don't say hi like I'd planned, instead ducking down the hallway that leads to the Christmas Emporium. Sarah's busy too, which shouldn't be surprising. Christmas is just over a week away, and it's a Friday night, so everyone's swarming here after work, feeling festive before their Christmas parties and other family traditions.

But Sarah sees me, holding up a hand and beckoning me over as she finishes helping a customer at the cash register. "Hey, little bro!" she says enthusiastically when I get close. "What are you doing here?"

She looks me over before greeting the next customer, taking in the dark gray button down shirt peeking out from beneath my half-zipped coat, and her brows lift. But she doesn't comment, instead smiling warmly at the next customer and greeting the older woman by name.

Drifting away, I walk slowly down the aisles, straightening out of place boxes and rehangng ornaments in the right place as I go. I have time to spare, so I might as well help out, right?

When I start down the next aisle, Sarah appears at my elbow, surprise stamped on her face. "Look at you, all dressed up and showing up to help me, unasked?" She puts a hand on my forehead, and I jerk away, giving her a quelling look that has no effect. "You feeling alright, Dylan?"

"Ha ha. You're hilarious," I grumble.

"There he is," she says, her voice warm with affection as she bumps me with her shoulder. "But seriously." She waves a hand at where I'm straightening a shelf display. "What gives?"

Shrugging, I try to act nonchalant. "I had a few minutes to kill."

“Before?” she prompts, placing a hand on my arm to get me to stop what I’m doing and pay attention to her.

I stuff my hands in my pockets and face her, a surge of self-consciousness washing over me, a relic of our shared childhood when Sarah would laugh about my crushes, singing that dumb sitting in a tree rhyme. But I’m not ten anymore, and Sarah’s married now. She was supportive of Ty and Olivia when they got together—though her relationship with our older brother is far different from her relationship with me. Still, I’m pretty sure she’s outgrown chanting playground rhymes at me.

Pretty sure.

Closing my eyes, I suck in a breath, then spit it out. “I’m picking up Lydia for dinner. ChristmasFest is still busy, so I thought I’d come in here while I wait.” *And now I’m rethinking the wisdom of that choice.* But I don’t say that last part out loud.

Sarah’s dark eyes grow wide, lighting up with glee, her mouth rounding in an O that she covers with her hands. Then she smacks me on the arm. “Why am I just now hearing about this?” she demands, though she’s grinning.

I give her my best quelling look, though as usual it has no effect on my big sister. “Why would I have told you? And besides”—I turn back to the display and finish straightening it—“I only asked her this morning.”

“Not wasting time, I see,” Sarah says, her voice thoughtful as she moves to my other side, working ahead of me to set things to rights.

“Don’t you have customers?” I ask.

She waves a hand. “No one serious, I don’t think. Browsers. If anyone decides to buy something, they’ll ring the bell.” She spears me with a look. “Now. Tell me everything.”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “A—I’d never tell you *everything*, Sarah, and I don’t think you’d really want that.”

“Gross!” she interjects. “No. *Those* details you can keep to yourself. But I’m *assuming* you don’t have those kinds of details yet.” She gasps, stopping and facing me. “Or do you?” She smacks my arm again. “You dirty whore!” That

last is the kind of whisper-yell that parents everywhere have perfected when needing to get their children to behave in public places.

I make a show of glancing around. “Shh, Sarah. This is a place of business. And anyway, I thought slut shaming was bad.”

“Not when you’re the slut,” she mutters.

I’m fighting back my laughter as I give her a shocked and offended look. “Hypocrite much?”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. I’m sorry for calling you a dirty whore. Which also would imply that your partner is as well, and I don’t believe that.”

“Double standard,” I cough into my fist.

With another dismissive wave of her hand, she brings the conversation back around where she wanted it. “What were you and Lydia doing this morning that had you asking her to dinner?”

I contemplate the best way to answer that question. “How do you know I didn’t text her and ask her out?” It’s deflection, so I can buy time for my inner conflict to resolve itself. The desire to goad her is strong, but I don’t want to lie to my sister—especially when she’ll figure out the truth eventually—even if it’d serve her right.

“Is that what happened?” she asks.

“No,” I grumble. “We worked the event last night with Mom and Dad.”

Another gasp, another backhanded arm smack. “You *are* a dirty whore!”

“Jesus, Sarah.” I rub the arm she keeps hitting, though it doesn’t hurt at all, especially through my winter coat. “Will you quit hitting me? I’m starting to feel like an abuse victim.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Please. We both know I’m not hurting you.”

“Anyway,” I continue. “By the time Lydia and I got packed up and ready to go—you know how those kinds of events sometimes run hours longer than planned”—she nods in sympathy—“we were the last ones to leave. Between Lydia’s mom leaving and us, a tree came down and blocked the road. We had

to stay the night at Hudgins House.”

“Wait, what?” Sarah grabs my arm, turning me to face her, all hint of amusement gone. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. Ask Dad. I’m surprised you haven’t heard already.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Sarah. We’re both fine. Like I said, we stayed the night inside. Lydia’s mom left her with the keys to lock up when we left, so we were able to get back in. It wasn’t comfortably heated, but it was better than spending the night in the truck. We survived just fine.”

Her eyes dancing, Sarah gives a suggestive, “Mmmhmm. I’m sure you did.”

Rolling my eyes, I smack her arm. “Don’t be gross,” I tell her as she rubs the place I made contact.

“Does Lydia know you’d hit a girl?” she asks, all faux pouty.

“Please. You’re my sister. You don’t count.”

That makes her laugh. “I’m sure Shane’ll love to know that I don’t count as a girl. He might disagree with you.”

Exasperated, I sigh and roll my eyes. “Yes, great, we know. You guys are madly in love and do it five times a day.”

“Oh my god,” she mutters. “Ow. And anyway, who’d have time for that?”

“Sarah.” Crossing my arms, I glare at her. “I thought we agreed we wouldn’t discuss our sex lives.”

“Okay, fine. You win.” She points a finger in my face. “Quit bringing it up, though.”

“You brought it up first!” I protest.

The bell on the desk dings, and she gives me a glare, still pointing at me as she starts to walk away. “This isn’t over,” she warns.

But yeah, it definitely is. “Bye, Sarah!” I call as I head for the door.

“Dylan, wait!” But she’s busy with a customer, so I just wave at her scowl as I walk out, leaving her to it.

While arguing with my sister wasn’t what I’d planned on when I went in the Christmas Emporium, I do feel a certain lightness afterward, and when I check the time on my phone, I see I only have a few more minutes to wait for everything to close.

When I get back to Santa’s Workshop, Nora’s already placed the sign alerting newcomers that they’re closing while Dad finishes up with the lucky few who made it before she put that up.

Standing off to the side, I watch Lydia as she interacts with the kids, smiling at her antics to get a smile out of the clearly over-tired toddler who’s far more interested in running around causing havoc than sitting and smiling for a photo. She does a silly dance, plays peekaboo from behind the camera, and cycles through all the different stuffed animals and puppets. The penguin in a scarf and Santa hat is the hit, but of course the kid wants it, reaching for it, his face on the verge of dissolving into tears. Lydia walks toward him, bent at the waist, the penguin out in front of her. She teases the kid with it for a second before letting him have it, producing a huge smile, and the flashes go as soon as she’s out of the frame. The kid’s not looking at the camera, but it’ll be a cute photo regardless. She takes a few more as Dad and the kid look at the penguin, then each other, and finally, Dad points at the camera, the kid looks up, and she gets one last shot. He’s not smiling, but he still looks cute. At least the parents have a few choices, and I think they’re all good. Maybe a little more candid than the standard Santa photo fare, but if anything, I think that’ll make the memory more special.

I slide in next to Nora, wanting to see how they turned out. I can feel her surprise, though I don’t return her look. When I reach over to tap on the keyboard so I can cycle through the shots, she slaps my hand away. “Hey! You’re not working!” she hisses. “What are you even doing here? You usually avoid this place like the plague when you can.”

Shrugging, I point at the screen. “I wanna see the pics.”

“It’s not your kid,” she hisses. “These are for the customers. Go away.”

Ignoring her, I step back, but only because the parents have returned to the

counter. Nora smiles and makes small talk as she turns the screen to face the parents, tapping through the photos so they can make the choice for their prints. I've angled myself to see the screen too, and while it's not as good as if I were up close, I still have a clear enough view to confirm that the pictures are really good. Lydia's a natural at this.

After she prints the photos for the parents and hands them over in the envelope with instructions on where to order more prints and download the digital files—sending them and their tot on their way with a cheerful, “Merry Christmas!”—she turns and glares at me. “Seriously, Dylan. What are you even doing here?”

When my eyes dart in Lydia's direction, Nora's face goes slack with surprise, and she gapes first at me, then at Lydia, then back at me. Tiptoeing closer, she lowers her voice, her shoulders hunched as though that gives us more privacy. “You and Lydia?” Her giddiness telegraphs perfectly clearly, even through her stage whisper. “Seriously? But I thought you guys could barely tolerate each other? When did this happen?”

Before I can answer, her face clears and she straightens. “Ooohhhh.” It's more of a sigh than anything. “Last night.” Her lips curve in a knowing smile and she glances between Lydia, who's helping a kid who looks to be seven or eight, so she doesn't have to pull out the big guns to get a smile like she did with the last one, and me. Then Nora's face turns solemn, and she holds up a finger in exactly the same pose as Sarah used just moments ago. “Don't be a dick.”

That shocks a laugh out of me and I spread my hands wide. “Why would you say that?”

She just arches an eyebrow in response, as though that's a sufficient answer to my question, and turns to help the mom who's standing at the counter now, her professional elf demeanor firmly back in place.

While Nora helps the mom, I refocus on Lydia, who casts a glance and a shy smile in my direction before giving the kid a high five and a cheerful, “Merry Christmas!”

Once the kid and his mom are gone, I step into the camera area and begin straightening the stuffed animals and puppets while Lydia stows the

equipment we don't leave out overnight.

"You don't have to do that," she protests. "I can get it."

I give her a big grin. "But if I help, you'll finish faster, and then we can get to dinner sooner."

Just then her stomach gives a loud rumble that has her freezing in shock before she bursts into laughter. "Okay, good point. Dinner sooner sounds good to me."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lydia

HEAT FLUSHES THROUGH MY BODY WHEN I CATCH SIGHT OF DYLAN WAITING for me.

He came.

I'm not sure if I'm surprised that he came at all ... but no. That's not it. I'm surprised that he's here, inside the ChristmasFest before closing, waiting for me to finish. Sure, he's talking to Nora, but his gaze keeps darting my way, like even though she's speaking to him, he can't drag his eyes away from me for long.

Honestly, I feel the same. It takes all my willpower to keep my focus on getting through the last kid. Fortunately I didn't see him until after I was done with the toddler who didn't want to cooperate for all the stuffed animals in the world, and it took every ounce of creativity I had left to get what photos I managed. Hopefully the parents found at least one they liked. Even more fortunately, the last kid is old enough that I just have to be a normal amount of friendly when calling his attention toward the camera to smile. He's cheerful and enthusiastic about the LEGO set and remote control monster truck he asks Santa for, describing in detail—complete with sound effects—the show the truck is inspired by.

Normally I love kids like him, but I'm relieved when he's done, because that means I get to spend time with Dylan.

Which is a crazy thought, if I stop and think about it for too long. Twenty-four hours ago, I'd never have believed someone who told me I'd be looking forward to a date with Dylan tonight, and yet, here we are.

"You don't have to do that," I tell him when he steps forward and starts straightening the stuffed animals for me. "I can get it."

He pauses, looking up at me with a wide smile on his face. He's attractive when he's broody and grumpy, but he's gorgeous when he smiles like that, and having it directed at me is almost enough to take my breath away. "But if I help, you'll finish faster, and then we can get to dinner sooner."

I open my mouth to say something, though I'm not sure what exactly, but my stomach decides to speak for me. Loudly. Then I laugh. "Okay, good point. Dinner sooner sounds good to me."

He hands me a paper packet, and my eyebrows draw together as I take it from him. Ignoring my reaction, he turns back to the stuffed animals with his smile still firmly in place. Opening the packet, I peek inside and discover a frosted sugar cookie decorated to look like an elf. "Oh my god, you're my hero," I gush, chomping on it immediately.

Dylan laughs at my response, which causes Nora to look over at us, eyebrows raised. "You wanna do my job too?" she asks.

Straightening, he plants his hands on his hips and glares at her, and somehow that makes him even more endearing. "Nope." He shakes his head firmly. "You'll stay and do *your* part. I'm helping Lydia with *her* part. You don't get to dump work on us just because I happen to be willing to help *her*."

Crossing her arms and cocking her hip, she looks like she's about to argue, but Mrs. Claus—her mom, I remind myself—intervenes. "He's right, Nora," she says in that mom-voice that brooks no arguments. "Don't think I don't know you tend to duck out early at the end and show up late, leaving the bulk of the clean up and organizing to Dylan and Lydia. If anything, they should leave early and let you finish without them."

"But Mom!" she protests.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Claus,” I put in, unable to address her by her real name while she’s still in costume. “I’m almost done.”

“I know, dear,” she tells me. “All the more reason to let her finish alone.”

Dylan steps behind me and rests his hand on the small of my back. “It’s best not to argue with Mom,” he loud whispers in a voice that’s designed to carry to his mother. To her, he asks, “Did Lydia tell you she has an elf name now?”

Mrs. Claus’s gaze sharpens on her son. “No,” she says slowly, “she didn’t.” She takes in the way he’s standing with me, not like she didn’t notice before, but like maybe she’s just realizing something significant about it. “What is it?”

Dylan glances at me. “Holly. Holly Sparkleflakes.”

His mom claps. “Oh, that’s perfect. Yes. I approve.” She gives us both a wide smile, then says thoughtfully, “You know, usually it’s only family members who get elf names.”

Dylan shrugs off her comment. “It was last night at the party while we were working with the kids. She used my elf name, so that meant she needed one too.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Claus says. “Of course. Makes sense.” But the way she says it sounds like she doesn’t believe that’s all it was.

“It’s true,” I put in, needing her to understand. “I told the kids that Elfie would read them stories, and Dylan announced that they could go with Holly to make snowflakes. It was very spur of the moment.”

Mrs. Claus nods, turning as Santa walks in. “Did you hear, dear? Lydia’s elf name is Holly Sparkleflakes.”

His eyebrows lift, and he studies Dylan and me. “Well. Isn’t that something,” he says, his eyes lingering on his son. “Big plans tonight?”

“Just dinner,” Dylan answers, voice gruff, and I give him a confused look. There’s something happening here that I’m not entirely sure I’m catching.

“Yup. Just dinner.” Though I hadn’t thought about it as a *just* anything. Still, I guess dinner isn’t really a huge event. It’s not like ... I dunno, a week away

on a tropical island. That would be more of a big plan. Or even some kind of actual event, rather than a meal.

Santa steers Mrs. Claus toward the back exit of the workshop. “You kids have fun. And don’t get caught behind any downed trees tonight.”

“We’ll do our best,” Dylan says, his voice tinged with sarcasm that has his dad chuckling.

“Are you guys really going to leave me to finish on my own?” Nora whines, sounding like she’s about to start a real pout fest.

Dylan turns to face her, eyebrow arching high on his forehead. “If you’d been working the whole time we were talking, you’d be done already.”

She huffs and drops her arms, stomping over to the computer to finish cleaning the desk while everything powers down.

Dylan rolls his eyes, then moves to the throne area to pick up the books there. I join him, and we make short work of it. Standing, he surveys everything, gives a nod of satisfaction and turns to me. “Ready?”

I grin. “Ready.”

I change quickly in the locker room, painfully aware that Dylan’s waiting for me just outside. But no way am I going on a date in my elf costume. Even if I do think it’s cute, it’s not date appropriate.

I’m touching up my makeup in the mirror when Nora comes in to get her coat out of her locker.

“Look at you, all dressed up to go out with my brother,” she says, the tone of her voice sounding almost sarcastic, and I can’t tell if she’s being mean to me or him or both.

Turning, I give her a confused look, and she sighs, flipping a hand.

“Sorry.” She sighs again. “I’m being bitchy, and it has nothing to do with you. Ignore me.”

“Everything alright?” I ask, because she seemed fine earlier, but it’s possible that was just an act since she was at work.

She nods, shakes her head, then shrugs. “It will be,” she says. “It’s just ... strange.” Pulling her coat out, she closes her locker slowly. “Dylan’s not usually like this.”

“I kinda picked up on that,” I say with a laugh. “He seemed happy to be here tonight.”

She nods, her brows crimped in a frown. “Yeah.”

I let out another surprised laugh. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No.” She shakes her head slowly, but her frown doesn’t go away. “I don’t think so. It’s just ... different.”

This conversation, hot on the heels of the elf name one with Nora and Dylan’s parents, makes me feel squirmy, and not in a good way.

I run my hands down the skirt of my formfitting gray cabled sweater dress that I have on over a pair of leggings and ankle boots. “Do I look okay?”

Her face finally lightens, and she gives me a smile. “You look great. I love that dress on you.”

“Thanks.” I breathe a sigh of relief. At least I have that much going for me, no matter what other weird byplay is going on between Dylan and his family.

And it occurs to me that’s what all this is, something between them, and therefore it’s not something I need to worry about. Not now, at any rate, and likely not ever. I have enough family problems of my own, after all. And no matter how much fun the idea of spending time with Dylan is, he’ll be going back to Seattle to finish his senior year of college soon, and I’ll be ... here.

Doing ... something.

We might have chemistry, and we might want to explore it, but we’re not well matched for anything more, and only an idiot would try to pretend otherwise. And no matter what my dad thinks about my decision to take time off from school, I’m definitely not an idiot.

“Have fun,” Nora says, giving me a finger wave as she leaves.

And I realize I’ve just been standing here, keeping Dylan waiting.

Grabbing my coat and purse, I hurry out the door of the locker room, leaving any worries about family issues or the future behind.

Dylan gives me an appreciative once-over when I come out, straightening from the wall he was leaning against and tucking his phone into his pocket.

Once my coat is settled on me, he steps forward, reaching for me. With his hands on my waist inside my open coat, he bends and touches his lips to mine, the contact brief and sweet. “God, I’ve been waiting all night to do that,” he breathes.

I smile in response, looping my arms around his neck. “All night, huh?”

He screws up his face like he’s thinking hard, and my smile grows wider. “Nope. All day, actually. Ever since I dropped you off at your house.” My stomach rumbles again, and his grin matches mine. “But now that I’ve done that, I better feed you before you starve to death. Didn’t you eat lunch?”

Laughing, I button up my coat and put on my mittens before putting my hand in the crook of his proffered elbow. This seems to be a thing for us now. I like it. “Yes, I ate lunch. But that was hours ago.”

“And you’ve been hard at work since then.” He pushes the door open, holding it for me, then making sure it’s closed and locked before offering me his arm again.

“I have. It was a busy afternoon.”

“After a not-so-restful night,” he adds.

That gives me pause, and I tilt my head from side to side in ambivalent agreement. “True, I didn’t sleep as well as I would’ve in my own bed. But I weirdly enjoyed last night anyway.”

He looks at me, eyebrow quirked in question. “Weirdly enjoyed? I’m not sure

if I should be offended or not.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “No. Definitely not. It’s just weird to enjoy being trapped by a downed tree and a snowstorm, though. Isn’t it?”

“Then I weirdly enjoyed it too.”

He leads the way down Main Street to a pub at the opposite end from the hall where ChristmasFest is held called The Filling Station. It’s bustling and warm, decorations all around the entryway, waitstaff wearing elf hats, reindeer antlers, and one guy has on a green sweater vest made to look like a Christmas tree, complete with flashing Christmas lights. I can’t help laughing at the sight. “This doesn’t really seem like your kind of place,” I murmur to Dylan in a low voice.

He glances around, genuine surprise on his face. “What makes you say that? I know it’s not fancy, but it’s cozy and the food’s good.”

I gesture at the decorations, including the mistletoe I glimpse not too far from where we’re standing. “It’s just so festive. And you’re such a—” I bite off what I was going to say, but he finishes for me.

“Grinch?”

I shrug, unrepentant, and he chuckles, putting his arm around me and pulling me close. “I’m really not a Grinch,” he says, his voice low, his mouth near my ear like he’s whispering a secret.

I shiver involuntarily, because his closeness like this does that to me, but manage to keep things light. “You just play one on TV?”

That makes him laugh for real, shaking his head. “Close. But no. I don’t hate Christmas. I just hate being forced to *love* Christmas.”

I pinch my brows together, my lips pressed in a line, trying to figure out what exactly he means.

Before either of us can say anything more, the hostess—wearing a T-shirt that says, “Dear Santa, my brother did it”—returns to the stand and pulls out two menus. “Oh, you have perfect timing. The dinner rush finally slowed, so I actually have an open table. They’re clearing it off right now, so it’ll just be

a minute.”

She makes small talk with us for a few minutes, then leads us to a table, leaving us with, “I’ll be right back with water for you.”

I look around some more, taking in all the little festive touches around the restaurant, then lean my face on my hand. “So this place doesn’t make you feel forced to love Christmas?”

He chuckles, folding his hands on top of his menu and leaning toward me. “No. It doesn’t.” He looks around too. “This place feels like someone *else* loves Christmas”—he gives me a pointed look—“or loves the money they make from pandering to all the people who do, but no one here gives a crap if I like Christmas as much as they do or not.”

Considering that for a moment, I look around again, taking in the waitstaff and their festive outfits. “What if you worked here?” I ask, because I think that’s the real issue—him being forced to work at Santa’s Workshop as an elf. I gesture at everyone I see working here. “They’re all dressed for the season, too. Would it make you as mad to do that?”

He considers that, watching everyone, then shakes his head slowly. “No,” he says at length. “It’s different.”

“How?” I ask, genuinely curious, because I can’t see much difference at all.

He shrugs, glancing around again before meeting my eyes. “They get to choose what to wear, and whether to wear Christmas stuff at all.” He nods toward the bar. “The bartender, for example, is wearing the standard black shirt he always wears. So *if* I were to work here, I could wear the usual uniform if I didn’t want to wear Christmas stuff.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “So you’re fine with a uniform.”

He glances around. “Uh, yeah? I mean, that’s pretty standard workwear.”

