

ISABELLE GRACE

A Christmas
Changes
Everything

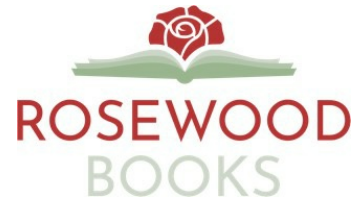
A
Hickory Ridge
Novel



A CHRISTMAS CHANGES EVERYTHING

A HICKORY RIDGE NOVEL

ISABELLE GRACE



For everyone who enjoys the magic of Christmas—this one's for you!

Published by Rosewood Books

Copyright © 2023 by Isabelle Grace

Isabelle Grace has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work.

ISBN (eBook): 978-1-83756-284-8
ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-83756-285-5
ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-83756-286-2

A CHRISTMAS CHANGES EVERYTHING is a work of fiction. People, places, events, and situations are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Cover Couture
www.bookcovercouture.com

CONTENTS

Rosewood Books

Foreword

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Rosewood Newsletter

We hope you enjoyed this book

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also By Isabelle Grace

JOIN THE ROSEWOOD MAILING LIST



You will be the first to learn about new releases *plus* the many FREE and discounted Kindle books we offer!

bit.ly/3x2haUb

Dear Readers,

I hope you're enjoying the Hickory Ridge series as much as I'm enjoying writing it. This book began as a novella entitled *Mistletoe and Holly* and was part of a collection of holiday stories where all proceeds went to charity. After the collection's limited run, I published the novella on Amazon and used it as a reader magnet.

Since its original publication, the book has been rebranded, retitled, and undergone changes so it fits into the Hickory Ridge series. Though it's longer and a bit steamier, the main and secondary characters from the novella haven't changed. There are additional peeps now included, some that are new and a few we've met in previous Hickory Ridge novels.

And it's still the Christmas season—my favorite. Oh, and even though it's not in the title anymore, there's plenty of mistletoe, too. I hope you enjoy *A Christmas Changes Everything* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Happy Holidays,

Isabelle

Hickory Ridge Welcomes YOU!

“**G**uess we’ll see about that,” Chace Dutton muttered to himself as he drove past the billboard-sized greeting and crossed into the place he’d once called home.

Probably still could if he wanted, since his stint in the military and his current position with Steele Security and Investigations prevented him from settling down permanently anywhere else in the world.

For the last fifteen years, Chace had lived out of a rucksack, duffel bag, footlocker, or, if *really* fortunate, an actual suitcase. The efficiency apartment he kept between Langley and Dulles was little more than a place to crash between assignments. But given a choice, he would have preferred the twenty-minute drive to his hole in the wall than the hour to his sister’s multi-level home.

Same state. Totally different vibe.

Big city and a stone’s throw from the nation’s capital versus rural, small-town Americana, the latter the only place Chace had ever considered home.

As he drove down the main street that connected Beaumont and Sheridan, the twin towns comprising Hickory Ridge, Chace wasn’t surprised to see white lights outlining every building, twinkling garlands of holly circling each lamppost, and the huge, ornately decorated but unlit Douglas fir erected in the town square, which was more of a circle, at the exact spot where Beaumont joined with Sheridan.

From what his sister had told him, the two unincorporated towns had

finally become the corporation of Hickory Ridge, with one mayor, council members from each town, united public utility companies, and county fire, police, and EMS departments. The unofficial town motto was *Teamwork Makes the Dream Work*.

Not exactly original, but one hundred percent accurate and fitting for the twin towns nestled in the foothills of the majestic Blue Ridge Mountains.

His stomach growled as he rounded the circle. Luckily, The Greasy Spoon was still open, and what better way to face whatever awaited him at his sister's than with a bowl of Culver Duncan's homemade chili warming him up from the inside?

Even though no one was behind him, Chace signaled and pulled into a parking spot. After shutting off the engine, he grabbed his wallet off the passenger seat, tucking it into his pocket as he headed into the diner.

If he didn't know any better, he would have thought he'd walked right into the 1950's. Black and white checkered flooring. Formica and chrome tables and countertops. Red vinyl booth, chair, and stool seats. Even a three-shelf display case filled with slices of various types of pie and cake sat at the counter's far end, and an old-time jukebox played "I'll Be Home for Christmas" in the corner.

Chace guessed he was.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," a pink uniform-clad waitress greeted him in a voice reminiscent of a three-pack-a-day smoker.

Thelma Duncan, Culver's wife and co-owner of The Greasy Spoon, never changed in looks or personality. Or at least she hadn't in the over thirty years Chace had known her. A tiny wisp of a woman with a short cap of excessively teased Lucille Ball red hair, heavily shaded and mascaraed blue eyes, and naturally plump candy-apple-red lips, Thel was a tell-it-like-it-is, don't-blow-smoke-up-my-ass-if-you-know-what's-good-for-you septuagenarian with her finger on the pulse of everything that went on in Hickory Ridge.

She also had a heart of pure gold but was quick to say that whoever was spreading that asinine rumor was full of shit. By unspoken agreement, few ever argued with her, mainly because they knew the truth about how exceptionally generous she and Cully were.

"Hello, Mrs. Duncan," Chace returned her greeting with a smile.

Her painted-on right eyebrow arched. "How many times do I have to tell you that Mrs. Duncan was my mother-in-law?" She kissed the tips of her

fingers and looked toward the ceiling. “God rest her soul.”

“Order up,” a rumbling deep voice boomed from the pass, followed by the peal of a call bell being hit with a metal spatula.

Thelma pointed to the counter. “Sit down. I’ll be right with you,” she instructed in her no-nonsense tone as she pulled the two platters from the window separating the front of the diner from the kitchen and carried them to the young couple seated in the third booth from the door.

“Okay. What can I get you?” she asked Chace.

“How about a bowl of Cully’s chili and a slab of cornbread?”

“I should have known.”

“Just like you, some things never change,” Chace countered.

Thelma rolled her eyes. “Sweet tea?”

“Of course.”

Nodding, she disappeared behind the swinging door into the kitchen, returning in about thirty seconds balancing a massive bowl of chili, half a pan of cornbread, and a tall glass of tea she set down in front of him. “Eat up. There’s plenty more where that came from.”

Chace eyed the overflowing bowl and enormous slice of cornbread, wondering how on earth he was supposed to eat all that, let alone ask for anything more. Like a piece of that pecan pie he knew Thelma made from scratch.

He was enjoying his first bite of the delicious hamburger, cheese, and bean mixture when one of his childhood friends, Holden Blackwood, walked out of the small banquet room of the diner with a dark-haired beauty by his side. They laughed as she wrapped her hands around his arm and leaned against his shoulder. Holden wrapped his arm around her and dropped a kiss on the top of her head, holding her against him as if he never planned to let her go.

Well, that was a new development.

“Chace? Is that you?”

Swiveling his stool toward the couple, Chace smiled. “Afraid so,” he replied as he stood and extended his hand. “Long time no see, man.”

“Too long.” They shook and did the one-armed bro hug before stepping apart. Holden reached for the woman’s hand and pulled her forward. “Frankie, this is one of my oldest friends, Chace Dutton.” Holden wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Chace, this is my wife, Frankie.”

Wife? Dang, Chace must have been away from Hickory Ridge longer

than he thought. Last he'd been in town, Holden was still happily playing the field. When he visited his sister in July, he'd heard two of Holden's three brothers, Drew and Jack, had entered into holy matrimony, with Reese close behind.

Either Lyss hadn't known about Holden getting married, or she hadn't thought to mention it. Maybe she thought he knew. They had been thick as thieves until Chace had left Hickory Ridge to join the Army.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Frankie."

"Likewise." She cast a sidelong look at Holden. "Growing up with this one, I bet you have some stories to tell."

Grinning, Chace inclined his head. "A few."

"Don't forget that goes both ways," Holden reminded him.

"But who are you gonna tell that doesn't already know?" Chace countered, because the only person who mattered had also participated in most of their shenanigans.

"Sounds like an interesting tale right there," Frankie deduced with a grin of her own.

"That's one way to put it, I suppose."

Frankie looked up at Holden. "How about I let the two of you catch up for a few minutes while I go down to Scoops and pick up some ice cream?"

Nodding, Holden leaned forward to drop a lingering kiss on her lips. "I'll meet you there."

"Don't rush," she insisted, shifting her gaze to Chace. "I'm gonna need you to come to dinner one night so I can hear some of those stories."

"I'll see what I can do."

She gave Holden's fingers a squeeze and left.

"Go ahead and eat before things get cold." Holden motioned toward the counter.

They both sat. Chace took another bite of chili as Thelma set a glass of tea in front of Holden. She walked away without saying a word.

"So, you still out saving the world?" Holden asked, clearly presuming Chace was still a Ranger.

"No." Chace broke off a piece of cornbread and slathered butter on it. "I didn't re-up after my last reenlistment. Instead, I accepted a position with Steele Security and Investigations."

"Playing bodyguard for the rich and famous? That sounds rather tame for you."

After serving in the Army's elite 75th Ranger Regiment for close to a decade, Chace got why Holden would assume working with SSI paled in comparison. Yet sometimes, by design, things weren't always as they appeared. "Well, luckily for me, not all the rich and famous lead boring, risk-free lives," he returned and popped a piece of cornbread into his mouth.

"No. I don't suppose they do." Holden took a swig of his tea. "You back for the holidays?"

"Not intentionally." Scooping up the last bite of chili, Chace added, "An IED in Iraq pretty badly injured Lyss's husband Sean. He was airlifted to a support hospital at the nearest base but won't be transported to Germany until he's stabilized. When Lyss got in touch with me, she was beside herself with worry. Of course, as a nurse, she'd already envisioned every single worst-case scenario. When she begged me to come home to help take care of the twins so she could fly to Landstuhl to be with Sean, I couldn't refuse."

Shrugging, Chace consumed the last of his chili. "Once my replacement arrived, I hopped on the company jet, and here I am." Almost thirty hours after Lyss's initial call. He'd only heard bits and pieces about Sean since.

"Where are the twins now?"

Chace scrubbed a hand down his face, the whisker stubble rough against his palm. "Three guesses, and the first two don't count," he answered, his voice sounding about as weary as he felt.

Holden's eyes widened. "With Holly?"

Nodding, Chace wadded up the napkin and tossed it into the empty bowl. "Which stands to reason since we *are* the girls' godparents. Plus, Holly is around them a lot more than I am."

"Still..." Holden's voice trailed off.

"Yeah. I know." Boy, did he ever.

Spending time in the company of Holly McCade was challenging under normal circumstances, such as a few hours here and there for birthday parties and holidays. But being thrown together for who knew how long to take care of their goddaughters, *his* twin nieces? Well, that threw a whole different spin on things.

One Chace wasn't sure he was adequately prepared to handle.

Thelma reappeared. "You boys can catch up later," she stated, neither her tone nor facial expression brooking any argument as she gathered Chace's empty dishes. "You have nieces to tend to." Though still half full, she plucked Holden's tea glass. "And your wife is waiting for you down the

street,” she added, turning on her crepe-soled heel and disappearing behind the swinging door.

“I think we’ve been dismissed.”

“Well, it’s not the first time.”

“And unlikely to be the last,” Holden agreed as they rose from their stools.

When they both reached for their wallets, they heard Thelma’s gravelly voice from the kitchen. “Your money’s no good here tonight. Now git.”

Laughing, Holden plucked a business card from his wallet. “Let’s get together while you’re here.”

“Most definitely.” He pocketed the card. “I have lots of stories to share with your wife.” Chace grinned. “Plus, I need to hear how that raven-haired beauty got Hickory Ridge’s infamous ladies’ man to the altar.”

“Not when the better story is how I got *her* there,” Holden countered, devilment glimmering in his eyes.

Wow. Not the response Chace expected from his high school buddy at all.

Clapping a hand on Chace’s shoulder, Holden laughed at what Chace suspected was the stunned expression on his face. “It’s a doozy,” Holden assured him. “Meantime, good luck with Holly and the twins.”

“Thanks, man.”

They repeated the combo bro hug-handshake. “Keep us posted on Sean, and let us know if you need anything.”

“Will do,” Chace promised as Holden shouted a thank you to Thelma and headed out the door.

Chace was shrugging into his leather jacket when Thelma reappeared. “You still here?”

“Just leaving,” Chace answered.

Thelma met and held his gaze. “I know this isn’t easy for you. Holly either. But right now, the two of you need to work together for the sake of Sean, Lyss, and the twins.”

“I know.” And he’d do his damndest not to allow the history he and his ex-fiancée shared to get in the way.

The closer Chace got to his sister's house, the more his anxiety manifested. His stomach churned to the point he feared tossing the chili he'd just consumed. His jaw ached from grinding his molars. And the palms of his hands were slick from sweat as he white-knuckled the steering wheel.

Forcing air into and out of his lungs, Chace berated himself for allowing his emotions to get the better of him. Especially considering he was specially trained to control his thoughts and feelings and focus solely on the task at hand. Which, in this case, meant teaming with Holly McCade to take care of his nieces.

In the absence of their parents.

For as long as necessary.

That she was the woman he'd come *this close* to marrying eight years ago should not factor into the equation whatsoever. Just like it shouldn't matter that Holly was also the youngest sister of Alex McCade, his immediate supervisor at SSI. The same man who'd expeditiously found a suitable replacement for Chace's current assignment and personally processed the paperwork for his emergency furlough.

Not for the first time in the last thirty hours, Chace wondered if Holly had intervened with her brother on his behalf. Well, not strictly for him, but because Lyss was Holly's best friend, and Holly knew what his sister wanted.

Doesn't make any difference either way, his subconscious mind insisted.

It really didn't.

But for a man accustomed to conducting business operations with an

airtight and well-developed strategy firmly in place before formal engagement ensued, the uncertainty of what lay ahead—not only Sean’s condition but also with Holly and his nieces—unnerved him. Hell, inserting into war-torn countries had never produced the level of angst and trepidation currently tying his entire body into a bundle of knots.

Besides, in his previous missions as a Ranger and his current assignments for SSI, Chace had multiple options at his disposal for nearly every scenario he may encounter. Presently, his intel was scarce. And where Holly was concerned, his experience had always been that less was definitely *not* more.

He doubted this situation would be any different. Oh, he didn’t anticipate opposition from Holly regarding the care of *his* nieces, but he and Holly were no longer together for a reason.

Well, several reasons really. And one superseded the rest—the constant threat of danger surrounding his career choice, first in the military and now as a security specialist with SSI. Risks Holly proclaimed were in no way conducive to marriage and family life.

Case in point, the situation they now faced. The irony certainly wasn’t lost on Chace that his return to Hickory Ridge at his sister’s request to take care of Emme and Wren was also precipitated by their father’s service-related life-threatening injury. Precisely what Holly feared would happen to him.

Chace couldn’t help but wonder how long it would take her to point out that his sister, her BFF, was now thrust into what had scared Holly to the point that she’d ended their engagement.

Regardless of their history, Chace was bound and determined to honor his sister’s request. If for no other reason than because Lyss rarely asked him for anything. That she had in this incident proved how much she needed him, and Chace had no intention of letting her down.

Resigned, Chace pulled his truck into Lyss’s driveway behind a late-model SUV he assumed belonged to Holly. Shutting off the engine, he hopped out of the truck, grabbed his duffel from the back seat of the dual cab, and followed the lighted stone pathway toward the front porch.

He raised his hand to press the bell, but the door swung open before his finger made contact with the illuminated button. And just like every other time since Chace had been fourteen years old, his heart skipped a beat at the mere sight of Holly McCade.

He’d long ago accepted it probably always would.

Fortunately, Chace had mastered the art of compartmentalizing. Though

he was still a ball of nervous energy about what lay ahead, he'd successfully managed his feelings for Holly in the past, and he'd do so again. Being the twins' godparents often threw them together during holidays and special occasions, so he had plenty of practice outwardly pretending Holly still didn't reside in a large portion of his heart.