Tilting my head to the side, I tap a finger on the table. “And why isn’t your elf costume the same as a uniform?”

His mouth opens and he sucks in a breath, but then he freezes, letting out his breath slowly. He purses his lips, his brow furrowing. “You’re right,” he

says. “I know you’re right. And you’re not even the first person to tell me that. But it doesn’t feel the same as wearing, like, a company branded shirt or something, you know?”

“That’s true. I worked part time at a local coffee shop when I was in high school. We had to wear a T-shirt and an apron with the logo on them. Those still feel like normal clothes, though.”

“Exactly,” he jumps in. “As you said, it’s an elf *costume*. It’s different. It’s more. It’s *worse*.”

I can’t help chuckling at that last one.

“And everyone just expects that you’re this cheerful elf *all the time*. It’s a small town, Lydia. You haven’t been here that long, so it might not be obvious to you, but everyone knows everyone here, or at least it feels that way growing up. I was the little elf boy my whole life. And it sucked.” He pauses, looking over my shoulder, his gaze abstract. “I don’t mind places like this, because here I can just pretend I’m a normal guy out with a girl I like during the holiday season.” My cheeks warm at the *girl I like* part. His eyes meet mine again. “I don’t have to play the role of the cheerful elf here. I can just be ... me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dylan

HOLDING MY BREATH, I WAIT FOR LYDIA'S RESPONSE, THOUGH I DON'T KNOW why it feels so significant.

I guess because every other time I've complained about the elf gig, my feelings are just dismissed, brushed aside like they're of no consequence and I have no right to them. Both my sisters act that way, and my parents act like I'm an ungrateful little shit—which I guess is understandable, but that's not how it is. I'm *not* ungrateful. I appreciate how hard they've worked to create what our family has and the opportunities it's given me. I do.

I just feel like I'm old enough to have some say in how involved I am.

Ty's the only one who doesn't brush me off and act like I'm ridiculous. Of course, he just grunts, so not exactly a well of support either.

So it *matters* in a way I have trouble articulating and don't like acknowledging, even in my own mind, that someone understands my point. And if that someone is Lydia? Even better.

I can't keep holding my breath forever, though, because our waitress, dressed in a green shirt with a white Christmas tree on it and reindeer antlers, comes over to take our orders. Of course, we haven't looked at the menus, and while

I know what I'll get, I don't think Lydia's been here before. She opens the menu and looks it over.

"Do you need another minute?" the waitress asks, already tucking her order pad into her apron.

"Yes, please," Lydia says, sounding relieved.

But once the waitress is gone, instead of looking at the menu, she sets it down and reaches across the table to cover my hand with hers. I flip my hand over, capturing her fingers, and she gives mine a squeeze. "That makes sense," she says at last in a voice full of sympathy, only just loud enough to carry to me over the noise of the other customers.

I almost sigh in relief, but carefully modulate my breathing so I don't seem ridiculous. "Thank you." Despite my best intentions, it comes out more emphatically than I intended. I squeeze her fingers now. "I think you might be the first person to ever tell me that." I'm downplaying it. I *know* she's the *only* person to ever tell me that. I just don't want to sound as pathetic as I feel. I give her a wry smile, deliberately self-deprecating. "I was beginning to think that maybe I *am* the ungrateful little shit my family sees."

She twists up her mouth, narrowing her eyes and cocking her head to one side as she studies me. Then her face relaxes, and she shrugs one shoulder. "I can see how they might think that, especially given your general attitude about being at the ChristmasFest. If *I've* picked up on it, I can't imagine how much worse you are at home."

That surprises a laugh out of me, and she grins.

Serious again, she studies me, propping her chin on her other hand. "It might help them see your point of view if you toned down the attitude a little. Even if you feel your behavior is justified, taking it out on your family doesn't help your case." She gives me a sunny smile. "Bitch to me all you want. Just tell yourself you only have a week left, suck it up, and paste on your best happy elf smile."

I give her a deranged smile. "Like this?"

She bursts into a fit of laughter, leaning back in her chair, the light glinting off her glossy lips, her eyes merry, and if I could make her laugh like this all

the time, I'd even be willing to work as an elf for years.

Okay, maybe not years. But longer than the short amount of time we have left.

God, I've wasted too much time being an asshole. "Maybe you're right," I say, laughter fading, but my smile still tugging at the corners of my mouth. I can't help it when we're together like this. She makes me want to smile. I adjust my grip on her hand, threading our fingers together. "Maybe I haven't been fair to my family either." I sigh, considering that.

Her thumb sweeps back and forth along the edge of mine in a small gesture of affection. "Family stuff can be challenging," she says, and I know she's thinking of her own issues. "We all get wrapped up in what we're feeling and seeing and it can be difficult to see the other person's side of things."

I squeeze her hand. "And sometimes other people *are* just being assholes. Just because you're related to them doesn't negate that possibility."

"True." Her smile's a little wan now, and I know she's thinking about her dad. "But in the end, I think we all want what's best for each other, don't you?"

"I guess so." The words are grudging, because I know my parents want what's best for me and don't think asking me to help out at Christmas detracts from that—which, in reality, it doesn't. I just don't enjoy it. Maybe Lydia's right and I need to stop being a whiny baby, suck it up, and help out regardless. I can't say I think Lydia's dad cares as much about what's best for Lydia. If she needs to take a break for a semester, wouldn't supporting her be a better option than threatening to cut her off? And while my parents point at finances from time to time as a reason for me helping, I think they'd be upset if I refused point blank to come home and work ChristmasFest, but I don't think they'd cut me off completely. It would definitely hurt our relationship, though, which is why I've never considered it. And it would cut into my spending money, because whether I like it or not, being an elf pays decently well. Add in the extra parties where I get overtime plus big tips from wealthy out-of-towners?

That kind of thing makes taking Lydia out on a date pretty easy. And if she's going to be here and I'm going to be in Seattle, it'll help with gas money to

come home and visit more often over the next few months.

Would it only be a few months, though?

Trying my best to keep my voice casual, I ask, “Do you think you’re only going to take one semester off? Or more than that?”

Her hand stiffens in mine, and she pulls away. “I don’t know,” she answers carefully. “Why?”

I shrug, leaving my hand on the table, hoping she’ll reach for it again. “Just curious.”

“Curious why?” she asks more forcefully. Not quite a demand, but definitely more than a polite request.

Blowing out a breath, I decide to lay all my cards on the table. “Because, I was thinking I probably won’t want to stop seeing you after Christmas break is over. And while I don’t mind coming back to visit, it’d be a lot easier to see you if you were in Seattle.”

“Oh.” That seems to mollify her, despite her monosyllabic response, because her cheeks turn pinker, and a small smile tugs at the corners of her mouth. Leaning forward, she sets her hand back on the table, though she doesn’t touch me. “So you’re asking for purely selfish reasons.” When all I do is shrug, she quirks an eyebrow. “You’re not trying to tell me what to do or why taking time off is bad or how I need to be careful not to wait too long to go back or whatever other reason I’ve heard more times than I can count by now?”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “Nope. None of that. Entirely selfish. One hundred percent wanting to know if I need to trade in my truck for a hybrid so I can afford gas for how often I’ll want to come back here.”

She laughs too, her hand turning palm up in offering. I take it without giving it a second thought. “Okay. But my answer’s still the same. I’m not sure how long I’ll need. At least one semester. I’ll have to find another job after next week.” Her brows pinch, her gaze drifting toward our hands.

“I’m sure you’ll find something,” I tell her with more confidence than I feel. The post-Christmas and pre-summer season isn’t exactly brimming with

possibilities here. There's lots of seasonal work during high tourism times, but between those times it's a lot thinner. "Mom and Dad'll give you a good reference. They have nothing but positive things to say about you, and the fact that you worked so late at the event last night, got trapped there with *me*"—I lay a dramatic hand on my chest, emphasizing that being trapped with me is likely to be the worst part of the whole ordeal and making her laugh again in the process—"and still showed up on time for work this afternoon? They'll be singing your praises to anyone and everyone."

The waitress hurries up to our table right then, out of breath, but beaming at us. "Sorry about the wait, guys! It's hopping here tonight. Have you decided?"

She looks between us, and Lydia's mouth is open like she totally forgot she was supposed to be picking out what to eat. Glancing down at the menu, she hurriedly picks something. "I'll take the cheeseburger," she says confidently, like that's what she decided on ages ago, and our conversation was just to pass the time while we waited, rather than the distraction from considering our order that it really was.

I have no regrets, though, and from the look on Lydia's face, neither does she. "Same for me," I say, handing the menu to the waitress and answering her questions about how I want it cooked and fries or salad.

When she leaves, Lydia giggles. "I totally forgot I was supposed to decide what to eat," she stage whispers.

"Their burgers are good here. I don't think you'll regret your choice."

She looks at me, soft affection on her face. "I can't imagine I will."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lydia

DYLAN'S QUESTION ABOUT WHEN I PLAN TO RETURN TO SCHOOL PUT ME A little on edge, but fortunately, that doesn't last long. It doesn't even put a damper on our evening. His easy reassurance that he wanted to know because he just wants to see me helps a lot, but the fact that he doesn't bring it up again helps even more.

I *like* this boy, and I can't stop being surprised by that fact. I guess he's a man. He's twenty-one, after all, going to be twenty-two in a couple of months, compared to my nineteen.

It sounds better to me that we're only two years apart, nineteen and twenty-one, than when we'll be three years apart at nineteen and twenty-two, though really the amount of time is actually the same either way. It just *sounds* better when there are only two digits between our ages.

Probably it'd sound even better if I were out of my teens, but that's nearly a year away since I just had my birthday last month.

"Well, now we have to have a belated birthday celebration," Dylan announces as we're walking to his car after the birthday discussion comes up.

That makes me laugh, which is something I've been doing a lot tonight. In

fact, I think I've laughed more tonight than I have in the entirety of my fall semester. When he's not doing his best asshole Grinch impression, Dylan's kind and funny and sweet.

It's not news, exactly. He was this way last night. But some part of me was vaguely worried it was the magic of the snow and the solitude that brought it out, or his response to the pseudo-emergency we found ourselves in. Not life threatening, but certainly unexpected and not generally considered ideal, even if I did end up enjoying myself.

I like laughing, though, and it feels good to relax. To just ... be. To not have to worry that my existence is complicating someone else's, which, despite my mother's reassurance that I'm welcome to stay as long as I like, I can't help feeling since I've been here.

This was meant to be her fresh start. And yes, she got a place with a guest room so my sister or I could come and stay anytime we wanted to. But coming to stay for a school break is a far cry from coming to live for an indeterminate number of months. And I know that me coming here has caused even more tension between her and Dad. She's assured me that I don't need to worry about it, that Dad's feelings are his to manage, and she can handle telling him that as many times as needed. But if it weren't for me, she wouldn't need to do that at all. Or at least not about me, anyway.

If it weren't for me, she would've made this move years ago, and she could've been happy all along.

"Hey," Dylan says softly, bumping me gently with his body as we walk arm in arm. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

Shaking my head and shaking off my thoughts at the same time, I give him a smile. "Nothing. Or, well, I was just thinking about how much fun I'm having with you."

"Oof," he says, clutching his chest with his free hand. "Try not to sound so surprised."

Laughing again, I pull myself closer to him with my grip on his arm. "Can you blame me? The first time we met, you told me to tone down the cheerful elf routine." I'd do air quotes with my fingers, but my mittens plus holding

Dylan's arm make that difficult.

He groans and covers his face with his free hand. "Have I said I'm sorry about that? Because I really, really am."

"Yes," I reassure him, pulling him to a stop and stepping in front of him. "You did. Remember? It was just yesterday on the way to Hudgins House."

Another groan from him. "God. That was just yesterday? It feels like ages ago."

"I know, right?"

One corner of his mouth lifts in a half smile as he meets my gaze under the sparkling twinkle lights festooning the town. Our breath meets in puffs of steam that drift up over our heads. I feel like I belong in a snow globe or on a Christmas card. The deliberately cute downtown buildings and the explosion of Christmas decorations certainly add to the sensation.

"A lot has changed in just over twenty-four hours," he murmurs.

My breath catches at the look on his face, the tone of his voice. I nod, not trusting my own voice to sound steady. Or like anything other than a croak. I'm not really used to having a guy as sexy as Dylan pay this kind of attention to me. His intense gaze holds mine, though his eyes keep dipping to my mouth like he can't help himself.

"Are you okay with this?" he asks, still quiet, and it seems fitting in the hushed atmosphere here in front of closed souvenir shops, away from the hustle and bustle of the open restaurants a block over.

My brows crimp. "With what, exactly?"

His smile pulls on both sides of his mouth now. "Us. Dating. Me kissing you. Maybe ... more?"

I can't help the coy smile that claims my lips. "What does 'more' mean?"

With a low sexy chuckle, he bends and claims my mouth, his arms wrapping around me and pulling me tight against him. "More as in I wish at least one of us weren't staying with their parents so we could have a bedroom where we'd be guaranteed not to be interrupted," he whispers against my ear. Then

he's kissing me again before I can do more than gasp.

The way he kisses me, the way his arm cinches around my waist, his other hand roaming down below the hem of my coat to palm my ass, makes me want more too. Sooner than later. But yeah ... where?

The thought of asking my mom to let us have her condo for a few hours makes my face flame with embarrassment, but going back to his parents'—my bosses'—house sounds even worse.

He cuts off our kiss with a soft groan, stepping back and adjusting himself. "God, Lydia. You have no idea what you do to me."

I give his crotch a pointed glance. "I think I might have *some* idea."

Chuckling, he offers me his arm, and we finish walking to his truck. "What am I gonna do with you?" he asks softly as he opens the passenger door for me.

"Make out with me some more?" I ask innocently.

His grin is wolfish. "Oh, for sure. And if it were summer, I could think of a hundred places we could go with enough privacy for my"—he catches my look—"our purposes. But it's December, and everything's covered in snow. It's too cold for that."

"Something to look forward to this summer, then," I murmur, and that makes him grin even wider.

"I like the way you think," he tells me, and even though this thing between us is brand new, the idea of still seeing him over the summer doesn't seem insane like it probably should. Because really, how does anything we start now have any hope of making it past mid-January? Or spring break at the latest?

He'll be busy with his last semester and his job plus preparing for his paid internship after he graduates. And I'll be ... here. Doing ... what?

Working, hopefully. Figuring out what to actually do with my life so that I don't wake up at forty and realize I've wasted the last two decades doing something I don't like to make other people happy.

Because if I've learned nothing else from my mother, it's that I don't want to end up like that. Yes, she's making new choices now, starting over now, she's happy *now*. But think how much happier she could've been all along if she'd had the freedom to do what she wanted years ago?

She made her choices. The words echo through my head in Dylan's voice. *You're not responsible for her decisions. Be happy for her that she's happy now.*

I'm trying. But it's difficult to just release the guilt I've been carrying with me for months.

This, being here with Dylan as he drives us toward my mom's condo in companionable silence, helps, though.

We make out some more in his truck when he parks in front of her building. "God, I wish I had my own place here," he whispers. "Or knew someone with their own place that they'd let me borrow."

I let out a laugh at that, tipping my head back, and he kisses his way down my neck, raising goosebumps in his wake, his hands in my unbuttoned coat cupping my boobs over my dress. "Oh my god. I'd be so embarrassed if we asked one of your friends to let us bang in their apartment."

He lifts his head. "Why?" he asks, totally serious.

I splutter out another laugh. "Why? Because!"

Shrugging, he returns his attention to my neck, kissing just beneath the point of my jaw, then moving to where my pulse beats rapidly under my skin. "I'd do it," he rasps against my throat. "If it meant I could take my time undressing you, kissing you everywhere like this, I'd ask."

He finds his way to my mouth, kissing me deeply before ending the kiss and moving back into the driver's seat, surveying me with dark, lust-filled eyes. "Unfortunately, all my friends in town are also home visiting their parents. So they're in the same boat we are."

I shift my mouth back and forth. "There's always a hotel?"

Laughing, he reaches for me again, though his kiss is chaste this time.

“That’s a good point. Though at this time of year, I’m not sure what’s available. I can look, though.”

I kiss him back. “We’ll figure out something,” I whisper. Looking around, I notice that the windows are almost entirely fogged over, and I let out a soft chuckle. “I should probably go upstairs,” I say, though I don’t want to at all.

He nods. “Probably.” We sit in silence for several beats, but when I reach for the door, he says, “You’re coming to my parents’ party tomorrow, right?”

I give him a grin. “You’ll be there?”

“Of course. As if I have a choice.” When my eyebrows lift, he grins. “It’s usually pretty fun, though. No elf costume, after all, but I do usually wear an ugly Christmas sweater.”

“Oooh.” I clap my hands. “Something else to look forward to.” Leaning over, I steal one more kiss. “Call me in the morning.” And then I pop open the door and hop out without waiting for a response, because I know if I stay any longer, I’ll never go upstairs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Dylan

I DRIVE HOME WITH A SMILE ON MY FACE DESPITE THE UNCOMFORTABLE tightness of my pants.

When I apologized to Lydia for being a dick to her on the way to Hudgins House, the most I'd dared hope for was for her to relax around me, maybe joke around a little like she does with Nora. And deep down I'd harbored this tiny idea that maybe if that happened, I could ask her out in a week or two. Maybe ask her the last time we work together and take her out a couple times before I have to go back to Seattle.

Of course, part of me also thought that might be pointless because I *am* going back to Seattle in a few short weeks. Classes start up again the Monday after New Year's, and I usually like to get back in town on Saturday so I have a day to relax and make sure I have everything together before jumping back into the grind. Now I might wait to head back until Sunday, just to get as much extra time with Lydia as I can before I have to go ...

Never in a million years would I have guessed my relationship with Lydia could undergo such a drastic about-face in such a short amount of time, though. And if it hadn't been for that downed tree, it wouldn't have. We'd be on the other timeline, where I hope she gets comfortable enough with me to

relax and be herself instead of the cold, distant version of her I've been getting until yesterday. And she did relax around me some at the Christmas party, working together to entertain the kids.

Even during the initial crisis of realizing we were trapped and scrounging for bedding and snacks, we were in that same sort of work-mode rapport—which, granted, is better than we'd had for sure. But it was once we were settling in for the night, talking and sharing that things started changing. Waking up tangled up together is what clinched it.

My smile pulls wider at the memory of her, warm and soft in my arms.

I want that again.

The thought echoes through me like a gong, as forceful as Martin with the bullhorn he used that summer I worked construction for him. That bullhorn is a big part of the reason I never worked construction for him again.

The problem is, as much as I want to wake up with Lydia curled against me, soft and sweet, with all the time in the world to explore each other, I don't have any idea how to make that happen.

I mentioned the possibility of coming to visit her here once I'm back at school, but I wonder if she'd be willing to come visit me too? That would make that fantasy more possible. Maybe we could go somewhere together for spring break ...

I'm getting ahead of myself, though.

The point is, we have time. Not a lot of it right now, but just because I'm going back to school doesn't mean what we're starting now has to end prematurely.

Maybe she'll change her mind and go back to school too ...

That would be the ideal solution, though the way she reacted to my curiosity about how long of a break she's planning means I shouldn't bring it up again any time soon.

I might be a jackass, but I'm not a *dumbass*.

I can still taste her kisses on my lips when I get home, and I'm grateful that

Nora's out somewhere with friends and Mom and Dad are talking quietly in the kitchen when I come inside. Poking my head in, I say, "I'm home. Gonna head to bed."

They both give me warm smiles of acknowledgment. "Night, sweetie," Mom says.

Normally I might linger, but I'm aching from the effects of Lydia's kisses, and I need to deal with the situation sooner than later. Or at least, I *want* to deal with it, and talking to my parents for a while is just going to kill my boner before I can get the relief I'd prefer.

Well, the available relief I'd prefer, anyway. I'd much rather have Lydia than my right hand, but I'll take what I can get for now.

Once in my room, I immediately start stripping off my clothes, leaving them where they land, picturing what I'd do if Lydia were here. First, I'd kiss her. Her kisses are amazing—sweet and tentative to start, but more aggressive the longer we kiss. In the truck, she was practically crawling in my lap to get closer to me, and if I'd had enough brain cells to spare, I'd have moved the seat back to give her the room to do it. But I couldn't manage to pull back from her long enough, take my hands off her long enough, to find the lever to make it happen.

Instead, she was halfway perched on the center console, bumping her head into the ceiling of the cab in an effort to get to me, her small hands on my face, my neck, gripping my jacket.

I returned her efforts equally, groping and pulling as much as I could, cursing the winter and the fact that she was so totally covered that I couldn't get to any bare skin except for that offered by the scoop neck of her sweater dress. Instead I contented myself with feeling her ass, her tits, her waist over her clothes while kissing her like my life depended on it.

I've never touched her skin—does she wear things on purpose to stymie me or is that just how she dresses normally?—and I'm beginning to regret my gentlemanly impulse this morning that had me tugging the sweater back down over the cami she slept in last night and suggesting we wait to find somewhere better to have sex the first time than the cushions on the floor of the dressing room at Hudgins House.

I was trying to do things right with her, cognizant of how badly I'd screwed up the start of our relationship with my asshole behavior. I wanted to take her out on a date at least once before getting her naked. It seemed like the right thing to do.

But I wasn't thinking about the impossibility of getting the kind of privacy we had this morning again. When and where will we find that?

The hotel idea is sounding better and better, but I also know that ChristmasFest brings in a lot of people and a hotel room might be difficult to come by. We could go somewhere a little farther away ... maybe an hour or so?

That's an idea.

The skin of her neck and upper chest were so soft under my lips, I can't wait to discover if she's that soft everywhere.

Fully naked now, I lay on my bed, my hand gripping my weeping dick and giving it a firm squeeze. I slick my hand over the head, catching the precum that's seeping out in anticipation of seeing Lydia naked for the first time.

God, I hope it's soon.

My hand moves faster as I relive waking up with her this morning, fantasizing about what I would've done if I hadn't felt so gentlemanly, the way she kissed me tonight, what it could've been like if it were summer and we could've driven out to one of the abandoned spots where people like to go stargazing.

I could've made us a soft spot in the bed of the truck, the warm summer night air kissing our naked skin ...

My balls tingle and draw up tight, lightning zipping down my spine as I come, shuddering and gasping, wishing I were buried deep inside Lydia.

I wake up almost giddy with anticipation, uncaring that my older sister will heckle me relentlessly regardless of what sweater I wear to Mom and Dad's

Christmas open house. If it's an ugly Christmas sweater, she'll heckle me for giving in and wearing it. If it's not ugly enough, she'll give me crap for not adhering to family tradition.

There's no winning.

Sarah thinks it's her job to give me endless amounts of shit, though, and has our entire lives. Moving out on her own and getting married hasn't changed that at all. I'm pretty used to it by now.

And regardless of what Christmas sweater I wear, Lydia will be coming over today.

"Up and at 'em!" Dad calls through my door. "Busy day, and we need all hands on deck!"

"Be out in a sec," I call back, which has Dad moving on his way, though I know if I haven't at least made it to the bathroom in the next five minutes, he'll be back, banging on my door and telling me to get a move on. This was every morning where there was a schedule when I was growing up, so we all know the routine. It doesn't matter that I'm a senior in college, have an alarm, and have gotten myself ready and to class or work on time every day of my college career. This is just what happens at the Daniels' house.

A few days ago, I would've resented it, grumbling my response. But now?

Now it feels almost comforting in its familiarity.

Huh. Just kissing Lydia a few times and going on one date has changed my attitude so much that nothing can bother me today.

Throwing off the covers, I roll out of bed, scrubbing my hands over my face to rub the sleep from my eyes, grabbing my clothes for the day and heading for the bathroom. It's steamy, so I know Nora's already had her shower. At least I don't have to wait for her to get out. Probably that's why Dad came by when he did, though. Nora just finished, so it's my turn.

Why didn't I see it that way before?

I mean, I guess I knew on some level that Dad did things the order he did them in to keep the morning going smoothly when I was in high school. But

since I left for college, every time he'd do it when I came home, I found it irritating. Belittling. Like I was too dumb to figure out when and how to get up and get ready on my own, despite the fact that I did it all the time.

But I didn't do it with *these* people all the time. I didn't have to worry about how my needs intersected and conflicted with theirs. Dad had all of it in mind and choreographed it in a way that we weren't fighting over the bathroom or breakfast.

I've always been too wrapped up in my own bullshit to notice that's what he was doing.

God, I really am a selfish asshole, aren't I?

Well, not anymore.

I hurry through my morning routine, getting dressed and heading to the kitchen where I give Mom a kiss on the cheek as I head for the coffee pot.

"Morning, Dylan," she says, smiling at me. When I return her smile, her eyebrows pop up her forehead. "Someone's in a good mood this morning," she observes.

"I am," I confirm, ignoring the knowing look Mom and Nora exchange. Everyone knows I had a date with Lydia last night. Coffee cup in hand, I turn and face the kitchen. "Where's Dad?"

"Right here," he says, strolling into the kitchen and looking me over in my jeans and garish Christmas sweater. I picked out the ugliest one I could find. Sarah got it for me a couple years ago. It has alternating stripes of red and green with snowflakes and reindeer stitched in white. Between each stripe is a row of sparkly pom poms. It's entirely ridiculous, and everyone knows I hate it. Dad's eyebrows join Mom's in using his hairline as a mountain climbing expedition. "You're ready for the open house already, I see."

I nod. "I am. And while we're all here, I wanted to apologize to you. I've had a bad attitude about helping out with Christmas stuff for years." I open my mouth to spill out the litany of reasons why, but close it again and shake my head, then say, "I can't say that being an elf will ever be my favorite job, but I do appreciate all the opportunity that the Christmas Emporium and by extension the ChristmasFest has given me. Not many kids have a guaranteed

job every winter that pays well and provides plenty of spending money until the summer jobs open up.” I lift my coffee cup to my parents. “Thank you.” To Nora I say, “And sorry for being a dick to you at every opportunity. I’m your big brother, so some of it goes with the territory, but I know it’s been excessive. I’m doing my best to put a stop to it.”

Mom and Dad look blown away, standing and blinking at me, their faces blank with shock.

“Awww, Dyl-weed,” Nora says, standing from the table and walking over to give me a hug and a pat on the shoulder. “You’ve always been a dick to me. You being that way when you’re home for Christmas is neither new nor different. I don’t expect different from you. But I also know you’ll have my back if I ever need it.” Then she spins on her heel and strolls out, probably to finish getting ready for the day now that I’ve had my shower.

“Well,” Dad says, stepping closer and clapping my shoulder, “I’m not sure what’s brought about this burst of self-awareness, but I’m hoping it sticks. Thank you for the apology. Your mother and I appreciate it. I assume your choice of sweater is in honor of your newfound family solidarity.” At my nod, he smiles. “Good. And you won’t mind helping get the house set up for today?”

“I’m happy to help,” I tell him, and I mean it. Honestly, I never minded setting up for the Christmas party. It meant I could invite my friends, I didn’t have to wear an elf costume, and the food is always delicious. Plus, since everyone was always caught up with all the other people here, no one paid much attention to me once the party started.

But this year’s different, even so. *I’m* different. And it’s all thanks to Lydia.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lydia

I'M IN MY ROOM IN A BRA AND LEGGINGS, GOING THROUGH NEARLY EVERY outfit I own, trying to decide what to wear tonight when Mom knocks at my door. "Honey? Are you almost ready?"

"No," I wail. "I don't know what to wear!"

Mom lets out a soft chuckle. "Can I come in?"

Grabbing a shirt off my bed, I tug it on, shoving my arms through the sleeves. "Yeah." I sound sullen and pouty, and I know it's ridiculous, but I can't help myself. "Come in."

Mom opens the door and stops, taking in the mess of clothes covering my bed, falling off the sides and onto the floor. She raises her eyebrows. "Oh dear."

Throwing my hands in the air, I turn to survey the mess. "I know! I just can't figure out what to wear. I hate all my clothes."

With a soft chuckle, Mom steps up behind me and rubs my back. "You really like this boy, don't you?"

Biting my lip, I nod, leaning my head on Mom's shoulder. I'm a couple

inches taller than she is, so it's a little awkward, but ever since I was a kid, this is how she's given me comfort, rubbing my back while I lean against her.

She waits for the sigh that lets her know she's made me feel marginally better, then gives me one more pat on the back before stepping up to the bed. Gently, she tugs clothes this way and that. "It's a Christmas party, right?"

"Right. An open house, where people come and go. There'll be food, but more like snacks and hors d'oeuvres than a sit down meal. Not formal."

"Do you know what he's going to be wearing?"

Wrinkling my nose, I giggle. "A truly ugly Christmas sweater." Stepping forward, I dig my phone out from under a pile of clothes on the corner of the bed and open the text where he sent me a photo.

"Oh wow," Mom says, sounding a lot like I did when I first saw the pic. "That's ..."

Giggling, I take my phone back. "I know. He told me his family wears ugly Christmas sweaters to their party, but that's more than I was expecting."

"I mean," Mom says quietly, almost to herself, "if that's how he's dressed, it literally doesn't matter what you wear, does it?"

"But I want to look cute," I wail.

"Oh, baby girl," she murmurs, giving me that Mom look that's so full of love and affection I think she's about to burst into tears, "you always look beautiful."

"You have to say that," I pout. "You're my mom."

That makes her laugh some more. "Should I leave you to your own devices then, if my opinion is untrustworthy?"

"No!" I hold out a hand. "Please. Help me. I've looked at everything so many times that I don't even know what cute *is* anymore."

Smiling, she goes back to sorting through my clothes. "Skirt or pants?" she asks after a moment.

I chew on my lip as I contemplate her question. "If I could decide that much,

I wouldn't be having this much trouble, would I?"

That makes her laugh again. "I'm going to vote for pants, then," she says, pulling out my wide leg black velvet pants. "These will do nicely for a Christmas party." Then she pulls out a simple red tank and a fuzzy white sweater. "I have reindeer earrings and a Christmas tree necklace you can borrow that will fit nicely with his sweater," she says, nodding toward my phone. "You'll look cute and festive all at once."

When she brings me the clothes she's selected, I throw my arms around her. "Thanks, Mom," I whisper. "You're the best."

Mom doesn't take nearly as long to get ready, opting for simple and classic like normal—dark red pants and a white cashmere sweater with a strand of pearls at her throat and single pearls dangling from her ears.

I can only hope that one day I'll look so effortlessly put together. But it's always seemed like her superpower, and not one that I've inherited. When we arrive at the address Dylan texted me, the block is crowded with cars parked along the snow berm lined streets, and we end up having to park almost two blocks away.

"My boss is throwing a Christmas party next week," Mom tells me as we walk over the snow-free sidewalks. It snowed earlier today, but everyone here seems to keep their walks pristinely shoveled, which I've never appreciated as much as I do right now. Since it's a party, I opted for my heeled ankle boots instead of my snow boots. It didn't occur to me that we'd have to walk two blocks to get there.

"Oh yeah?"

Mom nods. "On Tuesday. Families are invited, but I wasn't sure if you'd be working or not."

"Oh, um." I pull out my phone to check my schedule, my shoulders slumping as I see that I'm working that afternoon until close. "Yeah. I'm on until eight."

“Well,” Mom says lightly, “you could come afterward if you want. Or ...” She darts a sly look in my direction. “You could have the condo to yourself for a few hours if you prefer.”

My cheeks heat at what I know she’s implying, but the fizzing anticipation in my gut wins out. *We can have the place to ourselves.* Dylan and I. We were just agonizing over this very scenario last night, and here, a solution has fallen into my lap. Clearing my throat, I do my best to match Mom’s light tone of voice. “We’ll see how I feel. I might be tired from work.”

“Oh, of course,” Mom says. “Try to decide by Monday, though, so I can let Stephanie know whether or not to expect you.”

“I will,” I assure her, already knowing what my answer will be.

More people join us, also headed toward the Daniels’ house, which is covered with Christmas lights, a light up Santa and sleigh on the roof, plus assorted animatronic reindeer dotting the snow-covered yard. The main front door is open, though there’s a glass storm door closed, warm light spilling out, giving everyone a glimpse of the merriment already well underway inside.

“Are we late?” asks Mom.

I shake my head. “It’s an open house. There is no ‘late’ or ‘early.’ Apparently they do this every year, so even though the official start time was five minutes ago, I bet people who are close to them feel free to show up even earlier. Maybe they come and help set things up and that’s how the party gets started.”

Soon we’re swallowed up inside the Daniels’ home. Nora greets us, giving me a hug and taking our coats as I make polite introductions.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” Nora gushes to my mom. “Lydia talks about you all the time. And don’t worry, it’s all positive.”

I blush and Mom grins, giving me a side hug. “That’s good to know.” To me she says, “Don’t feel like you need to stick to my side all night. I’ve started making friends here too. I’ll be alright.”

I give her a kiss on her cheek. “Okay. But come find me whenever you’re

ready to leave.”

“Will do.” She gives me one last squeeze and we separate, her to say hello to someone she knows, and me to find Dylan.

He’s in the kitchen, his back to me as he pours something into the sink. “Merry Christmas,” I tell him, and he looks over his shoulder, his face lighting up at the sight of me.

“Hey! Give me a sec.” I step closer as he finishes pouring what I now see is ginger ale into a bowl in the sink with something pink floating in it. “We’re late getting the punch out,” he says as he gives it a quick stir. “Ty and Olivia got in this morning, then Sarah, Shane, and Sophie came over, and while we got most things set up, reunions are distracting.” Turning, he wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. “But everyone’s waited this long. They can wait a minute more,” he says in a low voice right before he kisses me.

A wolf whistle sounds from behind me, and I jump. Dylan seems reluctant to let me go as he lifts his head. I turn to see a guy and a girl I haven’t met who bear a more than passing resemblance to Dylan and Nora. I’ve seen the girl around, but not the guy.

“So *this* is what’s taking you so long,” the girl says, stepping forward, looking me up and down. “Hi,” she says to me, sticking out her hand. “I’m Sarah. The big sister.”

Before I can shake her hand, the guy comes in and puts her in a headlock that has her arms flailing. “I’m Ty,” he says. “The oldest.”

“Though you wouldn’t know it from the way they’re acting,” Dylan murmurs against my head, which has me trying to bite back a smile.

“It’s my job to keep these guys in line,” Ty finishes. He looks me over with interest, though not in a creepy way. Just like I’m someone new, and he’s sizing me up. “And who might you be?”

“This is Lydia,” Dylan answers before I can say anything. He holds up a finger and points it between his two older siblings. “You two aren’t going to cause problems for her. Got it?”

Ty holds up his hands like he’s been caught in the middle of a bank heist,

releasing Sarah. She glares at her older brother and backhands him lightly in the chest. “You’re lucky you tucked your shirt in,” she grumbles.

He shoots her an unrepentant grin. “Is it luck or is it planning?”

She lets out a frustrated, “ugh!” as she straightens her hair and turns to me, a warm smile overtaking the disgusted look she’d given her brother. “Hi, Lydia. It’s so nice to meet you at last. I’ve heard so much about you, and it seems unbelievable that our paths haven’t crossed before now.” She proffers her hand for me to shake, but Dylan doesn’t seem to want to let me go.

“It’s alright,” I murmur to him, patting him softly on the chest. “I have a big sister, too. I can handle myself.”

He gives me a squeeze and then grudgingly lets me go so I can shake Sarah’s hand. For her part, she looks ready to burst with giddy laughter, but she’s managing to hold it in.

“Shut it,” he growls at her. “Not a word.”

She gives him an exasperated look. “How am I supposed to get to know Lydia if I’m not allowed to speak?” Releasing my hand, she waves it at him dismissively, then turns so she’s standing next to me and hooks her arm through mine. “Come on. Mom’s been hard at work all day. Let’s get some food and let the boys finish with the punch.”

I cast a glance over my shoulder at Dylan, who’s glaring at the back of Sarah’s head, and I fight back my giggle until we’re out of the kitchen, when I let it loose.

“Oh good,” Sarah says, sounding genuinely relieved. “You have a sense of humor. I’m afraid you wouldn’t survive long around here if you didn’t.” A thoughtful look comes over her face as she gets us in line at the food laid out buffet style on a big table in the space between the living room and what looks like a formal dining room. The living room furniture has been pushed off to the side, with folding chairs set up as well, and a large trash can sits next to the door that leads to the kitchen. “Although Ty’s last girlfriend stuck around a surprisingly long time for someone who doesn’t have a playful bone in her body.”

“Maybe she did,” I suggest. “Just not the kind of play you’d be likely to see.”

Sarah's nose wrinkles involuntarily, then she gives me an appraising look and bursts out laughing. "Oh, I like you already." She hands me a plate. "You might be right, much as I don't want to think about my older brother like that." She makes a gagging noise. "But she also succeeded in keeping Ty away from home as much as possible, and while the Ty you're meeting is light and playful again, he was never that way when she was around. I think she drowned him in guilt, and he didn't see a way out for a long time." She brightens. "Now he's living with my best friend, and they're deliriously happy."

My eyebrows jump. "That doesn't bother you?"

She shrugs, loading pasta salad and carrot sticks on her plate. "Not really. They make each other happy, and that's what I want for both of them. Now, when they decided to break up and act like idiots, that was not a fun time for any of us, but that's a story for another time." She spears me with a look as I reach for the spoon for the hot, cheesy dip to go with the toasted baguette slices. "Now." A slow smile curves her lips. "Tell me about you and Dylan. How long has this been going on?"

I can't help smiling in return, which makes her emit a tiny squeal. "Not long," I tell her. "We had our first official date last night."

Her eyebrows jump. "Does that mean you've had *unofficial* dates?"

At my shrug, she cackles.

When Dylan and Ty come out of the kitchen, Ty carrying the punch bowl that he sets on a smaller square table covered with a red tablecloth set up at the end of this table. Another table in the dining room is covered with Christmas cookies, brownies, and cake balls. My mouth waters just looking at them.

Dylan makes a beeline for me, but Sarah shakes her head at him. "Nope. It's my turn. Your turn is later."

Ignoring her, Dylan steps up to me and steals a grape from the edge of my plate.

"Hey!" I protest.

His brows raise. "Not a food sharer, huh?" Then he steps between Sarah and

me and reaches for more grapes, placing another bunch on my plate to replace the one he stole. “Better?”

“Yes.” I smile up at him and lift my chin for a kiss.

He brushes his lips across mine, but keeps it chaste, especially since his older sister is standing behind him loudly clearing her throat.

She taps him on the shoulder. “Excuse me. You’re cutting. And interrupting.”

“She’s bossy,” he whispers loud enough that anyone standing nearby can hear him, including Sarah.

“Hey!” she protests.

“Right, like you don’t know it’s the truth,” he tosses over his shoulder, before returning his attention to me and pretending she doesn’t exist. “Blink once if you want me to rescue you and twice if you’re okay letting my sister boss you around.”

Meeting his eyes, I deliberately blink twice.

“Are you sure?” he clarifies. “Because I know her weakness.”

“What weakness?” she demands.

Giggling, I nod. “I’m sure. I don’t need rescuing. I’ll find you soon, okay?”

“Promise?” he asks.

“Promise.”

He dips his head and kisses me again. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dylan

I'M RELUCTANT TO LEAVE LYDIA TO SARAH'S TENDER CARE, BUT AFTER HER repeated assurances she'll be okay, I don't see much other choice.

With one last glare at my sister, I slip out from between them and head to the back of the line. Just because I'm letting them gossip about me doesn't mean I have to go far.

Lydia keeps glancing my way, a tiny smile claiming her mouth that makes me want to drag her to my room, but I'm trying to be good.

Once I'm through the line for food, I station myself in a corner that lets me keep an eye on the whole room so Sarah can't make off with Lydia.

The room's filling up more, and several people try to engage me in conversation, but since I can't keep my focus on them for more than a few seconds, none of them last long. Until Nora sidles up next to me, biting the head off a gingerbread man. "After your apology this morning, I thought you were turning over a new leaf," she says around a mouthful of cookie.

I look at her, surprised, but she's watching the people filling up the living room and not looking at me. "What are you talking about?"

Laughing, she holds her hand over her mouth, turning her head my direction

at last. “Seriously? You’re over here glowering at everyone, scaring off your friends as much as Mom and Dad’s. So much for turning around your bad attitude.”

My brows come together. “I don’t have a bad attitude,” I protest. “I helped set up. I didn’t complain or sigh or act like an asshole once.”

“Uh-huh,” she agrees, munching on an arm now and nodding. “That’s true. But now ...” She waves a hand up and down, gesturing at me. “Now you’re doing this again. It’s how you’ve started every morning at ChristmasFest too, standing off to the side, frowning at everyone and everything until it’s time to slap on a smile for the kids. Do I need to find Sophie? Will she turn that frown upside down?”

I dodge her attempt to poke my face. “No,” I grumble. “Stop it. I’m not mad about the Christmas party.”

Nora scrunches up her face, then looks around. “Ooooh,” she says after a moment, her face smoothing out. “I get it. You’re mad that Sarah’s stolen your new girlfriend.” She nods decisively. “That’s easily remedied.”

And before I can stop her, she slips through the crowd, headed straight for Lydia and Sarah, who’ve been joined by Shane at some point in the last few minutes. All smiles, Nora inserts herself into the conversation, and part of me thinks I should go over and rescue Lydia from the lot of them. All we need is Ty joining in, and it’d be a full sibling strike.

After debating with myself for several moments, I’m about to intervene, but just as I take the first step, I see Nora slip away from the group, Lydia trailing behind her. Nora leads Lydia to the dessert table, casting a meaningful glance in my direction as they go.

Since I’m not an idiot, I follow, stepping up behind Lydia. “Hey,” I say softly. “I see you survived.”

She turns to face me, smiling, her eyes dancing. “It wasn’t so bad, though I admit once Nora joined us, I was afraid I was going to be overwhelmed. What if your brother came up with his girlfriend too?” She glances toward Nora. “But then Nora asked if I’d tried the cookies yet and told me the Russian Tea Cakes are her mom’s specialty, which had Sarah protesting that

it's the gingerbread men that are her real specialty, which made Shane laugh and turned the argument into something between them, and Nora led me away while they were distracted."

"You're welcome," Nora says pointedly from across the table, where she's picking up a brownie.

"Thank you, Nora," I say dutifully, slipping my arm around Lydia's waist. "Sarah's right, though, about the cookies," I tell Lydia. "Mom's gingerbread men are the best. The tea cakes are good too, if you like those, but that's not what she's known for."

"Your sister seems nice," Lydia says, reaching for a gingerbread man and adding it to her plate.

I grunt in response and add one to my plate too. Might as well, since we're here.

Lydia laughs. "You don't think Sarah's nice?"

Shrugging, I give her a smile. "I'm not sure that's the word I'd choose for my older sister, no. She means well, though. Careful, or she might adopt you while you're not looking. That's what happened with Shane and Sophie."

Eyebrows raised, Lydia glances at Shane and Sarah, still engaged in conversation, too focused on each other to notice anyone else. "She adopted him while he wasn't looking?"

"Sorta. She decided she needed to make him and Sophie have the best Christmas possible after their parents died in a car crash the summer before—Shane is Sophie's older brother and guardian because of that. Sarah found out, decided to involve herself, and hey, presto, now they're married."

"Hey, presto, huh?" Lydia says, a smile on her face as she turns to look up at me.

"Something like that."

"And you're worried that she'll involve herself with me and hey, presto, I'll end up married to them too?"

That makes me laugh, and I shake my head, leading her off to an out of the

way spot in the opening to the hallway that leads to the bedrooms. “Given that polygamy still isn’t legal, no, I’m not worried about that. Besides, I’m pretty sure you like me too much to dump me for my sister and her husband.”

She gives me a cheeky grin. “I’m glad you think so.”

“Mostly I just don’t want her to monopolize your time here. I want to keep you all to myself.”

And that must be the right thing to say, because she steps in, lifts onto her toes, and kisses me.

It’s brief—too brief—just a brush of her lips against mine. And I’m desperate for more. For her, all to myself.

With a quick glance around the room to be sure no one’s paying attention to us, I usher her farther into the hall with my hand on her back. “This way,” I prompt. “Second door on the right.”

Her eyes dart between me and the crowd, then she’s following my urging and ducking through the door to my room. When I close it behind us, we can still hear the muffled sounds of people talking layered over “Silent Night” coming from the sound system.