"The girls just fell asleep," Holly whispered by way of greeting. "I didn't want the doorbell to wake them."

Obviously, someone had alerted her to his impending arrival—if not Alex, probably Thelma.

Stepping aside, Holly gestured for him to enter.

As he crossed the threshold, her signature vanilla and cinnamon scent enveloped him like a welcoming embrace, reminding him of when they greeted each other with affectionate hugs and passionate kisses. Chace rerouted his thoughts from the little diversion down memory lane since there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of that happening today.

Holly closed the door and followed him into the living room. "Can I get you something to drink? Or eat?"

"I'm good. Thanks." Alex must have tipped her off to his arrival, since Thelma would have included the fact that he'd eaten while at the diner.

Holly sat in the corner of the overstuffed sofa, and Chace dropped into the matching slate-blue recliner diagonal from her. She hadn't dressed for company. Instead, she looked ready for bed in her red reindeer-patterned pajamas and black woolly slippers. Even her caramel-brown hair was already twisted into the dual braids she employed to keep her thick tresses from tangling into a nest while she slept.

Not helping, his subconscious reminded him as his mind flashed with images of her lying naked in his bed, her glorious hair splayed across his chest because he'd asked her not to plait it as she curled her luscious curves against him.

Clearing his throat, Chace banished the scene from his mind, along with the feelings it elicited and could become embarrassing if he wasn't careful. "Have you heard from Lyss?" No better way to cool his libido than to bring up his sister.

Holly nodded. "Yes. She arrived in Germany yesterday evening, their time, but Sean hasn't been transferred yet. Apparently, he lost a lot of blood, and the doctors want to ensure he's stable enough to travel before discharging him. Lyss is worried sick."

In hindsight, Chace wondered if he should have flown to the medical center in Landstuhl from Cairo rather than returning home. Or, “Maybe Lyss should have waited until Sean was transported to the hospital before flying out to be with him.”

“You are aware we’re talking about your sister, right?”

Holly had a point. Once Lyss received the call informing her Sean was injured, nothing short of a SWAT team could have kept her grounded. Chace would bet money her decision was made before the call even ended. She was probably searching the internet for flights while still on the phone with Sean’s unit representative.

Kicking off her slippers, Holly folded her legs on the sofa cushion in crisscross applesauce style. “She said she’d call when she knew anything more.”

Leaning back, Chace propped his right booted ankle atop his left denim-clad knee. “How are Emme and Wren?”

“They seem okay,” Holly answered tentatively. “But Lyss only told them she was going to visit Sean. She didn’t mention his injury.”

Made sense, Chace guessed. “And they didn’t badger her to go along?” His nieces were nothing if not tenacious when it came to something they wanted. Clearly a trait they’d inherited from their mother.

“She never gave them a chance. As soon as Lyss got the call at work, she set her plans in motion. I assured her I’d take care of everything here.”

Chace met and held her dark gaze. “Did you try to talk her out of contacting me to come home?”

“No.”

Did you want to? Chace refrained from asking though he really wanted to. “Were you responsible for Alex expediting the arrival of my replacement?” he inquired instead.

“I didn’t have to after you told her you were on assignment in Egypt. As soon as she hung up, Lyss contacted Wyatt Steele directly.”

Damn.

Straight to the top of Steele Security and Investigations, huh? His little sister’s bold move didn’t surprise him, but Chace *was* duly impressed. He also couldn’t help but wonder if—or rather when—Wyatt would bust his balls about Lyss’s blatant disregard for the chain of command.

Not that Chace cared, since his family would always come first regardless of what Holly thought.

“Did Alex let you know I would be arriving tonight?”

She lowered her gaze and rubbed at a spot on her pajama bottoms. “He’s kept me informed.”

Did she mean in this particular instance or for the entire time he’d been employed at SSI? Not that he was about to ask her. Besides, it didn’t matter anyway.

Or rather, it shouldn’t.

“If the girls don’t know the real reason Lyss is visiting Sean, what are we supposed to tell them?”

Her shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug. “Why do we have to tell them anything?”

“They’re bound to ask questions, Holly. Especially with me showing up.” Plus, Chace felt they deserved to know about their father. Not all the gory details, of course, but at least that he’d been injured in the line of duty.

“Lyss promised to video chat with them every day. She can answer their questions then.”

“Leaving us to deal with the fallout. And depending on the severity of Sean’s injuries, who knows how long that might be?”

“I know.” Sighing, Holly rubbed her forehead with the tips of her thumb and forefinger, clearly indicating a headache was brewing. “On top of that, Christmas is only three weeks away.”

And the hits just kept on coming.

When on assignment, particularly those outside the country, Chace often lost track of things at home, like upcoming birthdays and holidays. This year was even worse, with his parents scheduled for a two-week Mediterranean cruise and Lyss deciding that with Sean deployed, she and the girls would spend Christmas in Florida with her in-laws. Since his family had all made other plans and many of his colleagues had spouses and children at home, Chace had volunteered to work through the holiday season.

That was why, until three days ago, he was in Cairo heading the security detail for a foreign dignitary and his family as they traveled through Egypt and parts of the Middle East. The gig was to last until the end of January.

“What are you thinking?” Holly asked as the silence stretched between them.

“You don’t want to know.” Considering the assignment he’d relinquished to return stateside hadn’t been without risk, she *really* didn’t want to know. Or maybe Chace just didn’t want to see the recrimination on her beautiful

face.

“Already planning your escape?”

Direct verbal strike, no facial expression necessary. “Nice,” Chace commented sardonically. “And no. I’m not.”

Surprisingly, Holly let it drop.

For now, anyway. Because Chace knew better than to think Holly would never address the elephant in the room again while he was in Hickory Ridge.

“Then what do you suggest we tell the twins when they start asking questions?”

“We’ll answer them as honestly as possible without getting into specifics.” Though he refused to lie to his nieces outright, he had no intention of scarring them for life either. “We’ll go with the flow. Take things day by day. Or minute by minute. As soon as Lyss knows the full extent of Sean’s injuries and prognosis, I’m sure she’ll explain everything to Emme and Wren in terms they can understand but won’t cause unnecessary angst.”

“What if she’s not back by Christmas?” Holly continued to play the devil’s advocate—a trait she’d mastered long ago.

Sometimes Chace couldn’t fault her for it. He suspected this might be one of those times. “Day by day, remember? And if the three weeks pass and Lyss isn’t here by Christmas Eve, we’ll celebrate the best way we can. Lyss can participate via video chat. Hopefully, Sean too. Whatever happens, we’ll keep everything as normal as possible for the girls, including all their holiday traditions.”

Chace raised his palms as their eyes met. “Sounds doable, right?”

Holly sank her teeth into her bottom lip. “It *sounds* like a whole lotta *we*,” Hope replied rather than agreeing with him.

Her skepticism rang loud and clear. Chace wasn’t sure if she doubted their ability to work together in a parental capacity with the girls or if she suspected at some point he’d leave her high and dry to take care of the twins on her own.

Guess there was one way to find out. “Is that a problem?” He purposely phrased it as a dare, as if she were the one who didn’t want any parts of the *we* component.

“Depends on what happens when duty calls.”

And there was his answer. Holly expected him to cut and run at the first opportunity. Well, she was in for a big surprise now, wasn’t she? “I’m on leave through January.” Chace cocked his right brow. “Didn’t your brother

include that in the information he provided you?”

When her gaze narrowed significantly, Chace knew he'd hit a nerve.

“There are always emergencies.”

“Like this one?” Chace countered, refusing to let her get the best of him. “Because right now, this is the only emergency that concerns me.”

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them. Chace watched the play of emotions cross Holly's face as she processed everything he'd said before she offered a response.

“Well?” he prompted. The last thirty-some hours had been brutal, and Chace was beyond exhausted.

“I agree we should keep everything as normal as possible. That's why I thought it was better for the girls to remain in their own environment rather than packing them up and taking them to my place.”

“Good idea.”

“Is this also where you plan to stay?”

“Would you rather I didn't?”

Holly shrugged. “It makes no difference to me.”

Yeah. Right.

Removing his ankle from his knee, he dropped his booted foot to the thick pewter carpeting with a soft thud and sat forward. “You sure?” he challenged her.

The few beats that passed before she answered were telling. “I'm already set up in the master downstairs.” Holly pushed herself off the sofa. “You can take the bedroom upstairs at the end of the hall on the right.”

Chace inclined his head in agreement. If she thought he'd protest, she was in for a rude awakening. He'd slept in far worse places than a double bed in his sister's guest room.

“Okay, then.” She walked past him on her way to the staircase but stopped before descending. “Chace?”

He didn't turn to look at her. “Yeah?”

“Let's not make this any more difficult than it already is.”

Smiling to himself, Chace rolled to his feet. “I wouldn't dream of it.”

By the time Holly closed the bedroom door, she regretted over half of what she'd said as well as felt in the last thirty minutes.

Nothing new there, though, especially in the last eight years, where Chace Dutton was concerned. Why would she expect tonight to be any different?

Maybe because his being here has absolutely nothing to do with you.

True. Chace had only returned to Hickory Ridge because of *his* family emergency. Not to see her or rekindle any old flame. Besides, if she weren't his sister's best friend or his nieces' godmother, Holly wouldn't even be involved with Emme and Wren's care at all. Nor would every nerve in her body buzz and sizzle as if attached to a live electrical current.

All because she would be sleeping under the same roof as her ex-fiancé for the foreseeable future.

Then again, Holly didn't expect to get much sleep tonight anyway. Like regrets, what else was new when Chace had disrupted her sleep in some form or fashion for over twenty damned years? From invading her dreams to tangling with her between the sheets to stealing the covers, Holly held Chace personally responsible for her most satisfying and pleasurable awakenings and nearly all of her sleepless nights.

Much like she suspected of this one, because no matter how many years passed, Holly's feelings for Chace still ran fathoms deep.

How could they not? From the moment he soothed her bruised pride and dried her tears of embarrassment after she fell off the pony at Lyss's twelfth birthday party, Holly had been a complete and utter goner for her BFF's older

brother. Now, two decades and a shit ton of history—including a broken engagement—later, Chace continued to take up a vast portion of real estate in Holly's heart and soul.

The epitome of tall, dark, and handsome by anyone's standards, for Holly, Chace's appeal went far beyond the physicality of his six-foot-three-inch God-given attributes. Like most, she first noticed the striking combination of his thick dark hair and smoldering deep brown eyes, the perpetual stubble shadowing the chiseled planes and angles of his handsome face, the often smiling, perfectly kissable lips, and his ridiculously mouthwatering hard-bodied physique.

But those features alone weren't what curled her toes or took her breath away.

For Holly, it was the tiny cowlick on the crown of his head that only appeared when he allowed his usual high and tight military cut to grow more than a few inches. The tiny white scar that bisected his right brow line from the time Lyss clocked him with her shoe when they were teenagers and he'd gone all big brother mode on her. The ever-present sparkle in his beautiful eyes that intensified considerably when he smiled.

Or grinned. The man had one irresistible grin, especially when those tiny lines fanned out from the corners of his eyes.

Hell, who was she kidding? Since the day she'd first laid eyes on Chace Dutton, Holly hadn't found much of anything she could resist about him. Until he decided to enlist in the Army. But even that didn't diminish how she truly felt about him.

Then or now.

Which was bound to create more than a few challenges as she and Chace took on the role of co-parenting Emme and Wren for as long as Lyss remained overseas with Sean. Depending on the severity of Sean's injuries, that time frame could equate to days, weeks, or God-forbid, even months.

Holly's nervous system was already running amok at the thought of sleeping under the same roof as Chace for one night. How in hell would she survive a week, let alone a month? Essentially living together like a family. Making decisions. Coordinating schedules. Participating in the surplus of December activities to celebrate the holidays, all of which were a huge deal in Hickory Ridge.

I'll be okay, Holly assured herself, augmenting her self-talk with deep, even breaths to keep herself from flying into a full-blown panic attack. *No*

need to catastrophize the situation, she soothed herself while inhaling through her nose, counting to ten, and then exhaling as slowly as possible through her mouth.

After repeating the process several more times, Holly felt better. Calmer even. She could do this. She just needed to keep her head on straight, put Emme and Wren first and foremost, and ignore her traitorous heart where Chace was concerned.

Though the last part was easier said than done, the last eight years had given Holly plenty of practice handling her feelings for Chace. Still, those were fleeting moments in the big scheme of things. A few birthday parties for the twins. A handful of holidays whenever he wasn't deployed or on assignment. Never anything longer than a few hours at best. And if things became too difficult to manage, Holly simply excused herself early from the festivities.

Only that wasn't something she could very well do in this situation.

But she'd manage. For Emme and Wren. Lyss and Sean.

Though futile, Holly yanked the covers back and slipped into bed. Misgivings, concerns, and doubts ran on a continuous loop inside her head. She thought about Sean, his injuries, if he'd even recover, and if he did, how profoundly his wounds would affect the rest of his life and the life of his wife and daughters.

Sean and Lyss's present circumstances were exactly why Holly had broken her engagement to Chace. After losing her oldest brother Sloane to the conflict in the Middle East, Holly was too scared to take the risk. Like Chace, Sloane was larger than life.

Strong.

Capable.

Invincible.

Although Holly understood the perils of military service, she truly believed no harm would ever come to Sloane. He was too smart and tough for anything to ever happen to him.

Until it did.

For as long as she lived, Holly would never forget the day her family received the news. Disbelief surfaced first, followed closely by denial. There had to be some mistake. A mix-up of epic proportions, because there was no way Sloane wasn't ever coming home again.

Only he did. In a flag-draped coffin. When her parents returned from

Dover Air Force Base with Sloane's remains, a suffocating pall fell over their entire household as they went through the motions of his funeral service and laid him to rest. It was the first time she'd ever seen her father cry.

The grief was numbing. The rage fierce. The sadness palpable. The desolation paralyzing. And Holly never wanted to feel that level of loss ever again.

At the time, Chace was already entrenched in the military and putting his own life in danger running special ops in God-forsaken places most people had never heard of, let alone visited. Depending on the mission, months could pass without hearing his voice or seeing his face. After what happened to Sloane and realizing the same thing could happen to Chace, Holly couldn't bear the thought of losing anyone else she loved. At least not in the same manner.

When Holly confided her fears to Chace, he understood why she felt the way she did, but he had at least two years left to serve. When he couldn't commit to separating from the military after those two years were up, Holly returned his ring and broke their engagement.

Ironically, here they were, thrown together as a result of what Holly had sacrificed her heart to avoid. Only it wasn't Chace, but his brother-in-law whose life hung in the balance. Her best friend's husband. The father of the goddaughters she shared with the only man she'd ever loved.

The man who'd dropped everything to fly halfway across the world when his sister called in need. The same man Holly would now navigate uncharted waters with as they did their best to keep everything as normal as possible for Emme and Wren.

And tempted the hell out of fate in the process.

CHACE DOUBTED Holly made it down the stairs before her mind whirled with every reason under the sun why their current situation was a veritable disaster in the making.

Maybe it was.

Or had the possibility of becoming one at some point as they assumed their caretaker role for the twins. How he and Holly might be affected by this predicament was of little importance in the big scheme of things, because

none of this was about them or their history.

No. It was about Sean, the injuries he'd sustained from the IED, and the effect his prognosis would have on him, Lyss, and the girls. For as long as Lyss remained in Germany, that's precisely where Holly and his attention should be focused. Not on themselves but on Emme and Wren.

And if it came down to where he and Holly needed to split the twins' care between them, that's what they'd do. How hard could it be anyway? They were seven. Besides that, he'd led special teams on missions into war zones, dismantled terrorist regimes, and ensured the safety and protection of royals, dignitaries, and celebrities. Handling two precocious little girls should be a piece of cake.