Honestly, that’s my only real complaint about this party. I’m already tired of Christmas music after hearing it nonstop at work the last few weeks. Having it playing at home is almost too much. But if it gives me the cover to get Lydia alone in my room? Suddenly I’m thrilled by the five thousandth rendition of the song.

I set my half-full plate on my desk, uncaring about the food, watching Lydia as she drifts around my room, taking in the awards, photos, and trophies that are still on display from when I was a kid. She stops in front of my tall bookshelf, taking in the few titles that are still there—I took the books I liked the most with me when I moved into my apartment last year—and the various souvenirs and mementos of growing up in Arcadian Falls.

I do my best to be patient, but after a few minutes, I can’t take it anymore. Stepping up behind her, I bend and kiss the side of her neck.

She inhales sharply, tipping her head to give me more access. Wrapping my

hands around her waist, I take her invitation, dragging my lips up and nipping at her ear just beside her earring. I grin at the little enamel reindeer I see when I lift my head, then I turn her in my arms, take her plate from her hand, set it on a shelf, and kiss her.

She responds immediately, opening for me and wrapping her arms around my neck. Her shoes make her a little taller, so I don't have to bend over so far to reach her mouth, but I still want her higher. Or me lower.

Without taking my mouth from hers, I move us toward the bed, having to disengage briefly so I can sit. With a grin on her face, she climbs onto my lap, straddling me, and now I tip my head back so I can kiss her again, my hands roaming her hips, ass, and sliding up under her sweater, where I once again groan in frustration to discover impenetrable fabric.

She laughs into my mouth, pulling back enough to look into my face while I give her a mock glare. "Are you doing this on purpose?" I ask.

"What? Kissing you? Yes, I'm doing that on purpose."

I narrow my eyes further. "No. Wearing so many clothes I can't get to your skin."

Shaking her head, she giggles again. "It's winter! It's cold! I dress so I can be warm." But she sheds her sweater and untucks her shirt, leaving a strip of exposed skin above the waistband of her soft, fuzzy pants.

With a low grunt of satisfaction, I trace the strip of skin with my fingertips, and she shudders in my arms.

"That tickles," she whispers.

Flattening my hands, I slide them up under her shirt. "Better?"

Her lips curve in a small smile, and she nods before dipping her head and kissing me again. I sigh into her mouth at the bliss of having her here kissing me while I finally get to touch her skin.

Breaking off our kiss, I drag my lips down her neck again, enjoying the low scoop neck of the tank top she's wearing and how much access it gives me to the tops of her tits and the sweet valley between them. But I'm greedy, and

it's nowhere near enough. Not for long, anyway.

I gather the fabric of her top in my hands, lifting it upward, meeting her eyes in silent question, which she answers by raising her arms and letting me take it off, leaving her in a lacy pink bra, a cute little bow between her breasts. It's sweet and pretty, just like her.

I touch the bow lightly with a finger before she brushes it away, intent on returning the favor, her hands grabbing at the fabric of my sweater and pulling it up.

Grinning, I let her strip it off me, enjoying the groan of dismay she lets out that echoes my earlier one when she encounters my undershirt. Laughing, I take it off without her help, gripping her ass to bring her with me as I scoot back on the bed and lie down.

She trails her fingers over my chest and abdomen, brushing over the rough hairs dusting my pecs and skimming down the center of my torso as I caress her sides, cupping her breasts through her bra, only mildly annoyed at the fact that there's still fabric keeping me from her skin.

"I have condoms." I nod toward my dresser. "In my top drawer."

Her eyes widen, and she glances over her shoulder as though someone's going to barge in and catch us. "Here? While there's a party going on?"

I can't help grinning at the innocence of that question. "Haven't you ever hooked up at a party before?"

Laughing, she shakes her head. "I can't say that I have. And even in the books and movies I've seen where people do that—even stories from friends—it's definitely not *this* kind of party."

I laugh too. "True. But I think the principle remains the same. There's enough noise out there that no one will overhear us, and enough people that we won't be missed. Especially if we don't take long. You can stay on top if you're worried about sex hair."

She lifts a hand to her hair. "I wasn't before, but now I am," she whispers, and I can't help chuckling.

Sitting up, I reluctantly take my hands off her so I can prop myself up. “We don’t have to do anything more than this if you don’t want to,” I tell her softly. “But I’m fucking dying to be inside you, and I don’t know when we’ll get a better opportunity.”

A sly grin claims her lips. “I do. Tuesday after work. My mom’ll be gone, and I’ll have the condo to myself.” My eyes widen at this declaration. “But,” she continues, “you make a good point about not having many opportunities.” She giggles. “I feel like I’m in high school still.”

“God, I know,” I groan. “I thought these days were long behind me, yet here I am again, sneaking around and trying to hook up with a girl whenever and wherever I can.”

She loops her arms over my shoulders, and I love the easy confidence that she displays. “Then what are we waiting for?” she asks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lydia

MY WORDS ACT LIKE A TRIGGER RELEASE. DYLAN SURGES UNDER ME, flipping us over so I'm flat on my back, and I have to stifle a whoop of surprise.

"What happened to me on top so I don't have sex hair?" I ask, breathless.

He stands and shrugs, pulling open the top drawer of his dresser to get the aforementioned condoms, tossing two on the bed next to me, then unbuttoning his jeans and leaning down to kiss my belly. "Had to get the condoms and get my pants off. Don't worry. You can still be on top." His eyes darken as he looks me over. "I'm looking forward to you riding me."

His low, sexy voice makes me shiver with anticipation, and when his fingers deftly undo my pants, slipping inside to caress my hip, I clutch at the blankets, not sure what to do with myself. Should I claw my own clothes off? Wait for him to do the honors? Stand and help him off with his pants and let him help me off with mine?

Before I can decide, he straightens and shoves his pants over his hips, leaving him in gray boxer briefs, tented sharply by his hard cock.

My mouth waters at the sight, and I sit up, reaching for him. He steps closer,

his breath stuttering as I trail my fingers over his flat belly, hooking them in the waistband of his shorts. When I glance up at his face, his eyes are heavy lidded and focused on what I'm doing to him.

Smiling at how obviously into this he is, I tug his underwear down enough to reveal the top of the thatch of pubic hair at the end of his happy trail, then pull the elastic waist out enough to clear his dick.

Reaching behind him, he shoves them down over his ass, helping me get them off, and then he's standing before me in all his naked glory, his fair skin paler at the tops of his thighs where it never sees the sun, but dark and ruddy over the thick erection jutting out toward me.

Neither of us move for a moment, then he breathes, "God, I need you to touch me."

So I do. Leaving one hand on his hip, I curl the other around his dick, giving it a squeeze and dragging it up and down his length.

His breath hisses out between clenched teeth, and he lets his head fall back. "Fuck, Lydia."

Grinning at his reaction to me, at the fact that *I* have the ability to make him feel this way, and elated with the power of it, I pump my hand again, bringing my lips close to him, inhaling the scent of his body wash mixing with a musky scent all his own. I drag my parted lips up his shaft, and he positively trembles when I plant a soft kiss on the crown.

His eyes slit open. "Please." The single word is little more than a whisper, and while I might not have vast amounts of experience, I think even a virgin would know what he's asking for.

Parting my lips, I take the head of his dick into my mouth, still pumping slowly with my hand, laving the head with my tongue before giving the whole thing a suck and pulling off.

He groans, and the combination of all of this is turning me on, my nipples hard little points in my bra, and I desperately want someone to touch me between my legs—him or me, I'm not that picky at this point.

"Jesus," he breathes when I suck him in again, bobbing my head a few times

before pulling off once more.

He curses, but grasps my wrist and pulls away from my touch, his chest heaving like he's run a mile. He uses his hold on my wrist to pull me to my feet, and he's kissing me, crushing me against him as he releases my arm, his hands moving behind me, then my bra loosens and he's trying to shove my pants off.

Laughing, I have to step away. He didn't get the zipper all the way down when he undid my pants earlier, and they won't come off easily until that's taken care of.

He gives me a crooked grin as I resolve the problem, tugging the straps of my bra down my arms after I shove my pants and underwear over my hips. Stepping out of my clothes, I meet his gaze as he pauses to take me in. "Fuck, you're gorgeous," he murmurs, closing the space between us once more, his hand cupping my cheek to tilt my face up for another kiss.

This one doesn't last long before he's once again kissing his way down my body, but this time he doesn't stop at my upper chest, instead bending to tongue each of my nipples as a short pause on his trip south until he's kneeling before me, giving me an open-mouthed kiss on the skin below my belly button, just over my neatly trimmed bikini area.

"I'm dying to taste your pussy," he confesses, looking up at me. "Do you want to stay on your feet or lean back on the bed?"

God, just thinking about it has my knees going weak, and I collapse onto the bed as an answer.

With a low chuckle, he adjusts my legs, opening me up so he can have his way with me. I push away the fleeting shyness that tries to intrude—he's only the second guy to ever do this to me, and it's been a while. I wasn't planning on this happening tonight.

He kisses his way up my inner thigh, pressing it farther to the side as he does so, and I lean back on my elbows, planting my other foot on the edge of the bed, leaving me open and ready for whatever he wants to do to me.

Once he reaches the top of my thigh, he pauses and meets my eyes, petting the outer labia of my pussy with his fingers. "Ready?" he asks.

It's my turn to take shuddering breaths in anticipation, and I nod. "Yes."

That's all the encouragement he needs, but even so, he starts off slowly, holding me open and licking me from opening to clit with the flat of his tongue. He gives a satisfied rumble and does it again, licking me slowly, steadily, deliberately. His licks grow shorter, more focused toward my clit as a finger swirls around my opening in slow circles, each one growing smaller until the finger slips inside me.

For someone who said no one would notice us gone if we don't take too long, he's sure taking his sweet time eating me out. But I'm not complaining.

His finger inside me feels good, finding a spot that has me gasping. He sucks my clit into his mouth, and I have to clamp a hand over my mouth to muffle the short scream of surprised pleasure. Another finger joins the first, and sweet baby Jesus, I don't think I've ever felt this good before. My self-induced orgasms feel nice, don't get me wrong, but they're a little more perfunctory and down to business, none of this slow build, play and experiment that Dylan's doing. And my high school boyfriend wasn't as concerned as all that about doing a good job when he decided to go down on me.

This ...

This is what people mean when they talk about mind-blowing sex. I always thought it must be an exaggeration, but it's not. I just haven't had the pleasure of experiencing it before.

With his fingers working inside me, he sucks my clit into his mouth again, doing something amazing with his tongue, and all my muscles tense up, holding me teetering on the precipice of the most intense pleasure before I go careening into oblivion with a loud gasp as my core pulses around the fingers lodged deep inside me.

Dylan stays with me, following me down the other side of my orgasm, keeping it going until I'm twitching and pulling away.

"Fuck me," he says quietly, wiping his face on his hand and crawling up on the bed next to me. He kisses me deeply, and I can taste myself on his tongue. Can he taste himself on mine? He didn't come in my mouth, but there was

definitely precum and the salty taste of the ocean when I had him in my mouth.

He gathers me closer, pulling my leg over his hip, and, hanging onto me, rolls us so I'm on top. With a grin, I push myself up to sitting, grab the condoms, rip them apart, and hand one to him, scooting back to give him room to put it on.

Watching him hold himself up and roll on a condom doesn't sound like it should be sexy, but it might be the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

Once it's in place, he holds out a hand for me. Gripping it, I rise up on my knees, inching forward. He reaches between us to hold himself in place for me, dragging the head of his dick over my very sensitive tissues until he finds my opening.

With a sigh, I sink down. Not much, just a little, because it's been a long time since I've felt this kind of stretch, and Dylan's bigger than my last boyfriend.

I take him in little by little, and Dylan holds still, his body trembling with the effort, his hands rubbing up and down my thighs as I work him in. And then I'm sitting flush against his pelvis, pausing for a moment and giving an experimental swivel of my hips that has him groaning.

"Fuck yes," he hisses. "Like that."

I move again, and his fingers tighten reflexively on my thighs, his slitted eyes watching me. After a few more experimental swivels and circles, I find a motion that feels good to me and settle into it while Dylan's hands roam every inch of skin he can reach. When I start to move faster, his hands settle on my ass, helping me move, his abs tightening and throwing his six pack into high relief, though that observation merely flits through my head, my focus more intent on the feeling of rising orgasm centered between us.

"You feel amazing," he whispers, one of his hands moving between us, his thumb seeking my clit and giving it a rub.

I grip his wrist, positioning him where I want him. "Right there," I hiss. "Don't move." He does as he's told, letting me use his thumb the way I need, and with a short, sharp cry, my hips lose their rhythm as I near my release, his hand still on my ass the only thing keeping me moving until I reach my

climax for a second time.

I'm half limp when I finish, only my hands on his chest holding me up.

Giving me a smug grin, he brushes my over long bangs out of my face, wraps a hand around the back of my neck, and with a gentle tug, brings me all the way down so my lips meet his. As we kiss, he moves under me, holding me in place while he chases his own orgasm, his muscles growing harder beneath me until, with a soft cry into my mouth, I feel him pulse inside me, shuddering as he holds me in place with both arms wrapped around me.

His entire body goes limp, his hold on me slackening, and I nuzzle into the spot beneath his jaw, kissing his sweat-dampened skin. His hand skates down my back and he lets out a soft, satisfied sigh and kisses my temple.

After a moment, I whisper, "We should probably get dressed and go back out there."

His soft chuckle bounces me on his chest. "Yeah." He sounds as rueful as I feel. "You're probably right."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Dylan

ONCE WE'RE DRESSED, WHICH GOES MUCH FASTER THAN THE UNDRRESSING BUT with the same amount of smiles and laughter, I poke my head into the hallway to check that the coast is clear. It's unlikely any guests would be down here, but someone might be using the bathroom. Or one of my siblings could be camped out waiting for us to come out.

Thankfully, the bathroom's empty and no siblings are in sight. I duck into the bathroom to wash my hands real quick, then head back to my room where Lydia's fluffing her hair and straightening her sweater. "Do I have sex hair?" she asks.

Grinning, I shake my head. "You look beautiful." She's flushed and happy, though I suppose someone could attribute that to the party, I like knowing it's from me. "The bathroom's open. You can check your hair and makeup and whatever else."

Stepping close, she gives me a kiss. "Thank you. Meet you out there? Or are you going to wait for me in here?"

Much as I'd like to wait for her ... "It would probably be smarter if you just came out when you're done."

She gives me a grin. “Sounds good.” With one last pat on my chest, she slips out of my room. I wait until I hear the bathroom door closed before heading down the hall, carefully closing my bedroom door behind me.

Ty’s waiting in the opening of the hallway, his eyes merry. “You dirty dog.”

“Shut up,” I tell him, trying to brush past, but he follows me.

“C’mon, man. Don’t be like that.” He bumps my shoulder with his. He’s a couple inches taller than me, and lankier with it, but not so much that he has to even dip his knees to bump me like he used to have to do when I was younger. “It’s smart.” He glances over his shoulder at the hallway. “I don’t think anyone really noticed you were both missing. Mom asked where you were a few minutes ago, and I said I’d seen you head to the bathroom.” Though his eyes are merry, his face is serious. “Your secret’s safe with me,” he whispers. Then in a more normal tone, “I can’t blame you, honestly. I know what it’s like being back at Mom and Dad’s house with a girlfriend.” His gaze lands on Olivia. “Hell, if I didn’t think everyone would notice we’re missing, I might steal your idea.” He shakes his head. “Too bad Olivia’s dad decided to rent out her old apartment.”

I grunt, heading for the punch and filling two glasses, which makes Ty grin. He fills a glass for himself too, ignoring the fact that I haven’t responded to anything he’s said so far. “So tell me about her,” he says conversationally. “Her name’s Lydia?”

I grunt again, and he scoffs. Finally, I crack. “Yeah. Lydia. Her mom moved here this fall and took over the event planning at Hudgins House. She’s staying with her mom for a while. Her parents’ divorce threw her, so she’s taking a semester off to regroup.”

Ty grunts this time, contemplating that as he sips his punch. “Makes sense, I guess. Even though she’s not a little kid. I know Shane was pretty fucked up about his parents’ deaths, and yeah, divorce isn’t the same, but it’s still a kind of loss, isn’t it?”

I think about that and nod. “Yeah. I’d probably be pretty fucked up if Mom and Dad got divorced.”

He laughs incredulously. “Right. Can you even imagine?”

I shake my head and realize that's probably how Lydia felt about her parents too. I mean, most kids don't think about their parents divorcing, do they? Especially if everything just seems like business as usual?

I'd tried to be sympathetic and understanding when she explained how difficult it had been for her these last few months, but it was more about holding space for what she was obviously feeling. And she even said that other people had made her feel stupid for feeling that way. Given the fact I was trying to make up for being a dick, I wasn't about to do that, even if the temptation to say something like, "At least you weren't a little kid," or, "You're out of the house, how bad can it be?" was almost irresistible.

But now? Putting myself in her shoes and trying to imagine how it would feel if *my* mom and dad—Santa and Mrs. Claus, for chrissakes—called me up one day and announced they'd be divorcing, and don't worry, it would be amicable and everything would still be fine.

I'd be so confused. And hurt. And wonder when and how everything had gone wrong and how I hadn't seen it. How much of our life as a family had been a lie?

Instinctively, I seek out my parents, finding them deep in conversation with the neighbors. Dad has his arm around Mom, and she's leaning into him, both of them in matching white sweaters with a classic Santa face on the front.

No, there's no chance of them doing that. They're far too obviously in love.

But for Lydia? If her parents had never acted like that—and I'm well aware that many perfectly healthy couples aren't demonstratively affectionate in public—how would she have realized there might be something wrong?

When she emerges, looking put together and not at all like we just hooked up in my bedroom, I abandon Ty and head for her side, wrapping an arm around her and kissing her cheek. She smiles up at me, and I'm determined to do everything I can to keep that smile in place.

"Hey, big bro," Nora says that night after everyone's left the party.

I straighten from the chairs I'm folding to take out to the garage for storage until Mom and Dad's next get-together. Narrowing my eyes at her, I cross my arms. "What do you want?"

She puts on a faux innocent look, her hand on her chest, her mouth open in surprise that I would accuse her of wanting something when we both know that's the way she approaches me when she's asking for a favor. "What? Why would you think I want something?"

"Out with it, Nora. Or I'll just keep stacking chairs and cleaning up so I can go to bed. I have to open in the morning."

Dropping the act, she reaches for a chair and folds it up, handing it to me to lean against the others I've propped against the wall. "That's what I was hoping to talk to you about."

With a sigh, I grab another chair and fold it up. "What now?"

She glares at me, passing me another folded chair, then grabbing two more from across the room and dragging them closer. "I thought you were going to be nicer."

"Uh-huh." I stack our folded chairs and wait for her to get the last few. "About Christmas stuff and working. Not about you trying to weasel *out* of working."

"I'm not doing that!" she protests, pulling the last three chairs close enough to reach. "I was just hoping you'd swap with me. I'll open tomorrow. You take the afternoon. Jason invited me to—"

"Ooohhhh," I interrupt, holding up a hand. "I get it now. You have a date, and you want time to get ready."

Hands on her hips, she stares me down. "Please. Like you wouldn't want to do the same thing in my shoes? And besides, if you trade with me, you'll get to finish the day with Lydia and not have to wait all afternoon for ChristmasFest to end before you can see her again. You'll spend all afternoon together, then you can go do something afterward. We all win."

I have to fight the urge to grin at her assessment, maintaining my grumpy older brother demeanor. "I see you've thought this through."

“Come on, Dylan,” she whines. “I thought you’d be happy to trade.” She holds up her hand and starts counting off her reasons on her fingers. “You get to sleep in. You get to spend the afternoon with Lydia. And then you get to take her out somewhere right afterward. No waiting, no agonizing.”

“And you get plenty of time to come home and get ready for your date.”

She tosses her hands in the air. “Obviously.”

“And if you didn’t have a date?”

Crossing her arms, she glares at me. “You’re just being a little shit for the hell of it now, aren’t you?”

I can’t help laughing. “It’s okay, Nora. We both know you don’t really care about my life and preferences unless it affects you.”

“You make me sound like a selfish bitch,” she mutters, and I shake my head.

“No. I don’t think that. Mom sets the schedule. We generally leave it unless there’s an actual reason to change it, and we both know the convenience of getting off at the same time as Lydia isn’t enough.” I hold up a finger when a wicked grin breaks out across her face. “Shut up. Don’t go there. I heard it as soon as I said it. I do *not* need my little sister discussing me getting off with my girlfriend, though.”

She cackles. “Good. I didn’t really want to. But when you lay it out there like that ...”

“Right, right,” I nod, gathering up as many chairs as I can. It’ll take me a couple trips to get them all outside, but I’ll do my best to keep it to only two.

But Nora grabs the ones I can’t quite manage, following me out to the garage. “Does that mean you’ll do it?”

“Are you only helping me so I’ll say yes?”

She huffs a sigh and rolls her eyes. “Obviously.”

Laughing, I nod. “Yeah, sure. We can trade.”

Even though I don't open the next morning, I still wake up like I have to, heading out to the kitchen while everyone has breakfast. It's more crowded with the addition of Ty and Olivia, but it's festive and welcoming despite the need to choreograph our way around the kitchen.

Mom's standing at the stove making eggs while I slip in and pour myself a mug of coffee. I lean down and give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Morning, sweetheart. Did you sleep well?" she asks me, expertly flipping the over easy eggs she's cooking.

"I did. Is that your breakfast, Mom?"

She shakes her head. "No, it's for Olivia."

"I offered to make my own breakfast," Olivia puts in from her spot at the round dining table. Ty has his chair pulled up close to hers, his hand on her leg, both of them with mugs of coffee in front of them.

Gently, I nudge Mom to the side. "Go, Mom. You need to get ready. I'll finish the eggs."

Mom seems reluctant, but then she catches the time on the oven clock and sighs. "Okay. The bread's already in the toaster. It should all be done soon." She kisses me on the cheek and hurries out of the kitchen.

"I really don't mind making my own food," Olivia says, her chair scraping back.