Still, Chace realized how much easier looking after his nieces would be if he and Holly found a way to work together rather than separately. As long as she was willing, so was he. There was no reason they couldn't do this.

Forcing his jet-lagged body out of the chair, he snatched his duffel from where he'd dropped it by the door and located the guest room. He unpacked, stuffing what he'd brought into two dresser drawers and one corner of the closet.

Grabbing his travel kit, he crossed the hall to the bathroom, splashed water on his face, and brushed his teeth. While rinsing, he noticed the toothbrush holder on the vanity. Grinning, he dropped his into one of the porcelain slots and left his toiletries scattered on the counter.

Despite Holly's doubts, he wanted to ensure she received his message loud and clear—he wasn't going anywhere. That *this* wasn't just a spot-check before he jetted off to his next assignment but that he fully intended to pull his weight by sharing in the care of his nieces.

Returning to the guestroom, Chace stripped down to his boxer briefs and slipped beneath the crisp white sheets. He didn't know why he bothered, because he had zero expectations of getting much sleep. Not with everything running amok inside his head. And most definitely not with Holly under the same roof.

Despite Holly's presence and whether he got any rest tonight or not, the twins would still get his best effort. They always did, even when Holly attended festivities for the twins when he visited. Of course, spending time in the same airspace as his ex for a few hours once or twice a year was vastly different from living under the same roof for an undetermined amount of time.

At least during those visits, when he was ready to crawl out of his skin because she was close enough to smell her vanilla scent, Chace could fabricate an excuse and flee. Now, that option was no longer available.

But that could prove to be a good thing, considering Chace had been doing some soul-searching for the past year. Re-evaluating certain aspects of his life. Like where he was at thirty-four years old. What he'd accomplished. Where he wanted to go. The decisions he'd made. Their outcomes.

And how his biggest regret was and probably always would be letting Holly McCade go without a fight.

Yeah, he'd been an idiot. Young and arrogant, with an over-inflated, testosterone-fueled ego, Chace believed he could save the world one mission at a time. And gratefully, with much of what he did while serving his country, the good far outweighed the bad. Until in the process, he'd lost the one person who mattered most.

Under similar circumstances, however, his sister hadn't deserted her fiancé. No, Lyss not only married but had children with her soldier husband. Unlike Holly, she'd been willing to take the risk.

But when Sean was injured, Lyss didn't shatter into a million pieces. The world didn't come to an end. Instead, she rallied, securing the care of her daughters, and boarded a plane to be with her husband. To offer her love and support. To care for him in his time of need.

Though he understood why she felt she couldn't, Chace wished Holly hadn't been afraid to take the same chance with him that Lyss willingly took with Sean. Then again, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

Ironically, though, here they were. Living under the same roof to care for his nieces, *their goddaughters*, for as long as necessary. If his outlook on relationships hadn't become so cynical in the last eight years, Chace might even believe this was divine intervention giving them a second chance.

It was the season of miracles, after all.

Holly awoke to the delectable aroma of brewed coffee and fried bacon. Rolling over, she pried one eye open and checked the time. *Six forty-five*. Apparently, Chace was still an early riser, even on a Saturday. Which was fine since it also meant he was making breakfast.

She'd missed that.

And him.

Dangerous thoughts, Holly reminded herself.

Or rather chastised.

At least, that's what she should be doing.

Rolling onto her side, Holly pushed herself up and swung her legs to the floor. She sat on the edge of the bed for a few seconds before gathering her clothes for the day and heading for the shower.

Twenty minutes later, with her hair still damp and wearing a pair of faded Levi's, a red sweatshirt with *Merry and Bright* emblazoned in white across the front, and fleece-lined brown boots, Holly shuffled into the kitchen as Chace dropped the last slice of cooked bacon on a paper towel-lined plate.

His dark hair was sticking up in several directions as if he'd rolled right out of bed and schlepped straight to the kitchen. Well, after he paused long enough to pull on the navy sweatpants and grey T-shirt that hugged every blessed inch of his leanly cut upper body muscles.

With Emme and Wren in the house, Chace would never leave his room wearing only his usual sleeping attire of boxer briefs. At least, that's how he used to sleep. Sometimes, anyway.

Opening the egg carton on the counter beside the stove, Chace glanced

over his shoulder at her. “Scrambled or dipped?” he asked, using the descriptions they grew up with for runny yolks perfect for dipping their toast.

As if he could read her mind, Holly felt the heat of embarrassment suffusing her cheeks. Valiantly, she did her best to forget the trajectory her thoughts had taken about how he was dressed and focused instead on how Chace used to make breakfast for them on the weekends when they were still together—often serving hers in bed. Holly wondered if he might have done so this morning had she not awakened before he finished cooking.

Don't be ridiculous! That is not why he's here.

Holding up an egg, Chace arched one dark brow. “Your eggs?”

“Whatever you're having is fine.” He was always the better cook between them, and per usual, Holly was starving.

“Dipped it is.” He dropped a spoonful of shortening into the skillet. “You make the toast.”

She fired off a snappy salute. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

Though eight years may have passed since the last time they'd eaten breakfast together, they fell back into the easy rhythm they once shared, where he prepared the stovetop portion while she toasted the bread and poured the coffee.

“What time do the twins usually get up?” Chace asked.

“On the weekends, I'm not really sure,” Holly replied, placing two slices of buttered toast on each plate Chace had pulled from the cupboard. “They've had school every day since Lyss left for Germany, so they've been up by six to leave here by seven. That gives me enough time to drop them off at the elementary and get to my school on time.”

As a high school English teacher, Holly liked to arrive at work at least half an hour before her students to ensure she had everything prepped and ready for the day ahead. Especially considering curveballs were often thrown into their regular schedule at the last minute—just another peril in the lives of teachers everywhere.

Chace slid two eggs and several slices of bacon onto each plate, handing one to her and following her to the breakfast nook with the other.

“Fortunately, I've been able to keep the girls on the same before and after schedule as Lyss to facilitate a seamless transition.” She dipped her toast in the yolk. “For now, anyway.”

“Do you anticipate a problem?”

Shaking her head, Holly covered her mouth with her fingertips and

swallowed the bite she'd just taken. "Not in general. Right now, my principal is allowing the bus to drop them off at the high school since my planning period is the last block of the day. But if they get sick or I have an afterschool meeting, that could create a problem."

"No worries. I can take over getting them to and from school now, as well as assuming the emergency contact responsibilities.

Surprised, Holly jerked her gaze to his. "You will?"

"Of course," Chace replied as if it were a no-brainer. "Considering they're the reason I'm here in the first place, why wouldn't I?"

Right. He was absolutely right, which made her feel like a complete idiot. "I'm sorry, Chace. I wasn't presuming you wouldn't. It's just been a bit of an adjustment trying to account for everything while working out the logistics on such short notice."

When Holly realized her explanation might come across to Chace as a complaint, she held up her hands, palms out. "Not that I mind." She shook her head. "Because I don't." Holly would do anything for her bestie. Even if it meant sharing the twins' care with Chace.

"But you still have to attend to your own responsibilities. I get it." Smiling, Chace nodded, causing Holly's pulse rate to double. "But I'm here now to help however I can."

Relief mingled with a heavy dose of apprehension, leading Holly to remind herself to proceed with caution. The last thing she needed was to become accustomed to Chace being around and helping out with the twins. Along with his presence in Hickory Ridge, their current situation was temporary—two facts Holly needed to remember at all costs.

Just as she was about to respond, Emme and Wren barreled into the kitchen. "Uncle Chase," they shrieked in unison, flinging themselves at him in tandem. "What are you doing here?" They were clearly excited to see him, their little girl voices rising a few decibels with each word.

"Having breakfast," he answered, a grin stretching the corners of his mouth and shining in the dark depths of his eyes.

Though they weren't identical, the twins shared similarities in appearance and personality. Witty and bright, both were blue-eyed brunettes, only Wren's straight hair was longer than Emme's curlier, shoulder-length version. And where Emme's eyes resembled a cloudless blue sky, Wren's were as dark as midnight.

"You're silly, Uncle Chase."

On cue, he pulled the sides of his mouth toward his ears, stuck out his tongue, and crossed his eyes. Both girls dissolved into a fit of giggles. Holly's heart swelled at how easily and naturally Chace interacted with his nieces, their connection evident since the day they were born. No matter the time between his visits, the three of them always managed to pick right back up wherever they left off without missing a beat.

Longing Holly had never expected slammed into her with the force of a freight train, reminding her of what a wonderful father Chace would be. Or could already be to children of their own if Holly hadn't given in to her fears and had been willing to take a risk.

Don't go there, Holly warned herself, because no good would come of it. Being a brother and an uncle was much different from being a husband and father. That's what Holly needed to remember. Not how wonderful he was with Emme and Wren or how much they adored him. And definitely not how merely looking at him continued to take her breath away.

Dammit!

"Did you know Mommy went to see Daddy?" Wren asked as she settled on one of his muscled thighs.

For a brief second, Chace's eyes met Holly's. "I did."

"Is that why you're here?"

"Mainly," he hedged.

"Are you staying until Mommy gets back?" Emme took over the inquisition and perched herself on his other leg.

"That's the plan."

"Awesome!" they chorused. Or rather squealed. Grinning, the girls high-fived each other, then Chace. "You know what we should do today?" Emme asked.

He arched his right brow. "What's that?"

"Christmas in Hickory Ridge."

With Sean's injury and the flurry of activity that followed in getting as much as possible in place for Lyss to fly to Germany, Holly had completely forgotten all about the two-week holiday festival that always began on the second Saturday in December. Which, as luck would have it, was today.

Despite the growing mountain of laundry needing to be washed, the boatload of senior essays to grade in her school satchel, and the weekly grocery shopping to tackle, Holly was beyond grateful the next two weeks provided an abundance of activities for the twins, especially on the weekends.

Like today.

Chace looked across the table at Holly for guidance in answering Emme. She tilted her head to the side and shrugged, throwing the ball figuratively back in his court. Sighing, Chace rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Well?” Wren prompted.

“Let’s ask Aunt Holly what she thinks.”

Asshole.

Both girls whipped their heads in her direction. “Please, Aunt Holly,” they pleaded in tandem with identical puppy-dog eyes to boost their appeal.

Whether learned or inherited, Emme and Wren had mastered the ability to sync their powers of persuasion through both words and body language to get what they wanted. Not in any sort of devious manner, but a seemingly inherent ability to work their magic.

Just like they were doing now.

“I’m game if Uncle Chace is.”

They swiveled their attention back to Chace. “You are. Right?”

The corners of his eyes crinkled first. Followed by the gleam and then the smile that stretched into his whisker-stubbed cheeks. “Sure. Why not?”

“Yay!” Both girls squealed as they hopped off Chace’s lap. “Let’s get ready!” Wren added.

“Whoa, there, munchkins.” Chace palmed the tops of their heads to hold them in place. “It’s not eight o’clock yet, so I doubt anything is even open this early.” Chace shifted his gaze to Holly. “Does everything still begin with the parade?”

She nodded. “It did last year.”

“Okay.” Chace pointed to Holly’s phone lying beside her empty plate. “Your job is to look up the schedule of events with the girls while I make their breakfast. Once we see what’s happening, we can figure out our itinerary.”

“What’s an itinerary?” Emme wanted to know as she sat on Holly’s right with Wren on her left.

“It’s like a schedule of events for the day,” Holly explained as Chace returned to the kitchen with their empty plates.

For the next few minutes, Holly scrolled through the Christmas in Hickory Ridge website. She mentally took notes on everything on the schedule for the next fourteen days, concentrating primarily on the weekend events since she and the girls still had school that precluded staying out past

bedtime.

“So, what did you find out?” Chace asked, setting the twins’ breakfast in front of them.

“A *lot*,” Holly answered as he returned to the kitchen to grab the girls’ milk. “It looks like on both weekends, there’s a petting zoo, live nativity, caroling, an assortment of musical performances in varying locations, and horse-drawn carriage rides around town to start.”

“Is the parade today?” Emme asked.

“Yes. At eleven,” Holly replied, and thanked Chace for the fresh mug of coffee he set in front of her. “Around two, there’s a cookie decorating contest at Sugar Rush, face painting, balloon art, ornament making in the community center, and the tree lighting in front of the town hall at dusk. And that’s not including everything I mentioned earlier.” She sipped her coffee, noting it was exactly how she liked it.

Warmth that had nothing to do with the heat from her cup o’ joe swirled through Holly’s chest and stomach, completely unnerving her for a few too many seconds.

In the lull, Chace began to outline their itinerary. “Okay. How about we leave here in about an hour? That’ll give us enough time to scope out the perfect spot to watch the parade, explore the souvenir carts, and grab a snack while we wait. Does that sound good so far?”

Both girls nodded.

“Awesome.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Once the parade is over, we can grab some lunch before or after we hit up the community center for face painting and crafts. By then, it should be time for the cookie decorating contest if you want to participate.”

“Of course,” Emme confirmed in a tone that screamed *Duh!*

Holly did her best to keep from laughing at Emme’s response and Chace’s sidelong glance shot in his niece’s direction.

“Depending on when the contest finishes, we’ll decide what, if anything, we have time to do before the tree lighting.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Holly concurred with his quick rundown of the schedule for the day. “While everyone is getting ready, I’ll wash the dishes and clean up the kitchen.”

Shrieking their agreement, the twins darted off in the direction of their bedroom. Wren quickly skidded to a halt, turning back toward Chace and Holly. “What if Mommy calls while we’re at the festival?”

Holly's stomach dropped at her goddaughter's question. The solemn look on Wren's little face broke her heart. Though Holly completely understood how much they missed their mom, her inexperience as a parent hindered her ability to discern the overall effect Lyss's absence was having on the girls. She also didn't want to run the risk of saying anything that might give them cause for worry and concern either.

Holly dropped to her knee so they were on eye level. She clasped both Wren's hands. "We'll have Uncle Chace text her to let her know about our plans and set up a call for when we get back home. How's that?"

Wren nodded. "That works."

"Good." Smiling, Holly pulled her in for a big hug.

As they disengaged, the glimmer of excitement returned to Wren's blue eyes. "I better go get ready."

"Remember, we'll be outside most of the day, so dress warmly."

"I will," Wren promised. "And I'll remind Emme too," she added, skipping off to deliver the message to her sister.

Standing, Holly turned around and found Chace watching her from the kitchen, his hands braced on the island. She couldn't read the expression on his face to determine what he was thinking. Or feeling. If he was satisfied with how she'd answered Wren's question... Or if he might be having second thoughts about...well, everything.

The silence stretched between them for a few more awkward seconds until Chace pushed away from the counter. "Guess I'd better get ready too," he declared, the smile back in his beautiful eyes.

"I can text Lyss if you want." Holly wasn't sure why she'd told Wren he would contact her mother rather than assigning herself.

Chace shook his head. "No. I can take care of it."

"Great." Not that she didn't want to call or text Lyss, but rather because she didn't know when Chace had last spoken to his sister. Most likely before he left Egypt, considering he'd asked last night if she'd heard anything since Lyss had left for Germany. No doubt he wanted to touch base himself.

Chace hooked a thumb toward the staircase. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Nodding, Holly grabbed her coffee mug and started for the kitchen to begin cleanup.

"And Holly," Chace's voice sounded from the top of the landing. "I promise to dress warmly too," he added, a grin evident in his tone.

“Asshole,” Holly muttered while trying to keep herself from smiling.

The second he stepped into the guest room, Chace sent a text to his sister informing her of their plans for the day. He could have called and probably should have, since it was two in the afternoon in Germany. But as he wasn't sure what had transpired with Sean since Lyss had last spoken to Holly, he didn't want to risk interrupting anything important.

Chace slid his phone into the pocket of his sweatpants, grabbed a clean set of clothes, and crossed the hall to the bathroom. He closed the door and locked it before stripping off his T-shirt and tossing it to the floor. Inspecting his reflection in the mirror over the porcelain sink, he rubbed his palm over his jaw, turning his head left and right to determine whether he needed to shave.

One more rogue day, he decided after a few more seconds of deliberation. Just as he took out his phone to lay it on the counter before undressing completely, it vibrated with an incoming call.

Lyss.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself," she replied, her voice strained. "I got your text but thought I'd call while I had a minute. Hope that's okay."

"Of course." He closed the commode seat and sat down. "You sound beat. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." It was more of a sigh than an answer.

"Have they transferred Sean yet?"

"No. They say he isn't stable enough to travel. Hopefully, he'll improve enough overnight to make the flight tomorrow."

“Has anyone informed you about the extent of his injuries?” Surely, they weren’t leaving her waiting *and* wondering what condition her husband was actually in, especially since he wasn’t stable enough to leave the medical facility closer to where the incident occurred.

“Just the basics. Nothing specific. Concussion. Compound fracture of his right tibia. Several broken ribs. A ruptured spleen. And a lacerated liver, which is the most significant contributing factor to the loss of blood he’s suffered. The last doctor I spoke with said the repair was successful. That’s why they think he’ll improve enough for transport in the morning.”

“I can come there, you know. So you’re not alone.”

“No. I need you there with Emme and Wren.”

“I’m sure Holly can handle the twins on her own.” Probably with one hand tied behind her back.

“She’s still teaching every day, Chace. That means lesson plans to write and papers to grade. Plus, the semester will end before winter break, so she’ll also have final grades to submit. And even though she teaches at the high school, I imagine the students are still bouncing off the walls this close to the holidays. Add in taking care of the girls, who’ll also be ramped up like squirrels on crack, and she’ll be exhausted.”

Yeah, after the conversation they’d had earlier about just getting the twins to and from school or being available in case of emergency, Chace knew Lyss was right. Still...

“I’m sure her family will gladly pitch in if she needs any help.”

Lyss’s heavy sigh came through the line into his ear, loud and clear. “And why should I expect Holly’s family to help with *my* children when you, *my* own brother, are already there?”

“But you’re all alone in a foreign country.”

“I’m fine, Chace. And I’ll be even better when Sean is transferred and I can talk face to face with a doctor about his injuries, treatment plan, and prognosis, while also ensuring he’s receiving the best care possible.”

“So, in other words, become a huge pain in the ass for the medical staff.”

“In a heartbeat if necessary.”

She would, too. There was no doubt in Chace’s mind. Good thing Lyss had spent several years as a trauma center nurse before the twins were born. She’d understand the doctor-speak, know precisely what to expect, and ask pertinent questions at the appropriate times. She’d also jump in to assist with Sean’s treatment protocol regardless of whether the hospital agreed or not.

“Try to work with the medical staff rather than against them, okay, sis?”

“Sure,” she agreed. “As long as he’s making the progress expected.”

Chace mentally shook his head. Given the right set of circumstances, his sister could be a force to be reckoned with. Especially when someone she cared about was involved. And it was no secret she loved Sean Matthews with every fiber of her being, and always would.

“So, you’ll stay in Hickory Ridge, right?”

“Yeah. Unless I’m called to come bail you out of prison.”

“Funny.” She paused a few beats, as if there was something else she wanted to say before ending the call.

“What?” Chace prompted, knowing she needed a little push to spit it out.

More silence, then finally, “I know this can’t be easy for either of you.”

There was no reason for Chace to ask her to define “this.” He knew what, or rather who, Lyss was referring to. “We’ll manage.”

“You’re sure?”

Chace met his reflection in the mirror. “I’m sure,” he confirmed for his sister and himself.

“Well, I owe you big for this one.”

“Just nurse your husband back to health and bring him home.”

“That’s the plan.” She exhaled slowly. “What time do you want me to call tonight?”

“We’ll probably be home by eight. I know that’s the middle of the night for you, though.”

“It’s fine. Besides, I probably won’t sleep much anyway.”

“You need your rest, Lyss.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Smart ass.”

“Always,” she countered. “Go have fun with Holly and the girls so I can hear all about it tonight when I call.”

“Will do. Love ya, sis.”

“Love you more,” she replied. “And Chace?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“WE’RE READY!” Emme and Wren chorused as they darted into the kitchen, dressed in colorful thigh-length sweaters, fleece leggings, Uggs, and knit beanies. They carried hooded jackets with gloves stuffed in their pockets. “Where’s Uncle Chace?”

“Right here,” came the deep-voiced response, followed by the thud of boots as he descended the stairs, his clean, fresh-from-the-shower scent preceding his entrance. “Is everybody ready to have some fun?” Chace asked, tossing his leather jacket on one of the stools in front of the island.

“We are!” the twins chorused, and Holly wondered, not for the first time either, if they somehow shared a brain.

Chace finished fastening his watch and pulled the sleeve of the shirt to his wrist. “Then why don’t you have your coats on?” he countered, one dark brow arched and a teasing glimmer in his brown eyes.

“We were waiting for you.”

He held his arms out to the side, palms facing up. “Well, here I am.”

Yes, he certainly was, Holly thought as her traitorous eyes took it upon themselves to roam the length of him, taking particular note of how the knit of his green thermal Henley stretched across his mile-wide shoulders and clung to the lean yet clearly defined cut of his arms and torso before disappearing into the waistband of well-worn Levi’s that deliciously showcased his perfectly rounded ass and muscled thighs.

Somehow, Holly managed to stifle the sigh that accompanied her visual journey. Just looking at him still made her ache in places only he ever could.

Gratefully, Emme’s response to Chace kept Holly from sliding further into her memory bank. “But you don’t have your coat on,” the elder twin pointed out while hastily zipping into her neon pink jacket. Her sister immediately followed suit.

As did Chace and Holly.

“Can we go now?” This time, Wren posed the question.

“And what car are we taking?” Emme added.

Chace looked at Holly. “I’m parked behind you, so my truck?”

“Sure. We just have to get their booster seats out of mine.”

“Think you girls can handle that while I talk to your Aunt Holly for a minute?”

The twins responded with a race to the front door as Holly’s stomach took a nosedive to her toes. What didn’t Chace want the girls to hear? Had he spoken with Lyss since breakfast? Was there news about Sean? And if so,

was it good or bad?

Once the girls were clearly out of earshot, Chace turned toward Holly. “I talked to Lyss.”

Her heart dropped.

“Not much has changed. Sean still hasn’t been transported, mostly because of the ruptured spleen and lacerated liver he sustained in the explosion. From what she’s been told, the repairs have been made, so hopefully, he’ll stabilize overnight and be transferred to Germany tomorrow.”

Swallowing hard, Holly nodded. “Are those his only injuries?”

“Fractured tibia, concussion, a few cracked ribs, general cuts and bruises.” He tilted his head from side to side. “At least that’s what she’s been told.”

“How did she sound?”

“Exhausted.”

Holly rubbed her knuckles over the center of her chest, her heart aching for her oldest and dearest friend.

“I offered to fly there to be with her so she wasn’t alone, but she insisted I stay here.”

“You could go anyway.” Leaving to be with his sister wasn’t the same as leaving on a mission to bring aid to another country, snuff out a bad guy, or provide security for complete strangers.

Chace shook his head. “She assured me she’d be fine once Sean was in Germany where she could see and assess his injuries herself.”

“What if he’s worse than they’ve led Lyss to believe?”

“We’ll reassess the situation and decide what to do then.”

“I can handle things here, you know.” Granted, it wouldn’t be a cakewalk with the holidays bearing down on them, but Holly was confident she could make it work.

“I know you can, babe.” The second the endearment fell from his lips, Chace lifted his hands in the air, palm out. “Sorry. Force of habit.”

Even after eight years? Holly couldn’t help but wonder. She didn’t ask the question, though. What was the point? He’d already recognized his slip of the tongue and apologized. No use needlessly belaboring the issue. “Well, if it comes down to Lyss needing you there, please don’t hesitate to go.”

His eyes locked on hers. “I won’t.”

“Good.” Holly nodded. “So, did the two of you schedule a time to call?”

“Yeah.” Chace pocketed his phone and wallet. “Tonight around eight.”

“Are you guys coming?” one of the twins, most likely Emme, hollered from the porch.

“Guess that’s our cue,” Holly said as she adjusted the shoulder strap of her purse and turned toward the door. Both girls stood in the small foyer with their arms folded across their chests.

“Patience doesn’t seem to be one of their virtues,” Chace murmured so only she could hear.

Rattled by his nearness, Holly sucked in a deep breath, exhaling slowly and hoping her heart didn’t pound right through her sternum. “You’ve got that right,” she managed to eke out despite the shiver shooting through her entire body from the low rumble of his sexy voice so close to her ear.

With Chace already having this effect on her central nervous system within twelve hours of his arrival, Holly needed to intensify her defenses against him if she wanted to come out of this situation with her heart intact.

An exercise in futility?

Probably.

Especially considering it hadn’t completely healed in the last eight years. But to keep history from repeating itself, Holly knew she had to try.

For as long as Chace could remember, Christmas in Hickory Ridge formally kicked off the holiday season, and no self-respecting citizen of the twin towns with their small-town appeal dared to miss the time-honored and highly anticipated tradition. So it stood to reason the streets were already packed with locals and tourists eager to dive into the festivities and create more holiday memories to cherish.

Of course, every single one of Chace's recollections about the festival included Holly. Even before they'd officially become a couple, when she'd only been Lyss's best friend, all arms, legs, and a smile so bright it could illuminate the entire world.

His world anyway.

"Look! There's Sophie!" Emme shouted, pointing at the little girl with the tall, dark-blond-haired man who, for some reason, looked familiar to Chace. Had they gone to school together? He didn't think so, but he had seen the guy somewhere before. "Can we watch the parade with her and her dad?"

All three pairs of eyes turned toward Holly, who simply shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

That's all the girls needed to hear as they dashed toward their friend.

"Should we be offended?"

Holly laughed, the sound hitting Chace square in the solar plexus, knocking the air out of his lungs. He loved to hear Holly laugh. Watch the adorable twin dimples form, cutting deep grooves into the hollow of her cheeks as amusement sparkled like diamonds in her chocolate-brown eyes.

The memory of that laugh, among so many other things he shared with

Holly, had kept him sane in some pretty intense situations both in the military and with SSI.

“They’re young and eager to have fun,” Holly’s voice broke into his thoughts. “Especially with their friends.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. “That used to be us,” he murmured.

“A long time ago,” Holly agreed softly, her gaze steady on the twins as they dashed toward their friend.

Chace’s upper arm bumped and brushed against hers as they wound their way through the growing crowd of parade spectators, and more than once, Chace caught himself reaching for Holly’s hand. Just like he used to.

A long time ago, he reminded himself of Holly’s words. Not that it made any difference, since the urge to twine his fingers with hers hadn’t faded. Nope, not one bit. If anything, the desire had intensified as if he were still a child, even more tempted because he’d been told no.

Only Holly hadn’t said no. At least not in so many words. But considering she broke their engagement eight years ago, Chace guessed there was a better than average chance the *no* was implied.

But that didn’t diminish his yearning to touch her either.

“C’mon, you guys,” Wren prompted them with a wave of her gloved hand.

The remaining space was pretty cramped, but they eased into place behind the twins, with Holly in front of him instead of at his side, which was fine. He was tall enough to see over her head, and if his hands found their way to her shoulders under the guise of steadying himself from an accidental jostling by someone in the crowd, that wouldn’t be his fault.

“This is my Uncle Chace and Aunt Holly,” Emme informed her brown-haired friend. “Well, she’s not really our aunt, but our godmother. But we call her Aunt Holly because she and our mom are best friends. But Uncle Chace is Mommy’s brother, so he really is our uncle and also our godfather. They’re here with us because Mommy went to see Daddy in Germany.”

TMI, much? Chace thought to himself and could all but feel Holly cringe at the dissertation *their* goddaughter felt the need to share. Thank goodness they were too young to know how close Holly had come to becoming their aunt by marriage, so that tidbit wasn’t added to Emme’s introduction.

“This is our friend, Sophie. And her dad...” Emme trailed off upon realizing she had no idea what Sophie’s father’s name was.

“Trey Prescott,” the father in question supplied, extending his hand.

Chace leaned forward, his front pressing into Holly's back to clasp Trey's. "Chace Dutton," he supplied. "And this is Holly McCade, godmother and best friend extraordinaire, as you've just been informed."

Trey laughed. "It must take a few years for their filters to develop," he replied as he removed his hand from Chace's and shook Holly's. "Nice to meet you both."

"Same," Chace and Holly replied in unison.

"We're all in the same grade and have the same teacher," Wren added her two cents.

Lucky teacher, Chace thought, if the rest of the class was as chatty as his nieces. Bet the woman had some interesting stories to tell about all she'd seen and heard in the classroom. Though she dealt with older students, Chace imagined Holly did too.

"Look, Daddy," Sophie said, pointing across the street. "There's Aunt Frankie and Uncle Holden."

Chace looked up to find Holden Blackwood and his wife making their way toward them.

As the Prescotts and Blackwoods exchanged greetings and hugs, Holden turned toward Chace. "Damn, man. Don't see you in years and run into you twice in as many days."

"It appears our nieces are friends."

"And we're in the same class," Sophie elaborated for the newcomers.

Emme looked up at Holden. "How do you know my Uncle Chace?"

"We grew up together and were in many of the same classes in school like you girls," Holden answered.

Since Holden hadn't made introductions between Frankie and Holly, Chace assumed they already knew one another. Not that he had time to do the honors, as two blue and white Hickory Ridge police cruisers slowly drove down Main Street with a *woop woop* of their sirens to signal the start of the parade.

The girls claimed their positions front and center for an unobstructed view, plus (and likely more importantly) easy access to the candy some of the entrants were sure to toss into the crowd. Once the police cars and Color Guard passed, the high school band followed, playing a variety of holiday tunes.

And so it continued. More bands from the middle school and bordering counties were scattered amidst antique cars, seasonally decorated floats by

local 4-H clubs along with other school and civic organizations, numerous gleaming firetrucks with horns honking and sirens wailing, multiple walking units, and even the Grinch processed along the parade route.

After about an hour, the main attraction, Santa and Mrs. Claus, arrived in an antique, red, horse-drawn carriage that closely resembled a sleigh with bags of what appeared to be presents piled high in the back. Even the majestic Clydesdale horses wore antlers in keeping with the holiday spirit.

“Remember the year we decided that one Christmas when we were much older, we’d play Santa and Mrs. Claus?” Chace whispered in her ear.

Smiling, Holly nodded.

“Maybe, someday, we still can.”

“Maybe,” Holly replied, surprising the hell out of Chace until he realized she probably spoke without thinking and was now totally regretting her response.

Fortunately, he was saved from commenting as the crowd dispersed around them. They said their goodbyes to the Prescotts and Blackwoods, with Holden reminding him they needed to get together while Chace was in town.

The other families hadn’t taken three steps away when Emme and Wren began debating what to do next.

“Why don’t we just walk around and check things out first,” Chace recommended.

Agreeing, they headed down the street. Festive music played through the speakers fastened to light posts at the beginning and end of each block. Holiday scents mingled together, some, like cinnamon, pine, and gingerbread, dominating the others, especially as they passed street vendors and stores where doors were opening as people came and went.

“Can we get our faces painted?” Emme asked, stopping in front of the community center. “Maybe do a craft?”

“Sure.” After all, that’s why they were here.

Judging from the number of kids darting between the stations set up around the perimeter of the downstairs space, *this* was the place to be after the parade. Without seeking permission, the twins rushed to the corner where three tables were joined in a horseshoe and about six teenagers sat painting the faces, arms, and hands of children as well as adults.