"Let Dylan do it," Ty says, and when I glance over my shoulder at them, his eyes are twinkling, a smile half hidden behind his coffee mug while Olivia looks back and forth between us like she's not sure what to do.

"It's fine, Olivia. I really don't mind," I reassure her with a wave of my hand. "Mom wants you to feel welcome. But she's also going to be late if she doesn't finish getting ready to go. If she finds out I let you take over"—I point the spatula in my hand at Ty—"and make no mistake, Ty would be sure to let her know—she'd have my hide. It's better for all of us if you let me finish making you breakfast."

Ty's not bothering to hide his smile anymore, and Olivia sighs. "Fine. You

guys are weird, though.”

Leaning in, Ty gives her a kiss. “Only because your parents are cold and distant,” he murmurs.

“No foreplay in the kitchen!” I shout. His words might not sound like foreplay to anyone else, but there’s no mistaking that tone.

He tosses one of Mom’s cloth napkins at my back. “Hey! Don’t embarrass my girlfriend.”

Two pieces of toast pop up and I slather them with butter before sliding the eggs on top. Passing the plate to Olivia, I shake my head at Ty. “If she’s dating you, how can she help but be embarrassed?”

Olivia chuckles. “Don’t listen to him, Ty. You’re not embarrassing at all.”

I nod thoughtfully. “I suppose that might seem true to you. But I promise, he’s plenty embarrassing to his siblings.” Turning back to the stove, I get out the eggs to make myself some breakfast.

“Is that for me?” Ty asks, his voice hopeful.

Chuckling, I shake my head. “Nope. I’m next. You can make your own.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lydia

WHEN I ARRIVE AT WORK, I'M SURPRISED THAT I'M THE FIRST ONE THERE. Maybe Dylan's running a few minutes late? We usually show up about the same time, and I'd even texted him to let him know I was on my way in.

As I'm putting my things in my locker, my phone vibrates with a response from him.

DYLAN

Traded shifts with Nora. I'll see you this afternoon. We can go out somewhere after if you want

My belly swoops in disappointment that I won't get to see him as soon as expected, but then rises again at the thought of spending all that time with him with no breaks.

I definitely want

I'm already out getting everything organized for the day when Nora arrives. She waves at me from the door and heads for the locker room. She shows up already in costume, though, so it doesn't take her long to stow her outerwear and purse and come out, grinning.

“Morning!” she chirps, moving to the computer and turning it on. “Same split as usual? You on camera and I’ll do this part?”

I return her smile. “Yup. That’s what I figured you’d want.”

“So,” she says after a moment, drawing out the word, “you and Dylan, huh?”

Straightening from the stuffed animal pile, I raise an eyebrow, but I can’t keep the smile off my face just from thinking about him. And last night. “What about me and Dylan?”

She sighs. “You’re together?”

Laughing, I nod. It’s obvious she knows already, so I’m not sure why she’s acting like it’s a question. “Yeah.”

She grins. “Good for you. And thank you. I’m giving you credit for the change in his bad attitude.” She lays a hand over her heart, her face emanating sincerity. “Believe me when I tell you that our whole family appreciates it more than we can adequately express.”

Chuckling, I resume organizing everything and getting it ready for the day. “Happy to help,” I tell her, though I’m not sure it’s all me. I mean, yeah, I’ve noticed that he’s happier since we’ve gotten together too, and based on the giddy elation *I* feel, I think it’s at least partly attributable to the new relationship excitement. But he’s had some good realizations of his own, and I’d like to think that he’d have a better attitude about all of this regardless of our relationship status.

The morning flies by. As Christmas approaches, the days are getting more crowded, and Nora assures me it’ll only get worse once school lets out in a few days when we have our mid morning break. “All the parents who waited until the last minute to get their Santa photos in will be showing up. We’re almost completely booked for the rest of the week already. This weekend will be nuts. Just wait.”

Wrinkling my nose, I grimace. “Yaaay,” I say in a small voice, and she laughs.

“We’ll survive,” she assures me, patting my shoulder. “We have so far, anyway, so there’s no reason to think we won’t again.” With a deep, bracing

breath, she turns and faces the milling throngs of ChristmasFest. “Once more into the breach,” she intones, not quite hitting the line from Shakespeare.

Laughing, I follow her back out.

Even though the second half of the day is just as busy, I feel more relaxed than I did during the morning. Maybe it’s because the anticipation of seeing Dylan had me more keyed up. Or maybe it’s because his very presence relaxes me.

It always has, I realize as we finish with our last customers of the day. Even when I was keeping my distance because I thought he was kind of a dick, working with him always felt less frenetic and more relaxing than working with Nora. Don’t get me wrong, I like Nora, and she’s a fun coworker, but Dylan provides a stable background presence that makes me feel grounded and able to push through, even with difficult kids and parents swarming us.

And with about a week until Christmas, everyone’s more frazzled and fraying at the edges than they were even a week ago. The littlest kids are harder to coax smiles out of, the parents are more irritated that their kids won’t smile or with the cost of the packages or the fact that they can’t take their own photos on their phones instead.

With Dylan here, it’s easier to keep my calm and professional demeanor. And it’s extra helpful that when we’re done, I know he’ll pull me into the locker room, wrap me in his arms, and hold me until I let out a deep sigh like he did during our short break earlier.

And then, we’ll get to go somewhere together. Where exactly that’ll be is still up in the air. We didn’t come to any conclusions when we talked on our break, and we’ve been so slammed that conversation about anything other than work has been impossible.

“Merry Christmas!” I tell the parents of the overtired toddler who’s still squealing and squirming in their arms as they try to carry him out. He didn’t want to sit on Santa’s lap for the picture. He didn’t want to stand next to Santa, though when Santa got down on the floor with books and toys, he

managed to get the kid close enough and engaged enough that I got some decent shots. And now that it's time to go, the kid doesn't want to leave.

The mom gives me an attempt at a smile that looks more like a grimace as she carries her squirming offspring away, and I sag against Dylan, who's stepped up behind me. "If that's what kids are like," I murmur, "I'm not sure I want to have any."

Chuckling, he wraps his arm around me and kisses my head. "I don't think we need to worry about that any time soon."

Nodding, I turn and hug him. "Yeah. True. But this would be enough to put me off for sure."

He holds me, just like I knew he would, staying right where I need him until I pull in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He rubs my back. "You good?" he asks softly.

I nod against his chest before stepping back. "Let's get everything turned off and put away, then we can get out of here."

Still trailing his fingers down my arm, he grins at that. "Sounds perfect."

"You guys are so cute," Mrs. Claus says, and I turn to see her watching us from next to Santa's throne, her hands clasped under her chin.

Dylan waves a hand at her, and Santa lets out a laugh—his real one, not the Santa-famous, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" he gives the kids—and they both turn to leave with a wave and a, "See you in a bit." Even with this demonstrable evidence that they're Dylan's parents, I can't think of them as Jake and Mara Daniels when they're still in costume like that. They're Santa and Mrs. Claus.

Funnily enough, even in his elf outfit Dylan is still Dylan. His parents almost turn into different people when they're dressed up. They fully embody their roles, which is part of the difficulty of thinking of them as different people while still in costume, even if it's after-hours.

Dylan's just himself, no matter what he's wearing, despite the fact that his mom gave him an elf name when he was just a baby.

I wonder if I'm actually different dressed as an elf versus in my normal

clothes and maybe that's why Dylan assumed I was just acting? Or if he's just so used to all the people around him acting differently in costume that he thought I'd be doing it too?

That makes a certain amount of sense, now that I think about it. His reactions when we first met weren't about me at all, but about his entire life up until then.

And while he's apologized and I've forgiven him, it helps to let it go all the way when I place it in that context.

Dylan places his hand on my back to get my attention. "You ready?"

At my nod, he threads his fingers through mine and leads me to the locker room. I'm suddenly feeling a little shy, but Dylan doesn't seem to have any such qualms. He goes to his locker, pulls out his change of clothes, and immediately starts stripping.

Letting out a choked laugh, I cover my eyes with one hand, though I can still see him through the gaps between my fingers, and he turns to look at me. "What?" he asks. "It's nothing you haven't seen before." His gaze darkens as his eyes rake over my body. "And nothing you won't see again."

My lips curve in a satisfied smile at the promise in his tone, though my cheeks are still hot and pink. "I know. It's still ..." I make a helpless gesture with one hand, unsure what I want to say.

"New?" he supplies, dropping his pants and stepping into the jeans he brought with him.

I'm a little disappointed at how quickly he's changing, even if I was shocked at first. Crossing the room, I stop him with a hand on his bare chest before he can finish buttoning his jeans. Skating my palm over his skin, I let it land on his shoulder. His eyes darken, and he bends to capture my lips with his.

It's a deep kiss, neither of us holding back. His parents are already gone, the rest of the vendors closing up and drifting out if they haven't left already, and we're the only people who use this locker room. We're the only ones who need to change into costumes, after all.

His hand goes to my thigh, lifting my leg so it's hitched over his hip,

dragging his jeans down a little in the process, and he turns me so I'm pressed against the wall of lockers next to his open one. The metal is cold against my back through my elf dress.

The longer we kiss, the more passionate it becomes, and then he's hitching up my other leg, picking me up and pinning me against the lockers, grinding his hard cock into the hot space between my legs, and I let out a soft cry of pleasure and desperation. That seems to spur him on, and he slides a hand under my skirt, cursing when he's once again stymied by my clothes—this time the high waisted tights I wear under the dress.

Breaking the kiss, he rests his forehead against mine, both of us breathing hard, and then he slowly lets me down so my feet touch the floor again.

With a slow, deep breath that has his chest expanding under my hand, he takes a half step back, giving me room to get out from between him and the lockers even though that's the last thing I want right now. "What am I going to do with you?" he murmurs, and I'm not sure if he's actually asking me or if it's a rhetorical question, so I just lift one shoulder in a shrug.

Chuckling, he steps back all the way, breaking contact, and I miss his touch already. "We shouldn't do this here," he says quietly. "Even though it's unlikely we'll get caught, it just seems like a bad idea."

Reluctantly, I nod. "You're probably right."

He drags on a shirt, stuffing his costume in his bag. "I'm gonna head out before you change." His eyes flash with heat when he looks at me. "Otherwise, I don't think I'll be able to stick to that plan."

Before I can respond with more than a soft gasp at the spike of arousal caused by his words, he strides out of the room, leaving me to change on my own.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Dylan

I PACE THE AISLES OF CHRISTMASFEST AS I WAIT FOR LYDIA, TOO FULL OF restless energy to be able to be still while she changes. Especially since all I want to do is barge back in there when I know she's undressed, pin her up against the wall again, and take her.

It's a bad idea, though, for lots of reasons. Number one, we work here. That on its own should be enough, though I'm not sure it would be if not for number two—I don't have a condom on me.

I never thought I'd be wishing I could have sex at work, after all, so why would I? And even though I knew we'd be spending the evening together, since our options for privacy are so limited, I also knew there'd be no way we'd get to have naked time. Not tonight, anyway.

Tuesday is only a few days away, I remind myself for the five hundredth time.

Last night only seemed to whet my appetite for her, though. Now that I've been inside Lydia, experienced the combination of sweet and sexy that she pulls off better than anyone I've ever met—largely because it's not an act, it's just her—I only want her more. Anywhere and any way I can get her.

God, when she stopped me from buttoning my jeans, I was nearly lost. I was lost, if only for a few moments. It's a good thing she dresses in such a way that it's impossible to get to her skin, or else I'd be balls deep inside her right now and we'd have to be much more concerned about the possibility of an intractable toddler on the horizon.

Sighing, I lean against the wall and let my head drop back against it. We either need to go somewhere we can get naked, or we need to go somewhere that'll kill this boner that won't quit.

When she emerges from the locker room, her purple hat pulled low, her short dark hair peeking out from beneath it, the sight of her takes my breath away. I can't believe she's mine. *For now*, a voice in the back of my head reminds me.

I don't want to think about the fact that I'm leaving, about the reality that long-distance relationships don't work that well, even if the distance is only a few hours. The fact that she's uncertain how long she's planning on staying here doesn't help.

Maybe she could move back to Seattle and get a job there if she doesn't want to go back to school, a more hopeful voice suggests.

That does seem like a possibility, doesn't it? Yeah, her mom's here, but Lydia's an adult, so it's not like she needs to live here. If she hadn't had such a bad time of it last semester, she'd be away from home anyway, right? And there are more job opportunities in Seattle than there are in a town of two thousand regular residents, especially during the off season.

I tuck that thought away as I put on my own coat, wrapping her in my arms for a kiss like we weren't just making out in the locker room five minutes ago. I'll talk to her about it later, maybe closer to when it's time for me to go back to Seattle. For now, we have time. There's no need to bring up problems that can wait for later.

I spend each evening with Lydia after we're done working, sometimes after spending all or part of the day working together, and it's blissful torture. I

can't touch her like I want to because there's nowhere we can go to do it, and for three days all I can do is chant *Tuesday, Tuesday, Tuesday*, to myself.

It's not ideal, but it's definitely better than nothing. I'm halfway tempted to ask my family to let me have the house for a while, but I know that won't work out in my favor. Even if my parents would do it, there's no way both my siblings and Olivia would clear out just so I can have the house to myself and Lydia for an hour. And with the ChristmasFest schedule, Mom, Dad, and Nora have every right to want to relax at home afterward too.

Sarah sidles up to me at the counter at Santa's Workshop on Monday evening. She has to wait several minutes, because we're totally slammed, but there's enough of a break between me finishing with one family and the next parents approaching that she can bump me with her hip. "Hey," she says quietly, her eyes darting toward Lydia. "How are things?"

Chuckling at her attempt at being stealthy, I whisper back, "Good. How are things with you?"

She waves an airy hand. "Oh, you know. Busy." Her eyes dart toward Lydia again. "Are you inviting Lydia to the family dinner on Thursday?"

"Oh, uh ... no?" I glance that direction too. "I mean, no one said anything to me about a family dinner, so I haven't asked her since I didn't know about it."

Sarah's eyebrows jump. "Oh. Mom must've forgotten, but since Ty and Olivia are here, Shane, and Sophie and I are coming over for dinner on Thursday. I assumed you'd be there, of course, and that you might bring Lydia too." She bites her lip, glancing side to side and lowering her voice so much that I have to lean in to hear her. "Look, this is super awkward." Her cheeks flame. "And I know we don't get involved in each other's ... intimate business."

"Sarah!" I hiss, trying not to laugh, both at her word choice and at the completely inappropriate time to talk about this.

"I'm just saying," she continues, ignoring me, "Mom and Dad's house is full of people all the time, and Lydia's living with her mom, right?" At my nod, she nods decisively. "Right. My old house is empty. Here's a key." She sets a

key attached to an Arcadian Falls souvenir keychain in front of me on the counter. “Clean up after yourself. There’s no furniture. But it’s private.”

And then she’s gone.

Despite the key to Sarah’s old house burning a hole in my pocket—the house next door to the one she now lives in with Shane that they’ve been renting out—I don’t use it Monday night. I’m not sure if it’s the fact that it would almost seem like a letdown after all the anticipation of waiting for Tuesday or if it’s because I know Lydia would be disappointed if I canceled our Monday plans, but I don’t mention it.

Instead, we pile into my car and I drive us to Inglewood where we catch a late showing of *White Christmas* at the movie theater there. They’re showing a rotating schedule of classic Christmas movies all month, and when Lydia told me that she grew up watching *White Christmas* with her grandparents as a kid, I knew we had to go.

After buying us popcorn and sodas, Lydia settles into the seat next to mine, a wide grin on her face, and while I might not care about this movie at all for its own sake, I’m smiling just as widely because she’s happy.

It’s a fun movie with catchy tunes and some funny jokes. When Bing Crosby’s character refers to Danny Kaye as a weirdsmobile, I lean over to Lydia and whisper, “I’m going to start calling my siblings weirdsmobiles.”

She laughs and nods. “Sounds like a plan,” she whispers back.

After the movie, I take her home and we do our usual thing of making out in my truck until the windows are getting foggy and the people who live there are probably wondering why I’m parked out there for so long. That or they’ve figured out I’m dating Lydia and know exactly why we’re out here for so long.

With a glance at the clock, she gives me a rueful smile. “I should go inside,” she whispers, her lips swollen from our kisses.

In response, I bring her in for another kiss, happily swallowing her laughter.

As much as the attraction between us is white hot, I like that we laugh. I've been with people who are dead serious when it comes to bedroom stuff, and while no one wants to feel laughed *at*, I like that when Lydia and I are together, even when we're making out or fooling around, we can laugh. It makes it feel so much lighter and more fun.

I eventually let her pull away, and she gives me another smile, shaking her head at me. "Tomorrow's Tuesday," she whispers.

"I can't wait," I tell her.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Lydia

DYLAN AND I OPEN TOGETHER ON TUESDAY MORNING, BUT I HAVE THE afternoon off. It's bittersweet saying goodbye to him when Nora comes in to take over. I want to spend as much time with him as possible, but I'm also grateful that I'll have time to clean up my room and get ready for him to come over tonight.

The plan is for him to pick up food on his way over after his shift ends, but I'll have a chunk of time where I'm in the condo alone between when Mom leaves and when he arrives.

Mom asks for my help getting ready for the Christmas party, even though we both know she doesn't really need it. She has enough fashion sense for the both of us, and usually it's the other way around. Still, it's fun to sit on her bed while she presents me with her outfit choices.

"Do you have any fun plans this evening?" she asks with a knowing smile after she's dressed in black slacks and a sparkly red top. It's sleeveless and has a cowl neck, but she assures me that she'll be fine since they'll be at her boss's house, and there'll be cocktails and eggnog, which will keep her feeling plenty warm.

"Text me if you need a ride home," I tell her after that reveal.

She gives me a funny look. “I thought I was the parent,” she says, hooking her silver drop earrings into her ears.

Laughing, I shake my head. “Seriously, though. It’s a party. If you want to let loose, you should. But if you need me to, Dylan can bring me there, and I can drive you home.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she says as she puts on her necklace, then turns to face me. “I take it from that statement that you have plans with Dylan?”

My cheeks heat, and she gives me a knowing look. “He’s coming over,” I confess.

“I sort of assumed that would happen,” she says, turning and giving me a kiss on the cheek before leading the way out of her room. “Be safe.”

Rolling my eyes, my blush deepens. “I know, Mom. I am. We are.”

Her eyebrows raise, but she doesn’t say anything else on the subject—thank god. After gathering her keys, phone, and purse, she gives me a wave. “Love you. I’ll let you know when I’m heading home.”

“Or if you need a ride,” I say, pointing a finger at her before she closes the door.

Laughing, she nods. “Or if I need a ride, though I don’t plan on that being necessary. See you later.”

Then she’s gone, and I’m left with the swooping sensation of needing to while away the time before Dylan arrives combined with excitement at the fact he’s coming over soon.

I busy myself with tidying my room, though that doesn’t take as long as I expected, largely because most of the mess was just clothes needing to be either put back in the closet or tossed in the hamper. After checking the time and realizing I still have at least thirty minutes of waiting ahead of me, I head into the living room and kitchen, straightening the books and magazines on the coffee table, lining up the remotes next to each other, and loading the few dishes from the sink into the dishwasher. While I’m naturally inclined to be messy, Mom isn’t, and between the two of us, we keep our living space fairly well put together. My room is where things tend to devolve, but since most of

my things are at Dad's or in storage, it's just clothes I have to worry about. I haven't been here long enough to acquire more that needs taking care of.

I wonder how long it'll take for that to happen? When will I decide to add personal touches to my room? It's homey and warm as-is, but it's definitely a guest room rather than a space that's obviously mine.

Maybe once the elf gig is over and Dylan's back at school, I'll have more time to want to do that sort of thing. The thought of Dylan leaving sends a pang of sadness through me that I immediately push away. I'm not going to think about that now.

Despite my resolve, his question from the other night about how long I plan to stay in Arcadian Falls floats through my head. Even though this is still very new, he's thinking about when and how often he'll get to see me once the spring semester starts, wishing I'd be in Seattle again so we could date like a normal couple.

And while the thought makes me happy, that pang rings through me again, because as lovely as it sounds to go back and have a boyfriend in theory, thinking about returning to school and how difficult last semester was has my shoulders bunching and my heart speeding up. Shaking my head, I throw that off. Just because Dylan wishes something were possible—and I do too, in some ways—doesn't mean I need to do it.

That's the whole point of this break, isn't it? To get out from under the expectations of others and figure out what *I* want.

My dad's the one who wants me back in school, majoring in business and on the pre-law track. He's already got my entire life mapped out for me.

Dylan wouldn't fit nicely in his plans either, which makes me smirk.

But trading my dad's desires for Dylan's doesn't feel any better, really. Not when I'm not sure what it is that I want to do with my life. Business and pre-law isn't it, though, I know that much.

Once I'm satisfied that I can't clean or tidy anything else, I settle into the corner of the couch and pick up the cozy mystery I grabbed at the grocery store last week. I haven't had a lot of time to read, since I've been busy with work or hanging with Dylan, but it's a good way to keep my mind from

spinning out right now.

This is something I know I want to do—read an enjoyable book that no one expects me to dissect or analyze or write a report on and wait for my boyfriend to come over with dinner. How much more perfect could life get?

Once Dylan arrives, bags of takeout in hand, I realize that this is even more perfect, actually. Because now he's *here*, and I'm not waiting for him anymore.

After relieving him of his bags, he takes off his coat and boots before following me into the kitchen, where he turns me back to face him, kissing me thoroughly against the island in the middle of the kitchen.

When he pulls back, we're both grinning like idiots.

"Hi," he says softly.

"Hi," I say back in the same tone of voice.

"I missed you," he whispers.

"I missed you too." Yeah, we saw each other this morning. And yesterday. And the day before. But it's still true.

That pang hits again—softer this time because he's here with me—when I think that if I miss him this much after just a few hours, how much worse it'll be when we go days and weeks between visits. Because as much as I think, oh, we can trade off visiting each other on the weekends, the reality is, that likely won't be possible. Work schedules, family obligations, school—for Dylan—and just ... life will get in the way.

Still. He's already wanting to make it work, though I think he's under the hopeful impression it'll just be for one semester. But then it's summer, so it's not like I'll be in Seattle then, since I'd be home for the summer anyway. And since Dad's cutting me off, it's not like I can go back to his house in Tukwila for the summer even if I wanted to. Which I don't, since Mom's actually supportive.

Though I suppose if Dad weren't being like he is, maybe I'd want to visit him.

I miss him. Or at least the version of him I had as a kid—the dad who played catch with me in the back yard, coached my junior high softball team, and quizzed me to help me study for all my tests.

I know he thinks I'm wasting time—and possibly my life—by taking time off from school, that his way of handling this is likely to get me to cave, but he's wrong. There's always been this pressure to perform—getting good grades and being the best was the way to get his love and attention—and I'm finally tired of trying to perform for his approval.

I guess with Mom no longer doing it—or maybe shielding me from the full effect of his “encouragement”—I finally feel capable of stopping as well. If Mom can end two decades of a life with someone to pursue her own happiness, why can't I? And doing it now will save me from looking back in two more decades and wondering why I built my entire life trying to make someone else happy instead of myself.

So no. Even as much as I want to make Dylan happy—and I really do—I can't. Not until I figure out what makes me happy in the long term.

It's much easier to know what makes me happy right now, and that's being here with Dylan, just like this.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Dylan

LYDIA'S QUIET WHEN I FIRST ARRIVE BEARING FOOD, AND IT SEEMS LIKE something's going on in her head while we're in the kitchen, just wrapped around each other, not talking, not moving.

Then her lips hitch in a smile, and she grazes one more kiss across my lips. "I'm starved," she whispers. "Let's eat."

We break apart, and she pulls out plates and cups and silverware while I get the food out of the bags, plating the chicken, rice, and veggies she ordered and the cheeseburger and fries for me. It's not fancy, maybe, but after working all day, I'm hungry too, and as much as I want to just take her to her room and strip off all her clothes, a meal will help me have the energy to do all the things I know I want to do.

We trade stories about our days as we eat, whatever had her quiet and thoughtful in the kitchen having passed like it never happened. Part of me wants to ask, but I don't want to ruin the evening if she doesn't want to talk about whatever's on her mind. Maybe her dad's bugging her again. She hasn't mentioned him since last week, but I'm not sure she would.

Once she pushes her plate away, I quit picking at my last few fries and push mine away too. She gives me a cheeky grin, and I stand, holding out a hand

to her. When she takes it, I pull her to her feet, reeling her in and dropping my mouth to the sensitive spot beneath her ear. She shivers, goosebumps rising beneath my lips.

“Dylan,” she breathes, and my half-hard cock goes to full mast at the sound of my name on her lips.

“Where’s your bedroom?” I rasp, giving her hips a squeeze as she turns so she can lead the way. She covers one of my hands with hers, keeping it in place as she walks down a short hall off the living room and opens the door to her bedroom.

There’s a lamp casting a warm glow over the space on the bedside table, illuminating the cream color palette punctuated by the dark purple throw blanket folded over the foot of the queen-sized bed and the purple and green floral prints hanging on the walls. It’s pretty and impersonal, which fills me with a certain amount of hope. While the room is certainly comfortable and welcoming enough, it’s clearly not *Lydia’s* space so much as one she occupies while she visits. The fact that she hasn’t made the space more her own means that maybe she sees her stay here as temporary, even if she hasn’t decided exactly how temporary it’ll be.

Maybe I could convince her to move back to Seattle ...

But not now. Not tonight. That’ll keep.

Instead I focus on the way her hands find their way under my shirt, cool fingers slipping up over my skin, dragging her fingernails back down to the waist of my jeans, though she struggles to undo the button while our mouths are glued together.

Taking over, I undo my pants, letting her have free rein again while I tug her shirt up and out of the way and shove my hands down the back of her leggings. Fucking *finally* she’s not wearing so many layers I can’t get through them without a crowbar and a chainsaw.

Once she starts pushing my pants down my hips, I return the favor, though hers are more difficult to get off her. “Do you have a thing for clothes that are nearly impossible to remove?” I ask with mock frustration as I step out of my pants and hers are still tangled around her thighs.

Laughing, she shimmies them down and off. “I guess I do,” she says thoughtfully. “Not something I realized before this last week, I assure you.”

I let out a low growl that makes her laugh more, and her laughter makes me smile. This. This is my favorite thing about us. Right here. Laughing doesn't detract from the arousal or the sexiness of the moment. It makes it *better*.

Before I can reach for her again, she pulls her top up and off, dropping it on the floor, leaving her in only her black satin bra.

“Jesus,” I whisper, reaching out a finger to trace the soft edge of the cup. No bows or lace this time, just simple, unadorned black satin, and the way it looks against her creamy skin makes my mouth water.

Pulling her close, I claim her mouth again, though I have to give it up momentarily when she pushes my shirt up. Reaching behind my head, I grab the back of the neck and yank it off one-handed, enjoying the way her eyes widen and an appreciative smile curves her lips. A cocky half-grin on my face, I nudge her back toward the bed. Obediently, she climbs on and scoots back, making plenty of space for me to join her.

I fish the condoms out of my pants pocket first—don't want to have to stop and search for them later—then crawl onto the bed, dragging my lips up her thigh to her torso, pausing to suck on a nipple before kissing her on the mouth again.

As I settle on top of her, she opens her legs, making room for me between them, and this—*this* is what I've been craving for so long. Our hookup at the Christmas party was amazing, but it was still rushed and hurried and with that edge of the forbidden that's crazy hot but not relaxing, plus she wanted to make sure she didn't have sex hair, so I didn't get to lay her out on her back like this, all softness and curves with no need to speed the night along.

I decided before I got here that as much as I might want to just suit up and dive in, I really want to make this last, so I kiss her slowly, deeply, making each caress long, languid, slow. So slow.

And she seems to want nothing to do with that plan, squirming beneath me, bowing up, pressing her chest to mine, her thighs hitching over my hips as she presses her hot, wet pussy along the length of my aching cock.

Tearing my mouth away, I press my face into the crook of her neck, breathing hard and fighting for control. “Jesus,” I breathe. “You ... You’re ...”

“Uh-huh,” she agrees, still undulating beneath me, seeking friction to get what she needs.

And if that’s what she needs, I’ll give it to her.

Sliding down, I kiss my way down her body, still taking my sweet time, soaking in her soft cries of frustrated pleasure as I suck and bite her nipples before nipping a path down her belly, detouring to the jut of her hip, then kissing my way up her left thigh.

Once I’m lying between her splayed legs, I rub my thumb up and down the cleft of her pussy, watching the way she writhes against me, keeping my touch deliberately light, more of a tease than anything.

“Shit, Dylan,” she whines. “Stop teasing.”

With a grin, I extend my tongue and trace the contours of her sex, making her shiver and curse again, since I’m still teasing, just with a different body part.

Then I give her the flat of my tongue, lapping at her like I did last time, because I like hearing her beg, but I don’t want to make her do it too much.

It doesn’t take her long to fall apart, riding my tongue and fingers, and then I’m climbing over her, rising on my knees to roll on the condom she hands me, guiding myself to her opening, and sliding inside on one long, slow thrust.

She gasps when I’m fully seated, her arms and legs clinging tightly to my back and hips, and I wrap my arms beneath her, gathering her to me. Everything about her fits so perfectly against me, and I don’t want to let her go. Ever.

It’s too soon to be thinking like this. I know it, which is why I don’t say any of this out loud. I’ve never fallen this quickly before, but I don’t want to stop.

I move as slowly as I can make myself, still wanting to drag this out as long as possible. If I make each time last, maybe I can make the whole thing—us

—last too.

It makes no sense, but that's how it feels, like if I can drag out the sensations as long as possible, it'll keep this whole bubble of time between now and when school starts again in January from popping and disappearing like soap and water.

But soon enough, I can't hold back anymore. My hips move faster whether I want them to or not, my own orgasm barreling down on me like a freight train. As much as I want to give her another orgasm too, I don't think I have it in me to hold back enough to make it happen. Her hand slips to my cheek, and she brings my lips to hers, kissing me and swallowing my cries as I find my own release. She keeps kissing me, even as I go limp, rolling to the side a little so I don't crush her. She rolls with me, keeping our bodies joined like she doesn't want to let go any more than I do.

And that, like the impersonal nature of her room, gives me hope. Dangerous, heartbreaking hope.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lydia

THE LAST WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS FLIES BY IN A WHIRLWIND OF KIDS AND photos and parents and time with Dylan, plus a loud, crazy, and wonderful dinner with his family. His sister apparently gave him the key to her empty rental house, so we've had a place to go after work where we have privacy. It reminds me a lot of that first night at Hudgins House, because it's blankets on the floor and a couple of pillows he scrounged up from somewhere since the place is empty and unfurnished.

But it's ours for now, and neither of us are going to complain about the hardness of the carpeted floor versus a bed. And if we want variety, the kitchen counters are the perfect height for a lot of fun things. Dylan even stashes food in the fridge so we can have snacks.

On Christmas Eve, much to our mutual chagrin, we're forced to go our separate ways once work is over, both of us with family traditions to uphold. Well, Dylan's are more family traditions and mine are ... new versions, I guess.

When I get home, Mom gets sugar cookie dough out of the fridge so we can cut out and frost cookies like we did when I was a kid. "We haven't done this in years," I say as she unwraps the plastic wrap from the disk of cookie

dough.

She shrugs, not looking at me. “I thought it was time to revive the tradition. Make it new again.” She offers me a smile, and I know this is important to her in a way she won’t admit out loud.

“That sounds perfect,” I tell her.

I wash my hands and put on the apron she hands me, pulling the cookie cutters out of the cabinet where she has them now while she rolls out the dough.

Carefully avoiding my gaze, she transfers the stars and trees and snowmen shapes to a cookie sheet. “Have you spoken to your father lately?”

I freeze midway to bringing a piece of cookie dough to my mouth. Popping it in, I shake my head. “No. He’s left a couple of voicemails, but I haven’t listened to them. I’m fairly confident I know what they say, and it’s nothing he hasn’t said a million other times.”

Pressing her lips together, she nods. She’s not surprised. She knew that would be my answer, because he likely called her today or yesterday to complain that he can’t get ahold of me and to try to bully her into bullying me into talking to him. Or caving and doing what he wants and calling to tell him so. That would be his preference, of course.

Unfortunately for him, this is as close to bullying as Mom gets. “It might be nice to call and wish him a Merry Christmas tomorrow at least.”

“I’ll think about it,” I grumble with a shrug, because that’s the best I can offer right now. I’m not particularly interested in doing even that much, because it’ll just give him an opportunity to lecture me more. And if he’s not willing to help me unless I do exactly what he wants, why should I wish him a Merry Christmas?

But I keep those thoughts to myself, because I know it’ll just upset Mom. Her dearest wish was that Brooke and I wouldn’t be overly affected by their divorce, and the fact that I need a break from school at all is just proof that’s not how reality works. And now that Dad and I aren’t talking? It’s just worse. And I hate that it makes her life more difficult as well, because if I give in and do what he wants, he’ll quit harassing Mom.

I can't do it, though. No matter how much part of me thinks maybe I should, that little voice that always vied for his approval and tried her best to keep everyone happy whispering, *Just do it. Go back to school after Christmas. You can hack it. Besides, you'll make Dylan happy too.*

Finally, I say it out loud. "I can't do what he wants just because it's what he wants, Mom." The words are barely more than a whisper.

Mom stops rolling the dough for the next batch to go in the oven and looks up at me, her face a mix of surprise and distress. "Oh, honey. I know that. I don't want you to do what he wants just to make him happy either." She shakes her head, attacking the dough with the rolling pin again. "No one knows better than me that it won't end with you happy."

My heart pinches at the pain in her voice.

"I hate that he's bothering you about it, though."

She shakes her head, still rolling the dough aggressively. "I can handle your father," she assures me. Then she stops and meets my eyes again. "I know you need time, honey. I hate to see you hurting, and I hate that he won't be reasonable, but I know you aren't just doing this to make him mad or punish him or whatever it is he thinks."

My gut clenches. "He thinks I'm trying to punish him?" The words are little more than a squeak and the way Mom presses her lips together is all the answer I need. "God! Has he always made everything all about him? How have I not seen that before?"

Mom gives me a look full of sympathy. "Oh, honey. He's your father. It's normal to want to see the best in him. And he thinks he's looking out for your best interests. He's just ..."

"Going about it all wrong?" I supply in the blank she's left hanging.

She tips her head to one side. "That's as good a way to put it as any." She looks down at the cookie dough. "I think if I keep rolling this, it'll be paper thin, so I better stop so we can cut more cookies. Oh!" She sets aside the rolling pin and dusts off her hands, rummaging through a drawer and pulling out little clay disks with handles attached. "I got these cookie stamps too. I know we've always done the traditional shapes, but since we're revamping

the tradition, I thought it would be fun to add something new into the mix.”

I give her a smile. “That sounds perfect, Mom.”

Our Christmas morning is lazy, both of us waking up whenever, though Mom is up before me, and when I emerge from my bedroom a little before ten o’clock, the smell of coffee cake fills the condo.

I give her a smile, accepting the mug of coffee she pours me and doctoring it to my liking. “You made coffee cake,” I murmur, taking a sip.

“Of course I did.” She refills her own coffee. “It’s Christmas morning.”

“Merry Christmas, Mom.”

She gives me a hug. “Merry Christmas, baby girl.”

We listen to Christmas carols and munch on sugar cookies while we wait for the coffee cake to finish baking and open our presents. It doesn’t take long to exchange gifts with just the two of us. Mom got me a pair of pretty earrings of nesting silver circles that turn and twist independently and a new pair of Bluetooth earbuds. “They’re supposed to be the latest and greatest,” she says, “and I know things go obsolete after a year or two, so I thought you might like new ones.”

“Thanks, Mom. They’re perfect.”

She gushes over the framed print I bought her, then stands and retrieves the stockings sitting in front of the gas fireplace, handing me one. “I haven’t had time to get the new ones personalized yet, but I will by next year.”

Waving away her explanation—as though I care that much about having my name on my stocking as an adult—I open the top and peer inside. She’s tucked in a paperback—another cozy mystery by the author of the one I’ve been reading—a small notebook with a fancy pen, a bag of chocolate truffles from the candy shop downtown, and some sheet masks she knows I like doing when I want to pamper myself. “Perfect stocking stuffers too. But now I feel bad I didn’t fill your stocking!” I protest.

She shakes her head and flips her hand at me. “I’ve always filled my own stocking anyway,” she tells me, pulling out the book and chocolates she got for herself, plus a couple of face serums that I know she uses already.

Next year, I’m going to get her stocking stuffers. I didn’t realize she’d planned on us doing stockings at all, since it’s not like I’m a kid anymore who expects Santa to come down the chimney and fill my stocking. The fact that she’s always filled her own stocking, though, makes me unbearably sad. Dad didn’t even do it for her? What an ass.

The timer goes off, and I stand, grinning happily in anticipation of Mom’s coffee cake. It was always a special occasion breakfast food growing up—Christmas, the first Saturday of summer break, sometimes on birthdays, especially if one fell on a weekend when Mom would proclaim that a birthday girl deserves cake twice on a Saturday, and occasionally for no discernible reason other than Mom wanted to make coffee cake on a day off. A handful of times a year at the most. Just the smell of it makes me happy, and when she dishes it up, warm and steaming, the cinnamon flavor bursts on my tongue, carrying with it all the fond memories I associate with coffee cake.

I’m glad we’re keeping as many of our family traditions as possible, even if they’re smaller. And introducing new twists, like the cookie stamps and someone else filling Mom’s stocking in the future.

When Brooke calls, I watch Mom talking to her, animated and happy, and I once again realize she’s happier than I’ve seen her my whole life. Maybe it’s just because of Dylan, but it suddenly hits me that I hope Mom finds someone again. Someone who makes her happy like this, someone who keeps her from getting lonely when I eventually move out—because even if I’m not sure when that’ll be, I know it will happen at some point. I’m going to figure out what I want to do and then I’ll go after it, once I’ve regrouped and recovered from my people pleaser burnout. Or Dad pleaser burnout, anyway.

No more business degree. No more pre-law. The thought of going to law school makes my stomach churn. I just ... don’t know what I want to do instead.

I like reading, but I hate the analysis and criticism portion that always goes

with English classes, and what would I do with a degree in English anyway? Become a teacher? No thanks.

And while I enjoy things like music and art, I'm not good enough or dedicated enough to make a career out of either of those things. I've always enjoyed science, but I don't want to be a doctor.

Mom gets off the phone and turns to look at me. "What's with that face?" she asks. "It's Christmas! It's your duty to be happy today of all days."

Laughing, I give her a hug. "I am happy," I reassure her. "I'm happy I'm here with you."

She hugs me back and kisses the top of my head. "Oh, sweetheart. I'm happy you're here with me too."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Dylan

CHRISTMAS MORNING IS ALL HUSTLE AND BUSTLE LIKE NORMAL AROUND HERE. Sarah and Shane come in a little after seven, yawning and bleary eyed with a hyper Sophie hopping all around asking, “Can we open presents *now*?”

“In a few minutes, Bug,” Shane tells her, calling her by the affectionate nickname that we’ve all adopted for her by now. “We just got here, and I’m not sure everyone’s up and out here yet.”

“We’re all awake,” I say around a yawn, coming into the living room from the kitchen, a mug of coffee in hand. “Ty and Olivia should be out in a few minutes. Mom and Dad are in the kitchen getting coffee and breakfast ready for everyone.”

Sarah comes close and gives me a hug. “Merry Christmas, Dylan.”

“Merry Christmas. Did you guys get much sleep last night?”

Laughing, she rolls her eyes, and Shane shakes his head.

“Santa came last night!” Sophie squeaks, jumping up and down.

I raise an eyebrow at her, then look at Shane, because I thought by now Sophie’d figured out that Santa wasn’t really real. He shrugs. “They did a

Polar Express party at school,” he says. “All the kids got bells like in the movie, and you know, you can only hear the bell if you believe. Sophie can hear the bell ...” He shrugs again, leaving me to fill in the blanks.

I nod like it all makes perfect sense, though I can’t say it really does. “Cool. Gotcha.” Whether or not I really get it doesn’t matter so much as my ability to play along, and I can do that.

Christmas morning passes in our family’s usual traditions of hot cocoa, presents, Christmas carols, and cinnamon rolls. There’s laughter and smiles on all sides until we separate briefly for showers and naps. Sarah, Shane, and Sophie head back to their place for a little while before they’ll come back for dinner. This year Shane and Sophie’s other siblings are spending their Christmas elsewhere, so it’s just our family and additions this time instead of the extended family that includes all the Elliott siblings plus Shane’s brother Brad’s long-term boyfriend. I guess Brad’s at said boyfriend’s family’s for Christmas this year, and Mallory, Shane’s other sister, must be with her boyfriend’s family, though I didn’t realize she was dating anyone seriously enough for that to be a thing. Not that I keep up with Mallory’s dating life that closely.

The only thing that would make today more perfect is if Lydia could be here. I know she’s with her mom, and they’re probably having a great morning together, though I’m sure it’s quieter than mine. And that’s good. I think she needs the opportunity to connect with her mom more after everything that’s happened over the last few months. But I still wish she could be here.

After my turn in the shower, I pull on jeans and one of my many Christmas sweaters—this one white with a large reindeer in profile stitched the front of it and a fuzzy red pom pom for his nose—and pick up my phone.

Merry Christmas

LYDIA:

Merry Christmas to you too! How’s your morning so far?

We chat for a few minutes, comparing notes about our traditional Christmas breakfast foods and whether we open presents before or after eating—before on both counts—and make plans to get together after Christmas dinner is over, though I’m sure I’ll face objections about me leaving early. They can all deal with it, though.

When the time comes for me to head to Lydia’s, I only face a small number of half-hearted objections. “You could invite them here, you know,” Mom says as I kiss her cheek. She’s at the kitchen table with Sarah, Sophie, Shane, and Nora playing Skip-Bo.

“Maybe another time,” I tell her, and Mom pats my cheek without another word.

Dad says something similar when I head into the living room to grab my keys and jacket. “The more the merrier!” he booms. “Tell them to come here!”

“They’re already expecting me,” I answer, and he nods.

“I guess you’re right. Bring the extra pie at least.”

I gesture at the box bearing an apple crumb pie Mom set aside for me earlier. “Already got it.” Mom makes more pies than we can ever actually eat in one day. She says it’s because she never knows which type of pie everyone will be in the mood for, so she makes two of each, but I think it’s really for this type of situation. You never know when you’ll invite someone over or need something to bring with you last minute, and if that doesn’t happen, well, then you just get to eat more pie later on. Who could be upset by that?

It’s evening and the sun’s long since down, the night clear and dark as I walk out to my car, the silence outside nearly as shocking as the cold. But braving the cold and dark is well worth it when I know Lydia’s waiting at the other end.

She answers the door when I get to her place, smiling and greeting me with a brief kiss before taking the box from my hands, a wide smile on her face.

“What’s this?”

“Merry Christmas,” I tell her and nod to her mom. “It’s an apple crumb pie my mom insisted I bring.”

Lydia’s mom takes the box from Lydia and carries it to the kitchen. “That’s so kind of her. I have some extra fudge I’ll send back with you.”

Not that I doubted she would, but that just confirms how well Lydia’s mom will fit in around here. Anyone that understands and participates in this kind of reciprocity will do well with the locals.

Every once in a while a new family moves in and they don’t send back their own cookies or treats after receiving them from others, and it leaves a bad taste in everyone’s mouth, making their ability to integrate into town more difficult. I don’t know if it’s just the way Lydia’s mom is, if she intuited the situation, or if one of her coworkers informed her of the normally unspoken expectations, but this will cement her place as a “good egg” in my mom’s world.

“We’re just about to watch a movie,” Lydia’s mom says as she serves up slices of pie for each of us. Passing my plate to me, she meets my eyes with a smile. “I hope you don’t mind Hallmark Christmas movies.”

She and Lydia both watch me closely as I respond. “Sounds festive.” I can’t say I enjoy those kinds of movies, but if it means I get to spend the evening curled up on the couch with my girlfriend, I’m not going to complain at all.

It turns out to be more entertaining to watch Lydia and her mom watch the movie than the movie itself. They get very wrapped up in the stories, even tearing up a little at the emotional parts, and while I don’t have the same reaction to the cheesy dialogue or contrived situations, I keep my opinions to myself.