When Emme and Wren jumped into two vacated seats, Chace and Holly moved closer as the artists asked what design the girls wanted and where. Emme chose Rudolph, and Wren went with Frosty.

The blue-haired artist working with Wren looked up, her smile widening when she saw Holly. “Hey, Ms. McCade.”

“Hi, Gemma,” Holly replied with a smile of her own. “I wondered if you’d be here showcasing your talent today.”

“Yeah. I had fun last year, so I thought, why not.”

Holly’s smile warmed all the way to her eyes. “I’m glad.”

“Are these your daughters?” she asked, lifting her hazel gaze toward Chace as if to include him in her question.

“Goddaughters,” Holly clarified. “And this is their uncle,” she added, hooking a thumb toward Chace.

“Yeah. They’re taking care of us while our mom is with our dad. He’s in the Army,” Wren elaborated.

“Well, that’s awfully nice of them,” Gemma replied. “Do you think they might want to get their faces painted?”

“Sure!” Emme chimed in at the same time Holly was shaking her head. “I think Aunt Holly should get a Christmas tree.”

“And Uncle Chace Santa,” Wren made her selection.

“How about Mrs. Claus for your aunt,” Gemma suggested.

“Yeah!” both girls answered.

One dark brow raised, Holly turned to look at Chace. Yeah, he knew what she was thinking, or rather asking, but there was no way Emme and Wren overheard him earlier when he’d reminded Holly about their aspirations to one day dress up as Mr. and Mrs. Claus.

Shrugging, Chace lifted his hands out to his sides and shook his head, telegraphing to Holly that the twins’ choices for their facial designs had to be entirely coincidental.

“Your turn!” Wren declared, hopping up from the chair and motioning for Holly to sit.

Gemma started on Holly’s Mrs. Claus as Emme turned her seat over to Chace.

“You girls stay where we can see you,” he instructed, pointing his index and middle fingers toward his eyes and then turning the gesture toward them.

Giggling, they nodded and went to the table right beside them to make a card for residents of the elder care facility.

As luck would have it, all four were finished simultaneously. Chace dropped a twenty into the jar at the face painting table before joining the girls on the sidewalk.

“I’m hungry. Can we get a hot dog and some hot chocolate?” Emme scrunched up her face and rubbed her face to emphasize her need for nourishment.

“We passed a cart right before the community center.” Holly pointed behind them.

“Lead the way.”

With the parade crowd no longer clogging the sidewalk, several café tables and chairs dotted the area in front of where some food vendors were set up in an alcove between two buildings. “Does anyone want anything besides hot dogs and hot chocolate?”

All three declined.

“Ketchup and mustard on both, right?” he looked at Emme first, then Wren.

Both nodded.

He shifted his gaze to Holly. “Still just mustard and relish for you?”

“Please.”

“Just one?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you’ll get them settled, I’ll get the food.”

Ten minutes later, Emme and Wren were scarfing down their hot dogs on one side of the table with Holly and Chace on the other.

“Just three?” Holly inquired, inclining her head toward the box of food in front of him on the table.

Nodding, he wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I had a big breakfast,” he answered with a grin before taking another bite. He chewed and swallowed before continuing. “So, does that happen often?”

Her gaze narrowed. “What?”

“Running into one of your students?”

“To be honest, I’m surprised I haven’t seen more of them today.” She twirled her finger around in the air. “Small town and all.”

Yeah, after the places he’d been since enlisting in the Army at twenty, Chace had kind of forgotten that aspect of Hickory Ridge. “Is it weird?”

“Not really. But I get along pretty well with most of my students.” She blew on her hot chocolate before taking a tentative sip. “Now, the parents sometimes are a different story, especially when they want to discuss their child’s performance in a public place.”

“They actually do that?” He popped the last of his second hot dog into his

mouth.

“There’ve been a few.” She ran her index finger around the rim of her paper cup. “I try to be as polite as possible and ask that they contact me at school.”

“Does it work?”

“It has so far. Besides, the parents with the most concerns aren’t the ones with struggling students.”

“Then what’s their beef?”

“Overall grade point average mainly.”

He licked ketchup off his thumb. “Why?”

“Class rankings, sports eligibility, college acceptance, and scholarships are probably the top four.”

Since his plan had always been to join the military, all he needed to maintain was a 2.0 to play sports. None of the rest concerned him. Not that he just did enough to get by. No, despite being a jock and some of the antics he managed to engage in, Chace did well in school, graduating with a 3.90 GPA.

Would have had a 4.0 if he’d done better in freshman English, but some of the shit his teacher required them to read and then write about in the first semester held absolutely no interest for him whatsoever. So, he did what most of his friends did—he half-assed it.

Until the second term when Mrs. Snyder assigned Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

“What are you thinking about?” Holly interrupted his thoughts.

He looked at her, a smile tugging at his lips. “Sure you want to know?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“*Frankenstein*.”

Holly wrinkled her nose as if she could actually smell her distaste for the classic thriller. “Why?”

“First, because it was about the only book I enjoyed reading in freshman English.” Chace leaned close enough to count the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. “And second, because we read it together two years later when you were a freshman and were afraid you’d have nightmares.”

“Which I did.”

“Do you make your students read it?”

Holly shook her head. “I only teach sophomores and seniors.”

“No scary books required in those grades?”

“Not in general, no. Besides, I’m older now and no longer that impressionable teenager.”

“I see.” His gaze held hers. “Are you wiser too?”

“Sometimes,” she murmured, scooting her chair back.

“The cookie decorating contest will begin in thirty minutes at Sugar Rush. All interested participants should make their way to the bakery now,” a male voice interrupted “The Hanukkah Song” to announce through the speaker system.

“Can we?” Wren jumped up from her seat.

“Yeah. We put it on the itinerary,” Emme added.

Chace and Holly shared a smile over the twins’ heads. At seven, they were quite savvy, especially when it played to their benefit. Not that it mattered, considering Chace had already decided to allow his nieces to call the shots.

Within reason, of course.

“Last one to Sugar Rush has to do the dishes for a week,” he challenged, grabbing all their trash and tossing it into a plastic receptacle before following at a much slower pace. Chace didn’t care if he was the last to arrive and had to do dishes after every meal for the rest of his life.

Not after he looked up and saw Holly had waited for him.

Don't read anything into it, Chace cautioned himself as he and Holly walked side by side to the red brick building in the middle of the block. He stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets to keep from reaching for her hand after inadvertently bumping into her arm for the second time.

He noticed Holly had done the same.

The closer they got to Sugar Rush, the stronger the mouth-watering aromas wafting out of the bakery became. Just like they had since the day Michael and Genevieve Cavaletti traveled to Hickory Ridge from New York City almost forty years ago with a dream to open a confectionary using the decades of family recipes for every kind of cake, pie, cookie, and sweet treat imaginable.

In Hickory Ridge, a birthday wasn't a birthday without a custom cake from Sugar Rush.

"Smells delicious, as always," Holly said as one of the double magenta doors opened, releasing another fresh shot of sugar-baked goodness to permeate the air.

Chace reached above Holly's head to hold the already-opened door so they could enter the pastel pink and green world of sugar delights. The side where the display cases and cash register were set up remained intact, but the eating side with the round white tables and café chairs had been transformed to include long tables for the cookie decorating contest.

They found Emme and Wren up front. They'd already signed themselves in, donned their white baker's aprons, and waited with the other contestants for their instructions. "All set?" Chace asked.

Both girls thrust their jackets at them. “Can you hold these for us?”

“Sure.” Chace took them and handed one to Holly.

“You better go find a table so you can watch,” Emme suggested.

“Will do, boss,” Chace replied with a mock salute.

“Is everyone ready?” the owner of Sugar Rush, Genevieve Cavaletti, spoke into the microphone hooked up to a portable speaker.

Squeals and cheers followed.

“Glad to hear it,” Gigi, as both family and friends knew her, answered with a musical laugh.

Holly pointed to a table in the corner. “How’s that?”

“Perfect.”

Carefully, they wove their way through the maze of tables, chairs, and clearly more people than the fire marshal deemed safe, to reach the last remaining hi-top. They removed their coats, stashing theirs, along with the twins’, on an empty chair before taking a seat at the exact moment Gigi announced they were ready to begin.

Eagerly, all the participants found a spot behind one of the four long tables laden with various seasonal sugar cookie cut-outs, colored icing, sugar crystals, and edible decorating supplies. Each child under twelve would decorate as many cookies as possible in thirty minutes and present their three best to a panel of “cookie experts” who would judge them.

“Think they’ll have as much fun as we did?” Chace asked, leaning close to be heard without shouting. He and Holly had participated in the contest every year while growing up. Neither ever won, but they were allowed to eat their creations, which for Chace was victory enough since Holly always shared at least half of hers with him.

“Of course.” Smiling, Holly pointed to where the twins stood side by side. With their heads bent, both were concentrating intently on designing and decorating their assortment of cookies.

“Do you still come to the festival every year?”

“Parts of it. Sometimes, I help with fundraisers the school sets up. If it’s not too cold, I usually come for the parade, but I always try to make time for the tree lighting.”

“And the nativity?”

“Yeah.” Nodding, she smiled, and Chace felt ten times lighter inside.

“Remember the year we played Mary and Joseph?”

A blush colored her cheeks. “How could I forget?”

“You know I wasn’t even supposed to have a part?” When her brows knitted together, Chace elaborated. “I paid Billy Landers twenty bucks to let me be Joseph.”

She jerked her head toward him. “You did not.”

Chace grinned. “I did.”

Her brows remained beetled together. “Why?”

“Because I didn’t want him to ask you out.”

“Billy Landers?” she exclaimed. “What made you think he would ask me out?”

“Really?” After all these years, Holly still didn’t realize the impact she’d had on the entire male population back in high school. “Every guy with eyes in his head wanted to ask you out.”

Holly rolled her eyes. “You’re crazy.”

About you, he thought, but said, “I bet a lot of those same guys still do.” Which begged the question of why none had taken advantage of Holly’s single status since their breakup almost a decade ago. Or maybe they had, and things just didn’t work out.

Either way, Chace was relieved she wasn’t dating anyone, since his blood curdled inside his veins at the thought of another man with Holly. Being the recipient of her brighter-than-sunshine smiles. Holding her hand. Getting lost in her doe-like eyes and kissing her petal-soft lips.

Yeah, Chace knew he’d never be able to bear witness to any of that without ending up in jail after he ripped the man’s heart out with his bare hands. And how fucking selfish was that? Because one thing was for damned sure, if Holly were with another man, he’d be someone she cared about very much.

Some who made her happy.

But most importantly, someone who always put her first.

Something Chace hadn’t done eight years ago but wished like hell he had.

“Hey.” She laid her hand on his forearm. “Where’d you go?”

No matter how many years passed between them, Holly could still read him like a book. Oddly, Chace found the realization somewhat comforting. Not enough for him to risk sharing his meandering thoughts with her, but comforting nonetheless.

Gratefully, Gigi Cavaletti saved him from answering by tapping the microphone before speaking into it. “Looks like we have our winners,” she announced in her best mistress of ceremonies voice. A hush fell over the

crowd. “In third place, we have Annabeth Holmes.”

Everyone applauded as a gap-toothed redheaded girl with pigtails rushed forward to accept her trophy and gift certificate.

“Our second place goes to... Drea Lawrence,” Gigi continued, congratulating the tiny girl who was grinning ear to ear.

“That brings us to first place, where it was too difficult to decide a winner, so we have a tie between twin sisters Emme and Wren Matthews.”

The girls squealed in delight, holding onto each other as they jumped up and down at the spectators’ cheers and applause, Chace and Holly the loudest of all. Holly tucked her thumb and forefinger in her mouth and let loose a piercing whistle. Chace pumped his fist in the air with a hearty “Woot! Woot!”

Upon receiving the ribbon and prize they didn’t mind sharing, Emme and Wren sprinted for Chace and Holly. “We won! We won!” they exclaimed, grins beaming from their little faces.

“We heard.” Holly squeezed them both in a congratulatory hug once the girls set their boxes of championship creations on the table. Inside were Christmas trees, angels, and Santas piped with icing and meticulously adorned with the appropriate decorations Sugar Rush supplied. “They’re perfect! You both did an awesome job!”

“What do you think, Uncle Chace?” Emme inquired, one brow raised.

“I think they look good enough to eat.” He wagged his brows for emphasis.

“Not before we take some pictures,” Holly interceded.

Chace whipped his phone from his pocket and snapped pics of the cookies, each twin with her own box displayed, and one of them together, smiling from ear to ear as they stood behind the table in front of their award-winning confections.

Once everyone was satisfied with the shots he’d captured, Chace started to pocket his phone when he looked down to find Wren staring up at him. “Aren’t you gonna send the pictures to Mommy?”

Another direct hit to his heart. Not so much from the question but the hint of sadness shadowing his niece’s eyes. “Of course. Let me do that right now.” Chace tapped the necessary sequence on his screen and hit send. He smiled down at Wren. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“No problem,” she replied with a smile he was relieved to see.

“You want a cookie now?” Emme asked, holding her box up for him to

make a selection.

“Hmm,” Chace murmured as he leaned forward, tapping his lips with his forefinger, and debated which cookie he wanted to try. “How about...this one.” He plucked a Santa where some of the red frosting had bled into the white, which meant it wasn’t one of the prize-winning trio.

Wren thrust her box at him next. “Take one of mine too.”

Chace went through the same decision-making process he had with Emme. “Definitely this one.” He pointed to a crooked Christmas tree.

“But it broke. I tried to fix it with some icing, but it didn’t work so good.”

“I think it looks perfect,” Chace assured her, because it did. To him anyway. “Besides, you used your noggin’ to figure out a way to try and mend it. Not everyone would have thought of that.” He paused. “On second thought, maybe we should preserve it in case you become a famous structural engineer or something.”

Her little brow wrinkled. “What the heck is a structural engineer?”

“Well, an engineer is like a problem solver, so a structural engineer keeps things from falling apart. Like you did with the Christmas tree.”

Wren considered his explanation for a few seconds, then shook her head. “Nah. You can go ahead and eat it because I’m gonna be a doctor when I grow up.”

Color him impressed. “If you’re sure.”

“Positive.”

“Okay.” Chace bit into each cookie. “Delicious. Just like I expected.”

Both girls giggled. “We didn’t bake them, Uncle Chace,” Emme informed him. “We only decorated them.”

“That’s what makes them taste so good.” To validate his claim, Chace shifted his attention to Holly and was rendered totally speechless when he found her looking at him in a way she hadn’t in eight long years. As if his interactions with the twins truly warmed her heart.

Had he impressed her? For some reason, Chace hoped so. Not because it was his intention but because, once upon a time, impressing Holly McCade had been his number one priority.

But like she’d said when they arrived for the parade, that had been a long time ago.

“Can we go to the petting zoo?” Wren broke into his thoughts.

Holly nodded. “First, go ask if you can have a bag for your cookie boxes. They’ll be easier to carry that way.”

“Good idea,” came the response from one of the twins as they raced toward the counter where a dark-haired younger version of Gigi Cavaletti waited on customers.

“Is that Ashton?” Chace asked.

“Yeah. She came back after her grandfather’s second mini-stroke to help out. From what her mother told mine, the plan is for Ash to assume the management responsibilities of the shop while easing her grandparents into more of a semi-retirement role.”

“How’s that working out?” Chace imagined it was no easy feat.

“Ironically enough, not as challenging as everyone expected. Though both Michael and Gigi will continue working in some capacity, like today with the cookie decorating contest or during the morning rush, it’ll give them more freedom and time to enjoy life without being tied to a set schedule day in and day out.”

“They’ve definitely put in their time.” For longer than his thirty-four years, that was for sure.

“Got ‘em,” Emme declared as both girls deposited their cookie boxes into the bags and put on their coats. “Ready?”

“We’re right behind you,” Chace replied, gesturing for the twins to lead the way.

The petting zoo was set up behind the Episcopal church on the next corner. Handing off their bags, Emme and Wren quickly scampered to the makeshift pens holding a variety of farm and domestic animals. There was also a tented area where wildlife specialists had set up various birds and owls for display.

“They’ve expanded since I was here last.” Impressed, Chace took in the usual array of calves, sheep, pigs, and goats, along with the added menagerie of donkeys, miniature horses, ducks, kittens, puppies, and rabbits. He was sure there was more, but that’s what he could see from where he stood.

“One year, they even had a boa constrictor on display. I’m glad to see it’s not here this year.” Holly rested her forearms atop the metal fence, her gaze focused on the girls as they ran from pen to pen, arms flailing and chattering up a storm. But they politely listened when the owners answered questions from the crowd and provided “fun facts” about their pets, all of which Emme and Wren absorbed like a sponge.

Chace was sure he and Holly would hear *everything* the twins had learned before they got back home. Then they’d probably listen to it all again when

they shared the day's events with Lyss.

“Still not a fan of snakes?”

Holly shot him a sidelong glance. “I will *never* be a fan of snakes. Or spiders. Or any other creepy crawly critter.”

“They’re just as scared of you as you are of them.” How many times had he used that same reasoning with her when they were together? Too many to count. But there were times that her arachnophobia and herpetophobia played to his advantage. Like when he could exercise his heroic abilities by ridding the area of the offending creatures. Or offer protection by wrapping her in his arms, even carrying her to safety.

But his all-time favorite was devising ways to distract Holly from her paralyzing fears by driving her, and himself, to distraction by loving her with his hands, mouth, tongue, and body.

His skin tightened, as did the denim around his groin. If memories were all it took to arouse him to the point of sporting wood, what the hell would happen if he actually touched her? Before his thoughts could travel farther down that dangerous path, Chace forced himself to think of something, *anything*, to diffuse the growing situation in his boxer briefs.

A cold shower. A wintry scene. Icicles. Snow.

Slowly but surely, everything south of his border seemed to return to its normal state. Well, as normal as possible with Holly standing close enough for him to smell the cinnamon and vanilla scent clinging to her skin.

“Uncle Chace! Aunt Holly! Come see the puppies.”

“This could be trouble.” Holly sighed.

They began walking toward the pen where black, brown, and tan furballs scampered around and on the twins. “Why do you say that?”

“Because ever since Sean’s been deployed, they’ve been begging Lyss to get them a dog.”

“I’m guessing she’s not in favor of the idea?”

“It isn’t that she doesn’t want to get a dog. She just wants to wait before adding anything else that needs extra care.” She looked at him. “Assuming the role of both parents for Emme and Wren while working a full-time job is exhausting enough as it is.”

Chace got that. The long hours and amount of traveling his job entailed kept him from getting so much as a goldfish, let alone a dog.

“I help as much as possible, but it’s still *a lot* on her plate.”

“She’s never said anything to me,” Chace replied more to himself than in

response to Holly, but when he looked at her, he read the expression on her face loud and clear. *Would it have made any difference if she had?*

Eight years ago? Obviously not. Otherwise, they wouldn't even be having this conversation. Instead, he'd have left the Rangers, married the love of his life, and been available for whatever his sister needed while her husband was deployed.

Today? Well, he was no longer in Cairo, now, was he?

Nope. When Lyss had called for his help, Chace had dropped everything to do as she asked. Yeah, the circumstances were a bit different now than they'd been eight years ago. He was older. Had more options. And after everything he'd seen and done, both in the military and as a civilian, as well as the choices he'd made—or in some cases didn't make—Chace had learned some valuable life lessons.

Like what, but most significantly *who* should always take precedence above all else.

His family and Holly McCade.

Holiday music flowed through the strategically placed speakers as dusk fell over Hickory Ridge. In the hour that had passed since Holly and Chace managed to pry the twins away from the petting zoo, they'd scoped out a couple of shops, purchased a few souvenirs, and scarfed down four chicken tender and fries specials from one of the food trucks lining the closed-off streets.

As they walked toward the center of town for the tree lighting, the darkening sky provided the perfect backdrop for the white lights outlining every building, the twinkling garlands of holly circling each lamppost, and the festive decorations, both amateur and professional, illuminating most storefront windows.

Despite the chill in the air, warmth bloomed inside Holly as she reveled in the picturesque scene surrounding them. A huge fan of most holidays, Christmas was her all-time favorite. From the story of Jesus's birth to spending time with friends and family to the true magic of the season, there was nothing about Christmas she disliked.

Except for the year she'd given Chace back his ring and broken their engagement. Even then, Holly never lost her love for the holiday—only the man she'd expected to share every single holiday with forever.

That year, though Holly celebrated with her family, she hadn't participated in Christmas in Hickory Ridge. She couldn't. Not when everything was still so raw from losing Chace. When everything and everyone she encountered would only remind her of him. What they had. How her world always seemed brighter with him in it. More meaningful.

More *everything*.

Gratefully, the following years weren't nearly as tough as the first. That wasn't to say things had been easy; merely manageable. Still, Holly looked forward to enjoying more of the festivities this year.

Just under a completely different set of circumstances than the one she was in presently.

And no, the freaking irony of her current situation hadn't gone unnoticed either.

The closer they came to the center of town, the more electric the vibe among the crowd. Children of all ages gathered with parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters. Some waited patiently. Others struggled to stand still no matter how hard they or their parents tried to rein them in.

And a few of the youngest crowd shared their frustrations at ear-splitting decibels.

Holly couldn't blame them. For many, it had likely been a very long day.

Upon reaching the circle, they, along with every other spectator, jockeyed for position as close to the small makeshift stage as possible. Fortunately, Trey Prescott and his daughter had scored a spot of prime real estate directly in front of the towering Douglas fir, and the minute Sophie saw the twins, she eagerly beckoned Emme and Wren to join them.

"Can we?"

Simultaneously, Chace and Holly looked at each other to ensure they were on the same page before giving the go-ahead the girls were obviously anticipating, since they were halfway to where Sophie was standing before Holly finished the *r-e* of her monosyllabic "Sure" response.

Not that Holly expected anything less. Just like she wasn't surprised when the crowd immediately took advantage of the tiny space created when the twins moved forward. The shift packed everyone as close as sardines in a can, Holly and Chace included, since they were all but glued to each other's side from shoulders to boots.

The scene was reminiscent of old times. Only when they were together Holly never stood beside Chace as if she were a statue with her hands stuffed into her pockets and all but holding her breath for fear the expansion of her lungs might nudge her body more tightly against his. And if that happened, Holly was sure he'd feel the jackhammering of her heart as it vibrated her entire body.

“You okay?” Chace murmured, his breath warm against her ear.

Did he read minds now? Certainly seemed like it.

Afraid she couldn't speak coherently, Holly nodded, praying whoever was in charge of the tree lighting would get this show on the road before she spontaneously combusted from a lethal mixture of overbearing memories, an overstimulated nervous system, and the overwhelming yearnings she couldn't seem to escape.

Before she could crawl completely out of her skin, Mayor Hudson stepped up to the microphone, welcomed everyone to the festivities, and said a few words about the history and tradition of Christmas in Hickory Ridge before turning the mic over to Santa.

“Ho, ho, ho,” the jolly old elf, who bore a striking resemblance to Culver Duncan, bellowed. “Is everyone ready?”

A thunderous variety of affirmations followed.

“And everyone has been good boys and girls this year?”

Another round of exuberant confirmations rang out from the crowd.

“Then, I guess we're ready, Mrs. Claus.” Santa covered her gloved hand with his on the lever-handled switch and began the countdown. “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.” They pulled the switch, and thousands of red, green, yellow, blue, and white lights illuminated the massive tree from top to bottom.

Cheers, *oohs*, *ahhs*, applause, and wolf-whistles erupted from the spectators before everyone joined Santa, Mrs. Claus, and the mayor in singing “O, Christmas Tree”. When they reached the refrain, Holly's vision blurred as an onslaught of unexpected emotions flooded her system.

What the hell was that all about?

She never got teary-eyed before at the tree lighting. Or when singing any Christmas carols. Not when she and Chace were a couple or in the years since they'd gone their separate ways. Granted, Holly had shed many tears, but never in public.

And especially for no apparent reason.

Maybe it was all too much. Sean's accident. Lyss's flying to Germany to be with him. Chace's arrival to help with the twins. Barely getting any sleep the night before with him under the same roof. Then fully participating in the kickoff of Christmas in Hickory Ridge with him and the girls.

All that coupled with the memories of the Christmases they had shared, it was no wonder she was on sensory overload.

When the song ended, Wren, Emme, and the Prescotts joined Holly and Chace. “Have you ever seen so many lights on one tree in your whole life?” Wren exclaimed, her eyes as big as saucers.

Grateful for the distraction and the thinning crowd, Holly moved forward a few steps, putting a bit of space between her and Chace. She immediately missed the warmth of his body against hers. “Well, it’s a mighty big tree, so I imagine it needs a lot of lights, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but they’re all so bright and twinkly.”

That was true. Rather than remaining static or blinking intermittently, the multi-colored lights flickered like candlelight, much like the flamelike bulbs inside the lantern-like top of each lamppost. Altogether, the twinkling provided a cozier ambiance for the evening festivities.

“Are we leaving now?” Emme asked.

“That’s the plan,” Chace replied.

The faces of all three girls fell. “But we wanted to get ice cream.”

Holly looked at the trio apologetically. “Maybe next time. Tonight, we need to get home in time for your mom’s call.”

That was all the reminder the twins needed. They thanked Trey and Sophie for letting them join them in the front row for the tree lighting, and everyone said their goodbyes before heading in the direction of their vehicles.

As the girls scampered a few feet ahead, Chace leaned toward Holly and whispered, “We probably have time for ice cream.”

She rolled her eyes toward him. “Is that your subtle way of telling me *you* want some ice cream?”

“Maybe.” When he grinned, Holly tried to ignore the heat racing up her spine at the gesture.

“There’s a carton in the freezer back at Lyss’s.”

“But is it peppermint?”

Every year they attended the festival together, she and Chace always had a bowl of peppermint ice cream from Scoops. “No. But we have candy canes you can break up and add to the vanilla bean ice cream.”

“It won’t be the same,” he grumbled half-heartedly, a mischievous glint shining in his dark eyes.

“You’ll get over it,” Holly assured him.

The twins beat them to the truck by several lengths, hopping inside once Chace used the key fob to unlock the vehicle. But before they reached the gleaming black Ford F-250, Chace surprised the hell out of Holly by circling

her wrist with his fingers and lightly tugging her to a stop behind the tailgate before she peeled off toward the passenger side.

Her breath caught in her throat a millisecond before her stomach plummeted to her toes from his touch. But when he urged her to face him and stepped into her personal space, Holly's heart nearly pounded right out of her chest.

After eight damn years, why did this man still have such a profound effect on her? It wasn't fair. He'd made his choice, and she hadn't made the cut. For that, she should hate him. Or it should have been enough for her to have gotten over him.

Moved on.

Stopped comparing every freaking man she met to him.

Jaw clenched, Holly looked up at him. "What?" she prompted, half afraid of what he was about to say.

Or what he might do.

Chace didn't release her wrist. In fact, she thought he might even have tightened his hold. "I just wanted to thank you."

Huh? She narrowed her gaze. "For what?"

"For today." He tucked his chin but kept his eyes on hers. "For not allowing our past to get in the way of doing what's best for Emme and Wren while Lyss is with Sean."

"This isn't about us, Chace. It's about my best friend. Your sister and her husband. But most importantly, our goddaughters."

"I know," he agreed. "But it could have been incredibly awkward."

Wasn't that the truth? Much like now when Chace still held onto her wrist, and she had done nothing to free herself from his grasp. What message did that send? To him as well as herself.

Holly decided to ignore those thoughts completely. Instead, she responded to his comment. "Then it's a good thing I've learned to adapt."

"But that's just it, Holly. I don't want this to be awkward. Especially when we have no idea how long this arrangement might last."

"Under the circumstances? I'm not sure we have a choice."

Locking with hers, his beautiful brown eyes darkened even more. "We always have a choice, Holly."

"You're right." Stepping away from him, Holly slowly pulled her wrist free of his grasp. "And when you made yours eight years ago, awkward became our new normal."

“Hi, Mommy!” Emme and Wren greeted Lyss with a wave the minute her face appeared on the computer screen.

“Hi, my babies,” she returned with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Did you have fun at the festival?”

Nodding, the girls bounced on their knees and launched into an animated play-by-play accounting of everything they’d seen and done at the Christmas in Hickory Ridge kickoff. One twin would begin describing an event or activity. The other would finish, with each adding their unique perspective about their day.

Lyss listened intently, commenting and asking pertinent questions whenever she could squeeze in a word. Otherwise, all she could do was nod as the twins prattled on.

Once they’d arrived back at the house, Holly texted Lyss to let her know they were home while Chace set up the video chat. He placed the laptop on the coffee table in the living room so both girls would have simultaneous and equal access to the screen and camera from their vantage points on the floor.

As soon as the call connected, Chace joined Holly on the sofa where they could also see and hear the call.

“She looks beat,” Chace observed, keeping his voice low enough so only Holly could hear. It was the first words either of them had spoken to each other since leaving the festival.

Not that Chace didn’t have plenty he wanted to say. Just not within earshot of the girls. Or anyone else, for that matter. At some point, the opportunity to continue their conversation would arise. And when it did,

Chace would take full advantage of it.

Now, though, he focused every bit of his attention on his sister. The exhaustion and weariness from the last few days showed in the slump of her shoulders, the deepening lines bracketing her currently unsmiling mouth, the dull shadows in her denim-blue eyes, and the dark smudges beneath them. Just seeing how big of a toll Sean's injury and being away from the girls was taking on her made his heart hurt.

It also told him she probably didn't have any further news on Sean's condition to alleviate her concern either. And that pissed him the hell off.

"Where's Daddy?" Emme asked after they finished recounting the happenings at the festival.

Oh. Shit.

To her credit, Lyss didn't even flinch at the question. Probably because, as the twins' mother, she'd been expecting it. "Actually, he's asleep right now."

"Why?"

"Because we're six hours ahead of what time it is there."

"Then why aren't you asleep too?" Wren piped up.

"Because I told Uncle Chace I'd wait up so I could talk to you after your day at the festival. I didn't want you to miss the parade or any of the other fun it sounds like you had."

"We missed you." This from Emme, accompanied by a nod from Wren. "But maybe you'll be back to go next weekend."

Lyss nodded. "I hope so." Sniffling, she pressed her lips together and took another deep breath through her nose.

Chace could see Lyss was barely holding herself together. He leaned forward to intervene. "All right, munchkins. I think we need to let your momma get some rest."

"Will we talk to you again tomorrow?"

Lyss pasted on a smile. "Of course. But maybe a little earlier, okay?"

"Okay," both girls agreed before they blew kisses, declared their I love yous, and said good night.

As if sensing he wanted to talk to Lyss without a seven-year-old audience, Holly shepherded them upstairs to get ready for bed. When Chace returned his attention to the screen, his sister was wiping tears from her eyes with the sleeve of her robe.

"You okay?"

Nodding, Lyss pressed her lips together again before speaking. “All of this is so hard, Chace. The endless waiting. The vicious loop of *what ifs*. Imagining the worst and hoping for the best. Missing the twins.” Her voice broke. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about, Lyss. Not for Sean’s accident. Or for wanting to be with him. Or missing Emme and Wren. Nothing.”

“But it’s also disrupted your life. As well as Holly’s. And who knows for how long?”

“None of that matters.” And none of it did. As Holly said earlier, this wasn’t about them. This was about Lyss, Sean, and the twins. What they needed, and not the effect any of it had on him and his sister’s best friend. “Go get some sleep, Lyss,” Chace ordered with a smile. “You need to be rested when you see Sean tomorrow.”