Nora had commented that being with Lydia had already changed me for the better, and I guess this is just further proof of that. Historically, I spend the whole time heckling these types of movies, at least with my sisters. To the point that they won’t watch one with me around anymore, and if I walk in while they’re watching one, they pause it and throw pillows at me until I leave. So the fact that I’m not only willing but also capable of keeping those

thoughts to myself is just further proof that Lydia's good for me. I'm being less of an asshole in all areas of life.

When the movie's over and it's time for me to leave, Lydia walks me to the door while her mom busies herself with the dishes in the kitchen. "It's weird to think we won't be working together anymore," Lydia says quietly, her hand on the doorknob as I put on my jacket.

"It just means we'll have even more time together, though," I tell her, gathering up the small gift bag holding the fudge I'm to take back to my mom.

"At least for now," Lydia says, giving voice to the other half of that statement I'd left unspoken.

"At least for now," I agree. "When are you going to start looking for a new job?"

She pulls her sweater sleeves over her hands and twists her mouth to one side. I hold my breath waiting for her answer. Is it wrong that I hope she doesn't find something right away? Because then she'd be more open to my suggestion of joining me in Seattle and getting a job there. At least that's my hope. I still haven't brought up the idea. I have about a week and a half before I leave, so I need to broach the subject soonish. But if I do it too soon, I'm confident it'll all go wrong.

"Probably not until after New Year's," she says. "No one's likely to hire me before then anyway. And having a week off sounds really nice after the busy week we just finished."

I grin at the patent exhaustion in her voice. "No kidding. Let's spend that week together, okay?"

She nods, smiling back at me. "Sounds perfect."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lydia

THE WEEK BETWEEN CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S THAT I SPEND WITH Dylan is bliss. No responsibilities, no expectations, just us. We spend as much time in his sister's empty house as we do anywhere else, relishing in each other's company, each other's bodies. I can confidently say I've never felt like this before. It's exhilarating and restorative at the same time. He lets me talk through all my feelings about my parents' divorce, letting me vent and offering support and sympathy instead of words that are supposed to be supportive but actually aren't. The kinds of statements that start with, "Well, at least ..." that so many people want to offer, as though that makes my pain less valid, less real, less problematic.

When I first told him about the divorce that night we were stuck at Hudgins House, I half expected him to say something like that. And from the look on his face, it seemed like he wanted to but was holding back for one reason or another. But I haven't gotten that feeling from him since, so either I've gotten better at explaining myself, he's actually empathetic, or he at least allows me to feel whatever I feel without judgment. My money's on the last one, personally, but I'm just happy not to feel defensive about my feelings for the first time since that fateful FaceTime call when Mom and Dad announced their divorce.

We spend time with his family and my mom, too, though usually separately. His siblings are a lot of fun, and it's entertaining to watch them poke at each other, their affection clear despite—or maybe because of—their teasing. It's very different than the relationship I have with my sister, though I don't think ours is necessarily worse. Watching them together makes me determined to keep in touch with her more, though. We always got along growing up, and we text infrequently now that we're both out of the house, with a brief uptick after Mom and Dad announced their divorce. She also doesn't get why I'm so upset about their divorce, which made me not want to talk to her much afterward. I'd gone to her for commiseration and support, and while she'd offered it initially, I guess I eventually started annoying her, because one day she'd just sighed and said, "Lydia, I get that you're upset, but it's not like you're being asked to pick a favorite parent or to take sides. They grew apart. It's not your fault. Grow up."

And that stung enough that I stopped talking to her about it. She'd text every few weeks to see how I was doing, but I didn't give detailed answers.

Maybe with some time and space we can overcome that breakdown. I'd like to have a better relationship with her, even if it doesn't quite resemble the one Dylan has with his sisters and brother. And she did send me a supportive message after she learned I was taking time off from school and Dad was going to cut me off for it.

After dinner on Ty and Olivia's last night in town, Dylan and I ended up at Sarah's old house again. I'm lying naked on my stomach with my head pillowed on my folded arms in our pile of blankets while Dylan trails his fingers up and down my back.

He places a kiss on my shoulder. "Have you thought about where you might start looking for a job next week?" The question is quiet in the stillness surrounding us.

I shrug the shoulder farthest from him. "Not really. I figured I'd look around for Help Wanted signs, maybe ask your parents if they know of anyone who's hiring, plus the usual places online."

He grunts, and I turn my head to look at him, one eyebrow raised, amusement tugging at the corners of my mouth. "Since when are we back to grunting?"

That was his primary form of communication with me the first little while, but he hasn't grunted a whole lot since we got together. Not at me, at least.

Chuckling softly, he rolls onto his back, one arm flung over his head as he stares up at the ceiling. "Since I'm going to be leaving soon."

I turn onto my side so I can look at him more easily, a pang of anticipatory longing lancing through me. Especially after this week of spending nearly all our time together, him leaving will be difficult. "I've been trying not to think too much about that," I confess.

He looks at me, his eyes glassy. "Me either," he says, his voice husky. "But when I'm doing laundry and starting to pack my things to go back to school, it's hard not to." Rolling to his side, he props his head on his hand, studying me intently. Something cold slithers through my gut. Things have been going so well. He's been so supportive, so caring. Surely he won't ...

"I've been thinking," he says slowly, his eyes falling to where his hand plucks at the blankets beneath us.

"Uh-oh." I try to make it sound like a joke, but my tone lacks any of the lightness that would pull that off, sounding as dire as I feel.

His eyes dart to mine then away, and he huffs a laugh, though I don't think he's any more amused than I am. "I was just thinking that you could come back to Seattle with me." He holds up a hand to forestall the protest I'm already filling my lungs to issue. "Not back to school," he says, and I deflate. "I know you need to take time off so you can figure yourself out. I'm not saying you shouldn't do that. I get that you need time to decide what you want to study, and it's difficult to do that when you're just grinding through whatever track you're on. Even filling all your gen eds isn't going to give you the breathing room to do that. I get it." He looks at me for the last three words, putting weight on each one, his free hand covering mine. "I do. I'm not trying to force you to do anything you don't want to do. I was just thinking about how much I'll miss you when I have to go. And how few jobs there are here between the main tourist seasons. Seattle has a lot more jobs to choose from. It might ..." He hesitates, looking at my face, and I'm not sure what he sees, but he sighs, sitting up and pulling a blanket into his lap. "It might make sense," he says. "You don't have to answer me right now. But

think about it at least.”

Sitting up too, I face him, both of us cross-legged on the floor, blankets over our laps. I blow out a breath, looking at the blank walls, the gas fireplace currently blazing. We’re in the living room with the blinds closed. We have all the room we want to spread out in here. For some reason, going into a bedroom felt weird, and since there’s no furniture anyway, it didn’t seem to be a problem to just make our nest here, on the floor in front of the fire. It added another layer of romance to the whole thing.

“You make a good point about the job thing,” I say slowly, my voice croaking. I clear my throat and shake my head. When I speak again, though, my voice is no better. “But even if I don’t have a job here, I have a place to stay.” I meet his eyes. He’s looped his arms around his knees and he watches me, his face impassive, like he’s girding himself for my answer, because we both already know what it’ll be. “Where will I live in Seattle?” I spread my hands, palms up. “My dad’s not an option. Even if I wanted to, which I most assuredly don’t, he wouldn’t let me move there even if I found a job right away.”

“With me,” he answers immediately, his voice equally croaky. But when he clears his throat, it helps. “With me,” he repeats more clearly. “I have a roommate, but I’m sure it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“But what if it is?” I push. “And even if it isn’t, I’d still have to pitch in for rent and electricity and food ...” I wave a hand, encompassing all the bills that come with living. “Mom’s happy to let me stay as long as I need to decide what to do with myself. But we both know it’s not going to be permanent. It’s just ...” I lift my hands again and let them fall. “I need to be here,” I whisper. “And as much as I wish you could stay, I know you can’t.” There’s more to it, but I’m afraid saying it will hurt his feelings, even if it’s true. Living together so soon after starting our relationship seems like a recipe for disaster on the face of it. But it would also feel like trading one kind of dependence—on my father—for another. While it’s true that I’m currently still depending on my mom, it’s only so I can find my footing and become independent.

I want what we have to last, to be more than a Christmas break fling, and I think for that to be at all possible, I have to learn to be independent. I have to

figure out how to make it on my own. With friends and family and a boyfriend who love and support me, yes, but able to pay my bills and not be in a position where someone can tug the purse strings to get me to do what they want. Of course, I don't think Dylan would do that. But I didn't think my dad would either.

Blinking hard, he looks away, nodding. He draws in a shuddering breath. "I get it," he rasps. "I just had to try."

With a soft sound, I crawl over to him, climbing into his lap, cupping his face in my palms and kissing him. "I love that you wanted to try," I whisper between kisses. "Maybe eventually that can happen. But not yet. Not right now. It's too soon."

His arms wind around my back and he nods, nuzzling my throat, kissing my collarbone. I breathe a sigh of relief as he continues, his kisses and touches growing more hungry, more insistent, until he lays me down, rolls on a condom, and enters me in one swift stroke. Me turning down his suggestion hasn't broken us. We're still okay. And as we both reach our orgasms, first me and then him close behind, I hold onto that assurance.

We're still okay.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Dylan

MY LAST DAYS IN ARCADIAN FALLS ARE SPENT IN AN AGONY OF TRYING SO hard to hang onto each moment as it passes while dreading our upcoming separation. Every kiss, every touch, every time she laughs, I do my best to lock them away in the vault of my memory, ready for me to pull out on the long nights that will separate us all too soon.

It's ridiculous. I'm being ridiculous. It's too early to be this wrapped up in a girl, isn't it? The L-word presses at my brain, but I don't let it out, because I know it's way, way too soon.

And it's not like this is the end, even though it feels like *an* end. It's the end of this perfect beginning for us, and I worry what so much time apart might do to us.

We'll see each other again, I remind myself. Soon, most likely. Not every day, of course, but in a couple weeks. Three at the most. We'll have the weekend together. We've already made tentative plans for visits—tentative only because there are work and school schedules that need to be firmed up first—and discussed spending spring break together. There's a solid chance one or both of us will have to work on spring break, but neither of us says that out loud.

That seems to be our unspoken agreement—we don't look directly at the fact that I'm leaving. We don't mention it, except obliquely when discussing the next time we'll see each other after I go, both of us willing to pretend that everything is wonderful.

This lasts all the way until my last night. At that point, there's no help for it. We have to face the truth head on. I'm leaving in the morning.

We go out for dinner at The Filling Station, the same place we went that first night. It's less thrilling now that the Christmas decorations have been taken down. We've entered the long, dark, unrelieved winter. Sure, there'll be a few lifts for Valentine's Day and then St. Patrick's Day. But those don't have the same brightness and cheer as the big holidays, and the short-lived decor always feels paltry and contrived by comparison.

I won't be here for those anyway.

We're both quiet at dinner. Subdued. The reality of tomorrow pressing down on us, making our conversation stilted, our smiles grim and small.

Finally, with a sigh, Lydia sets down the fork she was using to pick at a wilted salad. "I hate this," she says.

I wipe my hands on my napkin and stretch one across the table toward her. "I'm sorry."

She takes my hand, tears glittering in her eyes when she looks at me. "I wish you didn't have to go."

I give her a sad smile. "I wish you could come with me."

"But we both know why all of that's impossible."

I nod. We do.

I haven't pressed her about moving with me since I brought it up, though some small part of me is still hoping she'll change her mind. Even if not tomorrow, in a week or a month or ... eventually.

"It's not forever," she whispers, as though she's speaking to that tiny spark of hope I can't snuff out.

Tightening my fingers around hers, I nod. “I know.”

When I let us into Sarah’s house and flip on the fireplace, I do my best to take my time with Lydia. Not that I’ve ever rushed with her, but tonight there’s an extra need to be careful and thorough.

I undress her slowly, only taking my mouth from hers when absolutely necessary. She seems to feel the same sense of urgent slowness, because her mouth on mine, her hands on my skin, are just as deliberate, the pressure a little extra as though that will embed her touch so it can’t fade, like a metaphysical tattoo.

When we’re both naked, I sink to the floor, kissing her belly, then the top of each thigh, my hands cupping her ass, bringing her close to my mouth. Her hands thread through my hair, clutching the strands, using me to keep her balance when I guide one of her legs over my shoulder, opening her to me.

She gasps when my tongue makes contact, her legs shaking as I lick and suck at all her most sensitive places until her fingers tighten painfully in my hair.

“Down,” she whispers. “I need to lie down.”

Reluctantly, I let her lower her leg, my hands remaining in contact with her skin as she nearly collapses on the floor, her skin limned by the firelight, giving her an ethereal glow since it’s the only light in the room right now.

I follow her, skimming my hands up the insides of her thighs, using my fingers and thumb to give her pleasure, watching her as she holds herself up on her elbows, her head falling back between her shoulders, her hips lifting, greedy for me.

As much as I love watching her fall apart for me, I need to taste her, to feel her pulsing against my tongue as she comes, because I’m not sure when I’ll get the chance again. With my fingers inside her still, I dip my head and use my tongue to draw tiny circles on her clit. Her response is immediate and electrifying—a loud gasp, her thighs tightening on my shoulders, her hips moving. This is always one of my favorite parts with her. She’s so responsive, so uninhibited in her reactions, that I always know exactly when I’ve hit the right spot.

I keep up with what I’m doing, knowing it’s what she needs to find her

release, and soon enough, I'm rewarded with a series of increasing gasps and groans, soft, high pitched pants that tell me she's almost there as her thighs seem to pull impossibly tight around me, the muscles in her legs straining, and then she lets out a cry that almost sounds like surprise, and her pussy clamps on my fingers as she comes.

Staying with her, I pump my fingers slowly, flattening my tongue to spread out the stimulation to keep her orgasm going without overwhelming her until she collapses back on the ground, her arm covering her face, her chest heaving like she just sprinted a mile.

I kiss my way up her body, dragging my mouth along her torso, giving it a quick swipe with my hand to clear away the majority of her juices before settling over her.

Reaching for me, she wraps her arms around my shoulders, her thighs cradling my hips, her face soft in the firelight. "You're amazing," she whispers.

I kiss her softly. "You're pretty amazing yourself."

We kiss for long moments until she's grinding against me again, and I sit up to put on the condom, arranging her in my lap so she's spread out in front of me and line myself up with her opening. I love watching her face as I enter her, love seeing the play of emotions there as I slide home into her sweet warmth.

God, I love *her*.

Clamping down on those words, I lace my fingers with hers, leaning over her so I can kiss her, showing her with my body how I feel because I know that saying the words is too much. I know that loving her the way she needs means letting her have the time and space to figure out the direction for her life without her feeling like I'm pressuring her. And a declaration of love now, when we're on the cusp of saying goodbye, might feel like I'm trying to manipulate her into joining me. While I'd clearly love it if she came back to Seattle with me, I want it to be her choice. Her decision. Because she loves me as much as I love her and because that's where she wants and needs to be. Not to make me happy because I'm in love with her.

Spurred on by the thought, the need to show her how I feel since I can't tell her—not now—I slip one hand between us, rubbing her clit with my thumb. She adjusts, her fingers joining mine, at first trying to get me in the right spot, but after a moment, I let her take over. Because she knows what she needs better than I do.

When I fold her legs back toward her torso, changing our angle, she gasps, and I know that was the right move. I keep her there, plowing into her with long, steady strokes as her fingers fly over her clit, her breath finding the cadence of her pleasure, and when she tips over the edge again, I follow her, her pussy milking my cock, her orgasm triggering my own.

After the last of the electric shocks peter out, I collapse next to her, pulling her close and kissing her shoulder, letting out a contented sigh, the words, *I love you*, pounding in my head in time with my heart.

So I wrap myself around her, hoping her heart understands the beat of my own, even if neither of us can voice it. Yet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lydia

EVERYTHING SUCKS.

Dylan's been gone for over a week, and while we talk and text every day, it's not the same at all.

The magical realm of Arcadian Falls has lost all of its charm for me. The Christmas lights are off, the ChristmasFest space sits empty, only the Christmas Emporium is still open, harkening back those halcyon days of Christmas cheer where everything felt like a Hallmark movie come to life.

It took me most of the first week to even start looking for another job, and that was mostly motivated by guilt when Mom would ask about my day each evening and seemed disappointed after the fifth day in a row where I regaled her with thrilling tales of sleeping until noon and camping out on the couch watching movies and eating cereal. So on day six, I set an alarm and got up before she left, ate real food, and left the condo, wandering downtown to see if there were any Help Wanted signs posted anywhere.

I've done that every day since, varying my route slightly in hopes that I'll have missed a business that's not on one of the main roads, because the main roads are populated mostly with restaurants and tourist shops, and this is not the season for that.

On Tuesday, I wander into the Christmas Emporium, more for the shot of nostalgia—can it be termed nostalgia when the thing you’re remembering was only a few weeks ago?—than because I expect to find a job there.

Sarah sits behind the counter, brightening at the sight of me. “Hey, there! Haven’t seen you in a while.”

I give her a wan smile. “Yeah. I’ve been …” I wave a hand vaguely, as though that’s some kind of excuse.

She chuckles softly, propping her elbow on the counter and her chin on her hand. “How are you holding up?”

I shrug, wandering past the displays at the front of the shop. There’s a section of 2023 ornaments on sale for half off. “I’ll survive,” I say in a voice that sounds like I mean the opposite. “Keeping busy?”

Another soft chuckle from Sarah. “It’s, as you might expect, a slow time of year for the shop. But yes, actually, I’m still busy. I catch up on all the things I couldn’t do during the crazy busy season once January hits. There are actually people who prefer shopping for Christmas decor this time of year, taking advantage of the discounts.”

I nod. “Makes sense,” I murmur, looking at a display of vintage style glass ornaments.

“Plus I can analyze our sales data, see what sold better this year, what performed worse, compare things to the previous years and how things did across the year as a whole, and make plans for the next year.”

Brows raised hopefully, I glance up at her. “Need any help with that by any chance? That sounds like a lot of work.”

She gives me a rueful smile. “Sorry. I already let my seasonal staff go. I keep them on a little longer than the elves, because people still buy Christmas things the week between Christmas and New Year’s, but it’s late enough in January I don’t need much help. Mom and Dad are mostly retired, but they cover a shift here and there when I can’t make it in, and I have someone who works weekends for me who’s been here for years. If you’re still around in the fall, though, I’ll keep you in mind.”

I bob my head, swallowing down my disappointment. I knew it was a long shot, after all. “Thanks,” I croak, and she makes a soft sound of sympathy.

“Hard time finding a new job?”

I shrug, touching one of the wooden ornaments on an end cap. “I just started looking a few days ago ...”

She fills in the gaps from the way I trail off. “But after finding the elf job pretty much immediately, that feels discouraging I bet.” At my nod, she screws up her face, but then shakes her head. Picking up a pen and a pad of sticky notes, she sets them on the counter. “I can’t think of anyone off hand who’s hiring, but I can ask around.” She flashes me a grin. “Write down your number for me. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks,” I murmur. “I really appreciate it.” I scribble my number on the pad and pass it back to her.

She studies me for a moment. “Want to grab a coffee or something later? I close at five this time of year. You could meet me here then and we could walk to the coffee shop together.”

I open my mouth to say no, but then at the last second change my mind and nod. “Yeah. That would be nice.” I could use a friend in Arcadian Falls. Why not Sarah?

It takes longer to find a job than I was hoping—not until the second week of February. I see Dylan twice in that time when he comes home Friday night and leaves Sunday around noon. The visits are fast and furious and not nearly enough to leave either of us satisfied. Our conversations afterward always center on how short those weekends are and how we wish they were longer.

The whole time, I keep waiting for Dylan to bring up me moving to Seattle again since the chances of me finding a job there are much higher. I know he’s right, too, because I’ve looked. Granted, none of them are fabulous, but if I’m splitting rent and utilities with two other people, it might be doable. It wouldn’t leave a lot of room for saving, though. And that’s a big part of the

reason I don't tell Dylan about my job searches there. That and I feel like the only reason I'm even considering it is because I know it would make him happy.

He's unfailingly supportive, though, telling me that I'm lucky my mom is happy to have me around, that he knows I'll find something as soon as possible, that in the meantime I can use the time to research different programs and degree plans, figure out what I want to do with myself.

And he's right. So I spend time at the local library, small as it is. I even drop Mom off at work a couple days a week and drive over to Inglewood to see if I could find a job there and spend time browsing their slightly larger library that's open more often. While those two libraries are part of a much larger network that allows me to request books and pick them up at my local branch, browsing the online catalogue isn't the same as wandering the stacks to see what might interest me.

I check out a variety of books on everything from woodworking to psychology and self help to fashion history.

The self help is more for actually helping myself and not because I think psychology is a viable career field for me. But figuring out and moving past my people pleasing tendencies seems like it'll only be positive in the long run, and if I'm taking this time to figure myself out, that seems like a good start.

It's Sarah who finally comes through for me, calling me up, her voice vibrating with excitement. "How do you feel about animals?"

"Uh ... what? Baby animals are cute, I guess. What kind of animals?"

"All kinds," Sarah says. "Dr. Vanoger is looking for front office help. It's officially temporary while his usual receptionist is on maternity leave. But word is that she's likely to want to stay home with the baby full time, or, at worst, come back only part time until the kid's in school. So it'd be full time to start, and maybe part time. But by the time she's back, you could supplement with another part time gig somewhere else. And even if it's only temporary, it'll last until people start hiring for summer, and who knows what you'll be doing after that, right?"

Her excitement is infectious. “Oh, that’s perfect. Thank you so much, Sarah. You’re the best.”

“I know,” she preens, then laughs. “Okay, I’ll text you the office number so you can schedule an interview. He works with all kinds of animals, from family pets to livestock, so you definitely won’t get bored. I told him you were a whiz at charming kids and could deal with technology like a pro. I hope I didn’t lie about that last part.”

I laugh. “I’m sure I’ll figure it out. It’s basic computer stuff, right? They’re not expecting me to be tech support.”

She laughs too. “I mean, if you could do tech support, he’d probably want to keep you forever, but no, it’s just basic stuff. He’s a bit of a Luddite, though, so as long as you don’t make *him* deal with the computer, he’ll love you.”