“If they transfer him.”

“They will. Think positive.”

“I’m not sure I have the strength.” She laughed at the irony in that statement. “I really appreciate you and Holly looking after the girls, Chace. Especially with Christmas so close.”

“We’re glad to help.” Though he doubted Holly would appreciate his use of *we* as if they were a unit, he was confident she’d agree about wanting to help Lyss in any way she could.

“I’ll keep you posted. Good night, Chace.”

“Good night, sis.”

Chace disconnected the video call and closed the lid on the laptop. Sighing, he leaned back against the soft cushions of the sofa, plowing his fingers through his hair and then linking them across his abdomen.

Like his sister, Chace felt every one of the last seventy-two hours clear to the marrow of his bones. From the shock of Lyss’s initial call about Sean to the long-ass flight from Cairo after his replacement arrived to everything that had happened in the twenty-four hours since his arrival in Hickory Ridge, Chace was utterly spent.

He should get up. Fight the fatigue like he’d been trained to do as a Ranger. Get his circulation going. Only he couldn’t muster the energy it took to move even one muscle fiber. A quick power nap. That was all he needed. Just a few minutes, and he’d be good to go.

At least, that was what Chace told himself as his eyes drifted closed.

“I WISH we could have talked to Daddy, don’t you, Sissy?” Emme asked Wren.

“Yeah, but he needs his rest to be a soldier.”

Holly’s chest tightened at the twins’ conversation as they gathered everything for their shower. Despite how well Lyss had handled Emme’s question about where her father was, Holly knew that couldn’t be Lyss’s go-to response every time she chatted with her daughters. At some point, they’d have to tell the girls some version of the truth.

Which was *not* something Holly was looking forward to, no matter who explained the situation to the twins.

“Are we going anywhere tomorrow?” Effortlessly, Wren changed the subject.

“I’m not sure.”

“We should get a Christmas tree,” Emme suggested.

“And decorate it,” Wren added with a few bounces up and down on her toes.

“Then we could show it to Mommy when we talk to her.”

“I don’t know if we can get all that done by the time your mother said she’d call.”

“Then we’ll show it to her the next time,” Emme countered with a look that said, *See? Problem solved.*

If only life were as easy as her favorite seven-year-olds thought it was.

“Let’s go see what Uncle Chace thinks.”

“Freeze,” Holly commanded as they made a break for the door. “Showers first. Pajamas second. Then we’ll see.”

Wren’s eyes widened with an idea. “Why don’t you go ask him while we get our shower?”

Yeah, she could do that, especially since it would give her control over the conversation rather than her goddaughters. “Okay. But make sure you close the curtain so we don’t have another water mess to clean up.”

Both shot her a thumbs-up and disappeared into the Jack and Jill bathroom separating their bedrooms.

Though the twins had their own bedrooms, two twin beds were also in each for sister sleepovers that, according to Lyss, happened more often than not. So far, anyway. For now, the setup allowed the girls to share space if

they wanted to while providing personal space when needed.

Holly expected the need for privacy would occur more frequently as Emme and Wren got closer to their teenage years. It certainly had for Holly and her older sister Kit.

Once she heard the water running in the shower, Holly went in search of Chace to inform him the girls already had a plan to get and decorate a Christmas tree for the following day. Hopefully, Holly could talk him into siding with her on waiting another week.

Or even two.

Maybe even scrub the entire idea altogether.

It wasn't that Holly didn't want a Christmas tree. She did. Just not a live one with needles dropping all over everywhere. Or she'd need to remember to water it so it didn't dry out and become more of a fire hazard than it already was.

That's why Holly put up a small artificial tree each year. Less mess. Less hassle. Less dangerous. And less likely to initiate a lecture on fire safety from her firefighter baby brother Nick.

Holly entered the family room with her talking points ready to sway Chace to her side of the Christmas tree debate only to find him sound asleep on the couch. Her heart hitched a little at the sight.

Holly used to love watching Chace sleep. Sometimes, she would lightly trace the thickening stubble shadowing the hard line of his jaw. Other times, she would count his chest's slow rise and fall with every breath he took. Mostly, she just admired how ridiculously handsome he was and thanked her lucky stars to have him in her life.

One time he'd told her he knew she studied him while he slept. Whether he did or not, Holly had no idea. He'd never opened his eyes or confronted her. Not that it would have stopped her if he had.

Even eight years later, Holly found it nearly impossible to tear her eyes away from him. The attraction between them was still that freaking strong. But she couldn't risk Chace waking up to find her staring at him with her hands stuffed into the front pockets of her jeans to keep from touching him.

Turning, Holly forced herself to move, returning to the girls' bedroom to prevent them from barreling down the stairs and waking Chace up. A few minutes later, they emerged from the bathroom wearing wooly pajamas and slippers.

"Did you talk to Uncle Chace?" Wren inquired.

Holly shook her head. "He's asleep."

Emme wrinkled her nose. "Asleep? But he's a grownup, and it's not even nine o'clock."

"He's probably jet-lagged from the time difference between here and Cairo, not to mention the long flight and the drive to Hickory Ridge."

"The airport isn't that far from here," Wren disputed.

"It is after a twelve-hour flight."

"I guess," she replied in resignation. A second later her eyes lit up. "Do you think he'll wake up before we go to bed?"

"I have no idea about that, but I do know we aren't gonna wake him up."

"Oh-kay," Emme drew the word out, and both their little shoulders slumped in disappointment.

That lasted all of about three seconds.

They plopped on the bottom bunk and bounced as if they had some kind of internal combustion system revving them up. "Can we go ahead and bring the Christmas decorations down from the attic?" This from Wren.

"Not tonight."

Both bottom lips poked out. "Why not?"

"Because your uncle is asleep, and I'm not climbing up there by myself."

"We can do it."

"Nobody's doing it," Holly replied firmly. "Not tonight, anyway."

Emme pursed her lips together. "You're no fun."

Holly arched her right brow. "Oh really? So, does that mean you didn't have any fun at the Christmas festival we took you to earlier today? Because I could have sworn you did."

Chagrined, they lowered their gazes. "We did," they confessed in whisper-soft voices.

"I thought so."

"But everything we did today just really put us in the Christmas spirit," Emme explained.

"I know, but you also have to understand we can't do everything all in one weekend either."

Wren looked up through her lashes at Holly. "But maybe we can do something tomorrow?" Her expression and tone were full of hope.

"Maybe," she conceded.

"After we check with Uncle Chace," Emme stipulated for good measure.

"Exactly," Holly agreed and glanced at her watch. "But right now, it's

bedtime.”

Though their little faces fell in disappointment, neither tried to wheedle any extra time out of her. For that, Holly was eternally grateful and pulled them in for goodnight hugs and kisses before they crawled into their beds.

She was about to snap off the light when Emme’s voice stopped her. “Aunt Holly?”

“Yes.”

“Will you give Uncle Chace a hug and kiss goodnight for us?”

Holly’s heart slammed to a halt. At least that’s what felt like was happening inside her chest at her goddaughter’s request. Swallowing past the sudden lump in her throat, Holly wracked her brain for a suitable response since “not a good idea” would undoubtedly lead to more questions she wasn’t prepared to answer.

Realizing her silence might also prompt further inquiries, Holly said what she hoped would suffice. “If he’s awake.”

The second the words fell from her lips, Holly hastily retreated from the room and quietly pulled the door closed behind her, praying hard that Chace remained fast asleep on the sofa until she made it safely to her room. It was a great plan until she turned in the hallway and ran smack dab into a towering wall of rock-hard muscle.

Shit!

Chace had opened his mouth to alert Holly to his presence when she flew out of the twins' room and barreled right into him, her momentum knocking them both slightly off balance. Instead of falling on their asses, their quick reflexes took over. Chace grabbed her biceps at the same time Holly slammed her palms against his chest, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt.

Neither spoke.

Nor moved.

It was as if they were suspended in time.

Hell, Chace wasn't even sure he was still breathing. The only thing he knew for certain was how much he wanted to close the gap between them, lower his head, and kiss the living hell right out of her. He would have too if she dared to look up at him rather than boring a hole straight through the wall of his chest with her gaze.

He still might, considering Holly had yet to move so much as a muscle. Not to release her hold on his shirt or to pull free from his grasp.

How long they stood there like statues was anyone's guess. Probably no more than a few seconds, though for him, it felt like a freaking eternity. He was torn about what to do. Should he break the spell by saying something or remain rooted in place forever?

Chace suspected the twins were still awake, since he'd heard voices before Holly flew out of the room. Not wanting to chance them getting up to investigate only to find him standing with Holly in the hallway, he decided to go with a bit of humor. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm awake."

With a shake of her head, Holly blinked and unfisted his shirt. She smoothed the fabric back in place with a slide of her palms over his pecs, which only magnified the already intense urge he was fighting—to sweep her up in his arms and carry her straight down the hallway to his bed.

As if she sensed the internal battle waging war within him, Holly stepped back, putting enough space between them for their arms to drop back to their sides. Too bad the distance did nothing to extinguish the burning need for this woman raging like an inferno through his entire being.

But if separating himself from Holly by half a continent for the better part of the last eight years hadn't done a thing to diminish his feelings, twelve inches didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of succeeding.

"I'm going downstairs," Holly stated after several long seconds, careful to keep her voice low before skirting around him to make her escape.

Chace caught up with her in the kitchen a few minutes later.

"Holly."

She opened a cabinet and retrieved a bowl. "Sit down, and I'll fix you some ice cream."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know." Without looking at him, she plucked two candy canes from the opened package on the island and dropped them into a baggie after unwrapping them. She located a small mallet among the other kitchen utensils stuffed haphazardly in the blue and gray earthenware crock beside the stove. She began crushing the peppermint candy without making much of a sound at all.

Chace noticed she'd only set out one bowl. "Aren't you having any?"

"No. I'm good." Holly crossed to the fridge and pulled a half gallon of vanilla ice cream from the freezer drawer. She scooped three overflowing dollops into the single bowl and poured the pulverized peppermint on top. "Do you want any chocolate syrup?"

"No, thanks."

"Here you go, then." Holly set the bowl on one of the four handwoven placemats on the other side of the island. "Do you want anything to drink?" she asked while putting the lid back on the carton of ice cream. "There's tea, soda, water. Probably some wine or beer."

"I don't expect you to wait on me, Holly."

Her shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug. "I just figured I owed you," she all but mumbled.

“Owed me? For what?”

She wiped the counter by the sink for the fourth time. “Rushing us to leave when we still had time for ice cream at Scoops, for one.” She folded the dishcloth and draped it over the gooseneck of the faucet. “Not paying better attention when leaving the girls’ room and practically running you over in the hallway for another.”

“I should have said something so you knew I was there,” Chace replied and popped a spoonful of Holly’s version of peppermint ice cream into his mouth. It was pretty damned close to what Scoops actually served. “Or at least waited for you down here.”

Her brow furrowed. “Did you need something?”

“Just thought we could finish our earlier conversation.” He slid another bite into his mouth. “This is very good, by the way.” He scooped another spoonful and held it out toward her. “You wanna try it?”

With a shake of her head, Holly took a step back. “I’ve had some before. That’s how I knew how to make my own.”

It didn’t escape his notice that she didn’t address his comment about finishing their earlier conversation, but he let it slide and stuck with the peppermint ice cream topic. “Still as innovative as ever, I see.” He wasn’t surprised. She always had a special knack for figuring things out.

“It’s not exactly rocket science.” She filled a cup of water and began watering Lyss’s kitchen herb garden on the deep windowsill above the farmer’s sink.

He took a minute to finish his ice cream and then crossed the kitchen to where she stood.

Stepping to the side, Holly motioned with the cup. “Just sit it down there, and I’ll take care of it.”

“I’m perfectly capable of washing my own dirty dishes. And anyone else’s, for that matter.”

“Good to know.” Holly opened the dishwasher and stashed the watering cup on the top rack. “Your spoon goes in the utensil basket. Your bowl up top.”

Chuckling to himself, Chace followed her instructions, even taking the initiative to close the dishwasher door. Turning, he found Holly halfway across the kitchen, watching him as if she expected him to screw up the menial task. “Did I do everything to your satisfaction?” he asked as he leaned back against the edge of the counter.

“Smart ass.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Even if he’d wanted to, which, despite Holly’s obvious discomfort, Chace did not, he couldn’t keep the shit-eating grin off his face. “So, do we have plans already lined up for tomorrow with the girls?”

“They want to get a Christmas tree.” Holly sighed.

“I’m sensing that isn’t at the top of your to-do list.”

“Not really.”

“Is there something else you’d rather do?” He could think of a few things he wouldn’t mind tackling. In private. With her.

Lowering her gaze, Holly focused on pushing the toe of her boot against the tile flooring. “Not really,” she repeated.

“You just know you don’t want to get a Christmas tree,” Chace deduced, wondering why.

“Not a real one. No.”

What? The Holly he remembered loved going out in search of the perfect tree. And not from some pop-up lot full of pre-cut pines shipped in from who knew where, but from locally owned tree farms or a dense forest-like field in the middle of nowhere full of Mother Nature’s organic offerings.

Those tree hunts with Holly were some of Chace’s best memories of their time together. Especially when the weather grew colder, and they’d spend more time experimenting with how to keep each other warm than looking at firs and evergreens.

He especially liked it when it snowed. That’s when the long, toe-curling kisses seemed to last forever. And when he could back her up against a towering oak with her denim-clad legs wrapped around his waist in a vise-like grip as he pressed his burgeoning erection against the apex of her thighs.

As if it were yesterday, he could hear her soft pants and murmurings of pleasure. Taste the sweetness of her lips and neck while they ground their bodies together and generated enough heat to warm themselves and, quite frankly, all of Hickory Ridge.

But the part he loved the most was the glorious explosion that followed, clothed or unclothed, no matter their location. All they ever needed to reach the pinnacle of ecstasy was each other.

“Stop.”

Holly’s voice snapped Chace back to the here and now, where his memories were the only stimulation necessary for his arousal to test the

strength of the button fly on his Levi's.

Yes, he was that turned on without even touching her.

Not that he was surprised, considering he'd been experiencing raging hard-ons for the past eight years by just remembering how good they were together.

But wait. Holly had told him to stop. Only he hadn't said anything after she'd admitted to not wanting a live tree. Instead, he'd taken his little trip down memory lane.

Oh, shit. Had he said something during his reverie?

Or had she actually read his mind?

No, idiot. She probably drew her own conclusions seeing your Johnson swell before her eyes.

"Sorry," he murmured. What else could he say? "Guess I'm not doing my part in making things less difficult."

"Or awkward."

"C'mon, Holly. We were together for ten years. You can't honestly expect me to believe you aren't similarly affected when you allow yourself to remember our time together."

"No, but it isn't nearly as apparent."

Maybe her intent was to kill him. Because even though she hadn't uttered the actual words, the implication of her statement was loud and clear—the memories of their past aroused her as much as they did him.

So, did that mean she thought of him? Of how good he made her feel? Perhaps she even called on those memories when pleasuring herself. Imagined it was him instead of her fingers or handheld device. Screamed his name when she brought herself to orgasm?

He fucking hoped so since she starred in every single one of his fantasies when taking matters into his own hands.

And more often than not, when he went in search of a little human connection with a woman who wanted the same things he did—mindless and faceless sex.

A terrible thought struck him. Had Holly sought the same? Or had she actually met someone? Gone on dates. Invited them into her bed? The idea of another man touching her was enough to give him a stroke.

Should have considered all that eight years ago.

Yeah, he should have thought about a lot of freaking things. Considered all his options and made different decisions. But he hadn't. And it was far too

late to play the *shoulda, woulda, coulda* game.

That in no way meant he had to accept things as they stood. Or that he couldn't still have a future with Holly. All it really meant was that he needed to figure out a way to convince her they still belonged together despite what had occurred in their past.