“Got it.”

“I’m not going to say it’s a done deal,” she cautions. “You still have to do well at the interview. But call now. It’ll show that you’re excited about the job, and that’ll score points with the whole staff. And if you don’t have a lot of experience with animals, talk about how you always wanted a puppy but your mom said no or something. They’re all animal lovers. You need to be one too. Or at least convince them you are.”

Laughing, I nod. “Okay. Let me hang up then so I can call now.”

“Right! Come by when I close. I’ll buy you a coffee to celebrate!”

Dr. Vonager looks me up and down at my spot behind the front desk, his travel kit in hand. “I have an emergency call,” he says without preamble. “You’ll come with me.”

Surprised, I look around to see if he might be talking to someone else, but Sharon, the tech who sits at the desk when she’s not with a patient, is doing a dental cleaning. There’s no one here but me. “Really? But what about the phones?”

He waves his free hand. “Send ‘em to voicemail. We’ll call them when we get back and schedule them then. Sharon can hold down the fort on her own more easily than I can deal with an injured calf without help.”

When I stand, he looks me over, his eyes sharply assessing, then gives a nod as though to say, *You’ll do.*

I scribble a sign on a piece of paper that says, “Out for emergency. Sharon will get you for your appointment.” Then I set the phones to ring straight to voicemail and hurry after Dr. Vonager, grabbing my jacket and climbing into his truck.

He looks me over again when I buckle my seatbelt, his dark brows pulled together in consternation. “Do you have boots?”

My brows jump. “I have snow boots at home.” It’s early April, and the snow’s mostly gone except for the gravel covered remains of large berms left by the plows. I wear sneakers to work with my scrubs.

He nods. “What’s your address. You’ll need them.”

After picking up my boots—where I also change into jeans and an old sweater at Dr. Vonager’s orders while he waits in the truck—he updates me on the situation we’re heading to. “The Johnsons keep a small herd for milk and beef. One of their new calves caught himself on some barbed wire and cut himself up real good. I’ll need you to help hold him down and keep him calm while I work on him.”

I swallow down my anxiety and nod. “Okay.”

He nods too. “You’ll be fine,” he assures me. “You’ll probably end up covered in mud, but I’ve seen you with some of the skittish animals—and skittish people. The calf should make it, we just need to close up some of the deep wounds and make sure he doesn’t get infected.”

I nod again, feeling more confident. “Okay.” This time, my voice is firm.

As predicted, I end up covered in mud and straw from kneeling on the floor of the barn, draping my weight over the calf while I gave it pets and made soothing noises. Dr. Vonager gave it something to help it stay calm, but out in the barn, he said he couldn’t put it all the way to sleep. Too dangerous.

It took a long time for him to clean and suture the wounds, one of them deep enough to cut into the muscle beneath, plus cleaning a lot of surface scratches that I covered with ointment at his directions.

As hard as it was, it was also thrilling. Exhilarating. And when I climb back into Dr. Vonager's truck, I can't keep the smile from my face.

He gives me a rare smile of his own. "Feeling pretty good about your day's work?" he asks.

I nod. "I feel bad for the calf, of course. Poor thing. But it feels good to know that we helped him, and he'll be okay because of us." I tilt my head from side to side. "Well, because of you."

"Hey," he grouses. "Don't sell yourself short. My job would've been much harder if you hadn't been there. That calf is basically Sean's pet at this point." Sean is the Johnson's ten-year-old son. "Normally Dan could've helped hold the animal, but he's at work, and Amanda and Sean were too distraught to help. Sure, one or both of them could've helped hold the calf, but their anxiety would've made it more distressed. You have a soothing presence. Animals respond well to that. And you helped with the smaller wounds. That's important too."

"How did you become a vet?" I ask.

He glances at me out of the corner of his eye as he takes us back to the state highway that leads to Arcadian Falls, his mouth hitching up in a tiny smile, and he tells me about growing up on a farm and deciding to become a vet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Dylan

SCHOOL PROVES TO BE MY SALVATION FROM THE AGONY OF MISSING LYDIA. Of course, school is also the reason I can't be in Arcadian Falls with her. And peripherally the reason she can't come to Seattle with me.

But it gives me something to focus on so I'm not a blithering, whimpering wreck, and talking about my classes and work gives me something to tell her about each night. And I enjoy hearing about her job too. It's clear she likes it, though I'm not sure if that's her usual sunny disposition, or if she genuinely likes working at the vet's office more than she'd like to work anywhere.

I also hear regular updates about my older sister. I'm still uncertain how I feel about her befriending Lydia—mostly because I know Sarah loves nothing more than to tell embarrassing childhood stories about me—but I'm glad Lydia has a friend, even if that does mean yet another tie to Arcadian Falls. The more firmly embedded she becomes, the less likely it is that she'll ever leave. I grew up there. I understand the hold that place can have on people.

I'm sitting at my desk finishing up some homework before dinner when my phone rings. I smile when I see it's Lydia calling, even though it's earlier than our usual phone calls.

"I've figured it out," she says as soon as I answer.

My heart rate picks up at the certainty in her voice, but I tamp down my budding excitement. Maybe she's talking about ... today's Wordle puzzle or the way to make Mom's secret apple pie recipe and not her plans for school. "Oh yeah?" I keep my tone light and inviting.

"Yeah. I'm gonna be a vet."

I pause, blinking into the silence of that declaration. "A veterinarian?"

"Yes!" She excitedly tells me about the emergency call she went on today and how amazing it felt to help the injured calf and how she talked to Dr. Vonager about becoming a vet and what it would take. "Then I came home, researched schools, and looked at what I'd need to study. I'm going to change my major to biology and come back to school in the fall."

"Wait. Here? You're coming back here? In the fall?" While that's still ages away, it's a definite time period.

"Yes!" she squeals. "And actually, I might come back sooner. Since I took a semester off and my original major was business, I'll need to catch up on a few things, and taking summer classes would help a lot. Dr. Vonager says he has some friends in Seattle, that I'd mostly be helping with pampered pets and not livestock there, but he's sure he could get me a job with one of them."

"Oh my god, Lydia, that's amazing," I breathe, hope and relief and happiness for her, for us, filling my chest. "You're sure this is what *you* want?" I ask after a beat. "To come back sooner and take summer classes?"

"God, I love you for asking that," she breathes, and my own breath freezes in my chest. "Yes," she assures me, "this is exactly what I want. I know it's taken me a bit to figure it out, but now that I have, I have no doubts at all. I want to be a vet. And I want to be with *you*."

"I love you too," I blurt out, so happy to finally be able to say those words. She laughs, and I join in, so full of happiness and joy that we can't help it.

"I wish I could kiss you right now," she says.

Pulling my phone away from my face, I look at the time. It's just after six thirty. "I can be there in about three hours," I tell her.

“What?” she squeaks. “But what about school?”

“It’ll still be here when I get back. We need to celebrate.”

On my way to Arcadian Falls, I call and book a hotel room. I’m spending the night with my girlfriend, and I don’t care what anyone has to say about it.

I text her when I pull into her parking lot, not wanting to scare her mom if she’s still awake or wake her up by knocking if she’s in bed already, and Lydia tells me to come on up.

She’s waiting for me in the open door when I get up to her floor, her face glowing with happiness, and I wrap her up in my arms, pick her up and spin her around before setting her on her feet and kissing her.

We break apart when her mom clears her throat, but she’s smiling. “Nice to see you again, Dylan.”

“Nice to see you too.” Looking down at Lydia, I ask, “Ready?” I’d called her after booking the hotel room to let her know the plan.

She nods, picks up a duffle bag I hadn’t noticed, then gives her mom a hug.

“I’m proud of you, baby girl,” I hear her mom whisper.

“Thanks, Mom,” she whispers back.

I’m tired from the drive, but wired from the coffee I drank on the way and the thrill of being here with Lydia.

Checking into the hotel seems to take forever, but then we’re walking to the elevator and taking it to the second floor hand in hand. As soon as we’re in the room, we drop our bags, shuck our coats, and we’re in each other’s arms, kissing the way we wanted to earlier but couldn’t with her mom as our audience. We make it to the bed in a tangle of limbs and half pulled off clothes—my pants are undone and one of my arms is out of its sleeve, my shirt covering half my chest while Lydia shoves it out of the way to get her hands on me. She’s kicked off one shoe and I’ve pushed her pants down to

her thighs, but haven't managed to get them down more.

She falls onto the bed with a laugh, toeing off the other shoe while I make quick work of relieving her of her pants and panties. She takes care of her top half while I get out of my clothes, fishing the strip of condoms out of my pocket that I put in there before I left Seattle.

"God, I've missed you," I tell her, breathing the words into her skin.

"I've missed you too." She wraps herself around me, taking me into her body when we're both so ready we'll burst if we don't join together, pressing kisses and whispering words of love as we celebrate her decision and what it'll mean for us in the future.

After we've both cleaned up, I wrap her in my arms under the blankets, sighing with contentment and satisfaction. "I love you," I say for the hundredth time.

She kisses my chest, and I feel her lips curving into a smile. "I love you too."

EPILOGUE

Lydia

MOVING INTO THE DORMS FEELS LIKE A TRIUMPH. MAYBE THAT'S SILLY, BUT that's how it is. My best friend Sylvia lives down the hall, both of us in single rooms this time, which is so much nicer than the shared room we suffered through as freshmen. She's thrilled that I'm back at school, and even though I know it'll be challenging, I am too.

I survived my summer classes, after all. I only took two, but it was a good reintroduction to school, and since I was working part time as well, I'm glad I didn't take more than that. I'll still end up graduating a semester later than I would've if I hadn't taken a break, but those courses mean I'm less behind than I would've been otherwise.

True to his word, Dr. Vonager got me a job at a vet clinic here. I'm working the front desk during their evening and weekend clinic hours, and I'll continue doing that through the school year.

Dylan, of course, came to help me get moved, along with my mom and my sister Brooke. We've gotten closer over the last few months. She was excited and supportive of my plans once I told her about them in the spring, offering to let me stay with her for the summer until I could move into the dorms.

Of course, she's the one who told Dad about my plans, too, which I was less

thrilled about. “He wants what’s best for you,” she told me when I asked her what she was thinking. “And vet school’s bound to be expensive. If he wants to give you money, let him. You’ve made it clear that you won’t let him boss you around. There’s no need to cut off your nose to spite your face just to prove a point, though.”

I’d grumbled, but ultimately came around to her point of view. If Dad wants to help pay for school since I’m going again—even though he said he wouldn’t pay for anything ever again if I didn’t *stay* in school, the liar—who am I to tell him no? If he changes his mind later on, I’ll figure it out. Apparently veterinarian is an acceptable career choice to him, even if it’s not his first choice of business or law. And since I’m working, I’ll have more money for savings or to splurge on a fun night out with Dylan when I want to without having to worry about anyone griping at me about it.

Dylan brings in sodas and pizza as Mom, Brooke, and I finish unpacking boxes and putting my clothes away in the closet and dresser.

“You know, Lydia,” Brooke says, taking the pizza from Dylan, “I’m really beginning to like this boyfriend of yours.”

“Beginning to?” Dylan questions.

Stepping to his side, I stick out my tongue at my older sister. “Get your own boyfriend,” I tell her, and she laughs.

Brooke loops her arm through Mom’s. “Nah. I’m gonna stick with Mom on the single ladies’ track for now, I think.”

Mom looks pointedly away, and I hide my smile behind the can of soda Dylan hands me. Mom’s been seeing a lot of a certain realtor lately, and I think it’s bumping her off the single ladies’ track, but if she’s not ready to share, I’m not going to out her.

Dylan holds up his soda. “To Lydia,” he says, “and the future.”

We all clink cans and take drinks, and I feel so happy I could burst. When I left here nine months ago, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be back, and if I did return, how I’d feel about it. And now I can’t imagine wanting anything else.

Thank you so much for reading The Grumpiest Elf!

Want more of Dylan and Lydia?

[Click here to download a free bonus scene!](#)

DEAR READER

Thank you so much for reading Dylan and Lydia's story! I hope you had as much fun reading it as I did creating it, and I hope it got you into the Christmas mood.

If this is your first visit to Arcadian Falls, be sure to go back and catch Sarah and Shane's story in [A Very Grumpy Christmas!](#) You won't be sorry, I promise.

If you're not quite ready to let go of Dylan and Lydia, be sure to [download their free bonus epilogue](#). On that page, you can choose to get my emails as well (though it's not required. If you don't check the box, Bookfunnel only uses your email to deliver the epilogue). If you want to stay up to date on future visits to Arcadian Falls and other stories, definitely sign up for emails!

If you've read all my Christmas books, check out [Off Limits](#), or keep reading for an excerpt!

Jerica

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While writing is often a solitary endeavor, it takes more than just me to bring a book from concept to print. (Or e-print, as the case may be.)

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And to you, dear reader, for choosing these characters to vacation with for a while. I hope it's fun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerica MacMillan has been reading romance since she stumbled into the paperback section of the library as a middle schooler. And it's been an ongoing love affair ever since!

You can frequently find her sipping coffee out of snarky mugs while dreaming up stories and trying to bring them to life on the page. Join her Book Club at www.jericamacmillan.com/book-club and get a free book!

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Here are the best places to keep up with me and what's new:

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You're also invited to join my closed reader group on Facebook, [Jerica MacMillan's Book Junkies](#).

Or, if you want to speak to me directly, feel free to email me at contact@jericamacmillan.com.

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Keep reading for a sneak peek of Off Limits

Chapter One

Ellie

My flip-flops slap my heels as I march down the sidewalk to my brother's house. I know he won't be thrilled to see me, but that's just too freakin' bad. It's late. I'm tired. The library just closed, and I have nowhere else to go.

The perfect end to the perfect evening.

Fortunately, he only lives about a half mile from campus, and even though walking alone at just after midnight on a weekend might be questionable from a safety perspective, wandering campus alone would definitely be worse. And while I could probably call my brother and have him come get me, that would give him the opportunity to argue with me about my choice of destination—namely, his house. Surprise is definitely the better tactic.

And let's not discuss why I've spent most of my Friday night—the Friday of the first week of school, no less—in the library. We'll ignore that right now. We'll also ignore the reality of Cal's reaction when I show up knocking on his door in the middle of the night. Not that I'm worried he's asleep already. He won't be. He and his roommate will probably be up playing video games. At least that's what I assume they do on the weekends, especially during the football season when there are rules about parties and alcohol consumption. And when recovering from the grueling start-of-season practice schedule. That's what he did in high school, anyway, and I haven't noticed any marked changes in his interests since then.

I managed to avoid him most of my freshman year—both at his insistence and for my own sense of self-preservation—and I'm as irritated as he will be that this is the inauspicious start of my sophomore year.

To distract myself from Cal's likely reaction at seeing me, I start making a list of phrases that never end well.

First up is the infamous, *How bad can it be?* Plus its cousin, *How hard can it be?* Everyone knows those lead nowhere good.

Next is, *Hold my beer.* Often uttered by drunken idiots immediately prior to undertaking something spectacularly idiotic.

And my newest entry to the list? *Let me know if you need the room.* I made the mistake of saying this to my roommate last week, and she's taking advantage of the offer already. Which is fine, or it would be, if she only needed it for a few hours like I thought. But the few hours I expected appear to be stretching into all night.

Technically, it's not supposed to be all night. It's just until she tells me it's safe to return. But after five hours, I still haven't gotten the all clear.

Autumn is ... lovely, but a little eccentric. And tonight she tells me she's doing some kind of ritual to manifest the right energy for the year. She mentioned it having to be tonight because of the moon phase and chakra alignment or something that I didn't quite follow. I think she might've also mentioned needing a guy? But I might've misunderstood that part. When she gets excited, she starts talking fast and doesn't quite realize that not everyone grew up meditating naked under the full moon and reading tarot cards.

I met Autumn during freshman orientation last year, and thought she was fun, but we really hit it off when she wandered past my room and caught me changing the weekly quote on the whiteboard on my door. I started fancy lettering in high school while doodling in the margins of my notes. I'd pick an important word and embellish it. Eventually I branched out into calligraphy and various other forms of hand lettering. Doing it on a white board isn't quite the same as on paper, but it was a fun way to make my room unique. She *loved* it, told me how she'd go out of her way to walk past my room just to see what new thing I'd put up but she hadn't realized it was me. And we've been friends ever since. Anyone who gushes over my art is good people in my book. She's open and bubbly and pulls me out of my shell in ways I didn't know I needed before meeting her. I've spent my entire life living in the shadow of my parents' expectations. Autumn doesn't seem to have any such constraints, and part of me hopes that by living together, some of her adventurous spirit will rub off on me. But being forced to stand up for myself to my brother the first weekend of school isn't exactly what I had in mind ...

Turning into my brother's walkway, I sigh with relief that I'm finally here, pleased that the porch light is on and there's a light glowing through the closed curtains of the front window. It's a cute little red brick house with a tidy front yard. That must be Simon's doing, because I know Cal only does yard work when forced to. Or maybe Simon forces Cal to help. That thought makes me smile.

Two steps up and I'm in the sheltered alcove that houses their door. Steeling myself for Cal's irritation, I raise my hand and knock firmly on the oak door. The sound of footsteps on creaky floorboards precedes the door opening, and I'm face to face with a chest. A solid, heavily muscled, naked chest. Perfectly rounded pecs dusted with dark hair and tipped with flat, dusky nipples a few shades darker than his tan skin fill my vision. His flat belly flexes under my gaze, muscles standing out in sharp relief under the porch light, more hair surrounding his belly button and dipping below the waistband of the gray sweats hanging off his narrow hips.

Swallowing hard and licking my lips, I don't allow my gaze to dip farther south, knowing there'll be thick thighs below the soft fabric. This isn't my first encounter with Simon, and I *might* have Googled him to find pics of him in his football uniform after I first met him, but it is my first encounter with his naked chest. I thought he was mouthwatering fully clothed, but I was in no way prepared for *this*.

I force myself to drag my gaze to Simon's face. Not that it's any less droolworthy than his chest. Square jaw covered in thick scruff, high cheekbones, full lips just shy of being pouty, a straight nose, dark eyes, and thick, level brows. His hair's longer on top than the last time I saw it, but he has the sides trimmed close.

This guy. *Damn.*

The first time I met him, I immediately developed a crush, which I know would annoy Cal to no end. And while I love nothing more than to torture my brother—and let's face it, he started it when we were

little kids by constantly bossing me around and picking on me—somehow visibly drooling over his friend seems a step too far. So I do my best to rein it in and be normal. Or at least as normal as possible. As I'm sure Cal would love to say, I'm anything but normal.

God, and the last time I saw him, I actually *hugged* him. Like a moron. I'd come over so Cal could drive us home for Christmas last year, and before I left, I hugged Simon goodbye. I don't even know why. It just seemed like the thing to do. I'd been hugging my friends goodbye all morning and the day before, and then I'd gotten to Cal's place and Simon was there and we were leaving him behind, so I hugged him. And then Cal berated me for it for the first thirty minutes of the drive to Oregon, and then off and on the rest of the break. In fact, he brought it up *again* before he headed back to Spokane when practices started up a few weeks ago. Heat flares in my cheeks at the memory.

Simon crosses his gigantic arms over his gorgeous chest I'm definitely not ogling—nope, because I'm looking at his face. It's not my fault my peripheral vision is in perfect working order. His biceps and shoulders bunch and flex with the movement, and I can't help it if my gaze dips to take it in. He's moving. My eyes are drawn to movement. And beauty. And ...

His brows draw together over chocolate brown eyes as he tips his head back to survey me. "Ellie? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, uh, well," I stammer like I'm a moron who's never been asked a question, never seen a hot guy, and never seen a hot guy without a shirt on. For the record, I've seen both those things before and managed not to stammer when asked a question.

Sighing, I rub my forehead, the closest thing I can come to slapping myself in the face and covering my face in mortification at the same time. "Sorry, Simon. I know Cal will be pissed I'm here, but my roommate's—"

Simon steps back and gestures me in with a jerk of his head.

Tentatively, I step inside the door, standing in the long hallway that leads to the back of the house. Peering into the living room, I'm surprised when I don't find Cal on the couch. "Where's Cal?" I ask, turning to face Simon and pretend I'm not distracted by his bare chest.

Simon shrugs those massive shoulders. "Out. Have a seat." And with that, he disappears down the hall.

I lean to the side as far as I can to peer after him without actually following him, because that would make me a creeper, and I'm not. But I *am* mystified, especially since he's said maybe five words to me. What's he doing?

With a shrug, I settle into a corner of the couch, because he said to have a seat, so I guess he's okay with me hanging out, even if Cal's not here.

He reappears a moment later, and much to my disappointment, has a gray Marycliff football T-shirt now covering that glorious chest.

The couch creaks as Simon settles his large frame as far away from me as possible. I dart glances at him out of the corner of my eye as he picks up the remote and presses play on the paused show.

"Oh!" I sit up a little straighter and tuck my feet under me as the first episode of *Cobra Kai* comes to life. "This is a great show. Are you just watching it for the first time?"

The look he throws my way seems tinged with amusement, even though his answer is characteristically brief and could be interpreted as annoyance. "Yes. Shh."

I make a show of zipping my lips as I settle back into my seat. Maybe this night isn't shaping up so bad after all. Watching a great show with a hot guy at his house? Yes, please.

And for at least a little while, I'll pretend that he isn't my brother's friend and this isn't my brother's

house and that Simon might actually talk to me and think me pretty and clever and funny. So basically, pretend that I actually have more than a snowflake's chance in hell of landing Simon.

I'm not stupid. I know he'd never go for me. He's a senior. He's a football player. He's my brother's best friend.

And I'm the annoying little sister.

I know how life works. But for a few minutes, I'm just going to let myself believe in possibilities.

That's what Autumn's whole point for tonight was, after all. Manifesting what you want for the semester. And what I want is to have some fun. And ideally I'd like that fun to be with someone who looks like Simon. So even if I'm not chanting naked in the moonlight, I soaked up some moonlight on the walk over here, which according to Autumn is important somehow, so I'll take that energy and direct it toward what I want.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and put my desires out into the universe. Fun with a hot guy. Sounds like a great plan to me.

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