For now, Chace steered the conversation back to the present matter. "Have you had a tree in the last eight years?"

"An artificial one."

Oh, that hurt his heart. "Why?"

Holly shot him a look that said *Why do you think?* Her verbal response was more logical. "Easier. Cheaper. Don't have to remember to water it. No needles all over the floor. And my most favorite, it's pre-lit with multiple settings, so no stringing lights or deciding if I want colored or white, flashing or twinkly."

"Sounds kind of boring, if you ask me."

"I didn't," she shot back. "Besides, I can find excitement elsewhere with less mess and frustration. I also spend most of the holidays with my family, and as you know, they always go all out."

Yeah. He did. Christmas at the McCades was always a big freaking deal. Then again, so was every other occasion or event. From birthdays to holidays to graduations. Even the day he and Holly announced their engagement had morphed into quite a celebration.

Doubt much celebrating occurred when Holly gave back your ring.

Definitely time to move forward. "You know the twins aren't going to settle for an artificial tree, right?"

"Yeah. I do."

"We can make it an adventure for them."

"I'm not traipsing through the woods with you and two seven-year-olds in search of the perfect Christmas tree. Especially when there's an eighty percent chance of snow in the forecast."

"Afraid you might get cold, and with Emme and Wren in tow, that I won't be able to warm you up like I used to?" He'd probably live to regret it, but Chace couldn't help poking at her.

"Awkward," Holly warned him.

"You did say it was our new normal," he reminded her.

"In the grand scheme of things? Yes. But not as a free pass to make things worse than they already are."

“You honestly believe I’m making things awkward on purpose?”

Holly folded her arms across her chest. “You honestly expect me to believe you aren’t?” she tossed his words back at him.

Touché.

But just because she knew the truth didn’t mean Chace planned to stop.

Oh, hell no. If anything, her awareness only served to make the non-challenge all the sweeter.

Starting now.

Chace pushed himself away from the counter and crossed to where she stood, stopping when mere inches separated the toes of their boots.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“What I’ve wanted to do all damned day,” he answered before cupping her face between his palms and locking his eyes with hers.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” she replied, her gaze never wavering.

Chace brushed the pad of his thumb across the plumpness of her bottom lip. “Why not?”

“What’s the point?” she countered. “It won’t change anything.”

Maybe not, he conceded, but only to himself.

Still.

“It might.”

Holly shook her head. “We both know better than that, Chace.”

He lowered his head nearer to hers. “Do we?”

Before his lips could touch hers, Holly flattened the palm of her hand against his chest, halting any further advancement on his part. “Yes,” she answered as she backed up enough to escape his hold on her. “Well, at least I do.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way, Holly.”

“Yeah. I’m afraid it does.” Her eyes held his for a second longer. “Good night, Chace. Sleep well.”

Thirty minutes and a cold shower later, Holly still couldn't wrap her head around what had transpired in the kitchen with Chace. How something so innocuous as converting plain vanilla ice cream into a peppermint swirl and informing him the girls wanted to get a Christmas tree led to resurrected memories, sexual innuendos, and an almost-kiss she somehow found the strength to avoid.

No small feat considering she ached to feel Chace's lips against hers again.

Clearly, Holly should have eliminated the temptation altogether by handing Chace his bowl of ice cream and making a hasty retreat to her room. Or better yet, bypassed the kitchen entirely. Gone straight downstairs and locked the damned door, even if the latter was more to keep herself in the bedroom than to keep Chace out.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, as far as her lips were concerned—Holly had managed to evade what was likely to become a one-thing-led-to-another scenario where the two of them ended up behind that locked door for real. How she was able to say what she did and escape on legs as limp as cooked spaghetti noodles, Holly didn't have a clue.

Irritated with herself for not only putting herself in that position in the first place but for nearly surrendering to her baser needs, Holly wanted nothing more than to erase the entire encounter from her mind. Pretend it never happened.

She turned on the TV, hoping to find something enthralling or mindless to spark her interest—anything to keep her from thinking but, most of all, from

remembering. Not just about what had almost happened tonight but what they'd once had together all those years ago.

Holly turned down the covers and sat on the edge of the bed to plug her cell phone into the charger. When the screen lit up, she noted three messages from her sister, the last one in huge capital letters:

CALL ME.

Generally, Holly and Kit communicated regularly. But with Sean's accident and Lyss leaving to be with him, it was all Holly could do to adapt and merge her schedule with Emme and Wren's. She was lucky to have had enough time to leave Kit a voicemail detailing what had happened and that she was staying at Lyss's with the twins.

Under normal circumstances, going several days without connecting with her sister wasn't unusual. Not when the entire McCade brigade essentially lived within spitting distance of each other, making it easy to keep tabs on family as well as members of the community. Besides, someone was always willing to make sure everyone willing to listen was *in the know*.

All of which likely explained why Kit had texted and called several times in the last twenty-four hours—someone had informed her that Chace was back in Hickory Ridge. And since Kit's Automotive served as a veritable hub of information in the twin-town hamlet, it was safe to assume word had spread that Chace was also staying at Lyss's to help care for Emme and Wren.

Yeah, Holly could hardly wait to have this conversation with her sister.

Not.

She'd just decided to wait until the morning to return her sister's call when the phone vibrated in her hand before another message popped up on the screen.

If you don't call within the next five minutes, I'm coming over there and bringing the whole damn family with me.

Guess I won't be postponing that call after all.

Inhaling a deep breath for strength to get through this conversation, Holly hit the green receiver icon and put the call on speaker.

"It's about fucking time."

And here we go.

"Sorry. I've been a little busy."

“So I’ve heard.” Each word dripped with sarcasm. “Why didn’t you tell me he was coming to help with the twins?”

Oh, how to answer. *Because it’s no big deal.*

No, after crying on her sister’s shoulder for months after their breakup, Kit would never believe that.

How about... *Because I didn’t think he’d actually show up.*

Though somewhat true, Holly figured it would only rile up her sister more.

Maybe... Holly wracked her brain for a more plausible reason. Only none were forthcoming. Probably because she had none, aside from the fact she was trying to deal with the situation as best she could while also keeping everything as normal as possible for Emme and Wren.

“It’s not that difficult a question,” Kit stated unnecessarily.

Sighing, Holly plowed her fingers through her hair, quickly realizing she hadn’t braided it yet. Not that she needed to since she was grown and could take care of her own hair. The nighttime braiding routine had been her mother’s brainchild after she’d spent one too many endless mornings trying to work a comb through the tangle of knots in Holly’s waist-length hair.

It was either braids or a much shorter cut. Over the years, the habit simply stuck.

“HOLLY!” Kit bellowed.

“BECAUSE I’VE BEEN KIND OF BUSY HERE!” Holly hollered back.

“Okay,” Kit’s voice softened. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” And it was, because Holly knew Kit was only concerned about her and the effect living in Chace’s pocket was bound to have on her. Judging by their earlier kitchen encounter, Holly had to admit Kit had every reason for concern.

“How’s everything going?”

“Pretty well, surprisingly.” The almost-kiss notwithstanding, of course.

“So, how does everything seem to be going?”

“Good.”

Would Kit still think that if she knew how close she’d come to letting him kiss her? How she desperately wanted him to? Or how soaked her panties became during her walk down Christmas-tree-hunting memory lane? Or how much effort it had taken Holly not to climb him like a tree in the kitchen?

Probably not, but the news wouldn’t shock her either.

“But it’s early yet,” Kit added.

That much was certainly true. “It’ll all still be fine.”

Maybe.

Hopefully.

“I must admit I’m a little concerned about all this, Holl. Not just that Chace is back but that you’re essentially living with him in a very family-like setting. Doing things with Emme and Wren that parents do with their children.”

Holly understood where her sister was coming from, especially after participating in today’s festivities with the girls that, although truly enjoyable, stirred up a slew of painfully wonderful memories of the Christmas traditions she and Chace had once shared. When she balked at going on a tree search the next day with him and the twins, perhaps that was merely her subconscious shifting into self-preservation mode.

But like she told Chace, this wasn’t about them.

“This is the kind of thing godparents do, Kit. Fill in when the parents need help. It’s not like it’s forever. As adults, I think we can handle it.”
Please, God, let that be true.

“You were adults eight years ago, too,” Kit pointed out. “And breaking up with him nearly destroyed you.”

“No,” Holly disputed. “What cut me to the quick was that Chace chose the military instead of a civilian life with me.”

“He’s a civilian now.”

“On paper maybe, but I’d bet my first edition of *To Kill A Mockingbird* that the Department of Defense has Steele Security and Investigations on speed dial,” Holly countered.

“All the more reason for my concern, then.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Just like you’re fine when you and Chace cross paths at Lyss’s for a holiday gathering or a birthday party?”

Holly rolled her eyes even though her sister couldn’t see through the phone. “I *am* fine. Even then,” she insisted.

“So why do I always need to have a carton of mint chocolate chip or pistachio ice cream on hand around every single holiday or during Emme and Wren’s birthday month?” Kit countered. “Whether he shows up for the events or not.”

When Holly didn’t respond right away, Kit continued. “Never mind. I’ll tell you why. Because you’re still in love with him. Will always be in love

with him. And if a few hours in his presence once or twice a year is enough to stir those feelings back to life, what do you think will happen while living in each other's pockets for however long Lyss is in Germany?"

Good question, since they hadn't even made it twenty-four hours before Holly needed to employ every ounce of willpower she possessed to keep from kissing him.

"Look, I know it won't be easy, Kit," Holly conceded. "But I'll manage. I promise."

"I don't doubt you'll try." Kit released a heavy sigh. "And I'm here if you need anything. To talk. Vent. Cry your eyes out. But if you feel the need to hit something, call Alex."

They both laughed. Their brother always seemed to take the brunt of their frustrations.

"In all seriousness," Kit continued, "don't hesitate to reach out. Day or night. No matter what."

"I won't." And she wouldn't.

"You'd better not. Oh, and Holly, just so you know, I'll most likely be checking in on you daily, so if you don't respond in a timely manner—"

"You'll show up in person," Holly finished her sister's threat. "Got it."

"I'm glad we understand each other."

Yeah, so was she. Because even though they didn't always see eye to eye, there was never any doubt she and her sister always had each other's back.

"All right. I better get off here and get to bed. Old man Larsen is bringing in his hunk of junk in the morning for its annual tune-up. I'm sure I'll have my work cut out for me."

"You always do." Holly paused a beat. "Kit?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for checking on me."

"Of course. That's what big sisters are for."

"Younger sisters too."

"You bet. Good night, Holly."

"Good night, Kit."

HOLLY WAS BACK at the scene of the near-crime early the next morning. Only

this time, she was alone and seated at the island with a mug of coffee as she graded senior essays. Her heart wasn't in it, but with the semester ending in two weeks, she didn't have much choice.

Especially since she'd learned early in her teaching career to grade writing assignments in chunks rather than an entire class of thirty in one sitting. Along with alleviating cramping in her fingers, neck, and shoulders, the strategy also gave each student's paper the fresh eyes and full attention it deserved.

Most of the time.

Today, with yesterday's events keeping her from getting much sleep, not so much. Even when she had managed to drift off, snatches of festival activities, both past and present, the conversation she'd had with her sister, and that near-kiss invaded her usually dreamless slumber.

Around seven, Holly gave up the fight, crawled out of bed, and dug out clothes appropriate for tree hunting. Though she didn't want to, she'd resigned herself to the inevitability of the day's events, because once Emme and Wren got an idea in their heads, changing their minds became an exercise in futility.

Particularly when they joined forces, like Holly fully expected would happen today.

Once dressed, she'd brushed her teeth and French-braided her hair into two pigtails on either side of her head. Returning to the bedroom, she'd debated whether to change the bed linens, decided to wait until the following weekend or when Lyss was on her way home, whichever came first, and made the bed.

Then, she'd tidied up, tossing dirty clothes into the hamper and making mental notes of what she needed to pick up from her townhouse in the coming week. When she'd run out of things to do in the bedroom, because yes, she'd been looking for anything to keep from going upstairs where early riser Chace would undoubtedly already be enjoying his second cup of coffee, her choices of what to do next were few.

With the reluctance of a teenager forced to clean her room, Holly had trudged up the stairs. However, Chace was nowhere to be found when she entered the kitchen. But as evidenced by the green light on the Keurig and an empty mug by the sink, he was up and at 'em. She just wasn't sure where he'd gone.

Happy for the reprieve, she'd brewed a mug of coffee for herself, pulled

out the essays, and had finished three when a fresh-from-the-shower Chace sauntered into the kitchen wearing another pair of faded jeans that hugged his lean hips and thighs like an old friend, and a blue thermal Henley under an untucked and unbuttoned blue flannel shirt.

With his finger-combed damp hair, freshly shaven cheeks, and bare feet, he looked good enough to eat. What was it about a man in boot-cut jeans and bare feet that was so freaking sexy? Holly didn't know the answer to that question, but if he'd been shirtless with the top button of his Levi's undone, she knew for a fact it would take every ounce of restraint she could muster to keep from stripping naked and begging him to take her right there on the kitchen floor, consequences be damned.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Omigod. How long had she been sitting there, gaping at him like some sex-starved wench, her imagination running wild? Holly didn't know but judging by the grin glimmering in his beautiful brown eyes, definitely long enough for him to catch her staring and draw his own conclusions about what was going through her mind.

At least she wasn't drooling, or at least she hoped not. Surreptitiously, she swiped her hand over her mouth and found it dry. Thank goodness.

Relieved, Holly picked up her coffee. "I doubt they're worth that much," she managed to reply before taking a sip of the cooling hazelnut blend.

Chace popped a pod into the Keurig. "I don't know." Snapping the lid shut, he placed his cup under the drip and pressed brew. "You looked pretty intense. I'm not sure you even blinked."

Again, Holly wondered how flipping long she'd been staring. Didn't matter. She just needed to change the subject. "How long have you been up?"

"Since about five." He pulled his mug to his lips and blew on the steaming liquid. "Decided to go for a run, came back, showered, and here I am."

Indeed, he was.

"Did you sleep well?" Chace asked, the grin returning to his eyes as he looked at her over the rim of his mug.

She met his gaze and arched her brow. "Did you?"

"Like a baby." His grin widened into his cheeks. "Had a really good dream too." He lifted his coffee and took a sip without taking his eyes off her. "I guess I have you to thank for that."

Yeah, she guessed he did.

Asshole.

“You’re not going to make this easy, are you?”

“I let you walk away last night, didn’t I?” he countered.

“I wasn’t under the impression you *let me* do anything.”

Chace leaned his ass against the counter and crossed his bare feet at the ankles. A shiver raced up Holly’s spine.

Damn his sexy bare feet.

“C’mon, Holly. We both know you wanted to kiss me just as much as I wanted to kiss you.”

“You’re delusional.”

Chace held her gaze. “I may be many things, sweetheart, but delusional isn’t one of them. Especially not after the way you looked at me last night and again just a few minutes ago.”

Bastard.

“But I get it,” he continued. “Yesterday dredged up a lot of memories. And feelings. Hell, I had to stuff my hands in my pockets all freaking afternoon to keep from reaching for yours.”

Holly’s stomach took a major dive to her toes. Doing her best, she tried to ignore the sensation and its implications. “It’s been eight damned years, Chace. We shouldn’t still have these feelings.”

“If we’d parted under less than amicable conditions, maybe we wouldn’t.”

“Like what? If I’d caught you cheating on me?”

His eyes narrowed into a frown. “Why do I have to be the unfaithful party?”

“Because then it wouldn’t have been so damned hard to walk away.”

Setting his cup in the sink, Chace pushed away from the counter and crossed to the island. Again, just like the night before. Only this time, she was sitting, so he turned the stool to face him and cupped her cheek with his palm. “I never cheated on you, Holly.”

“I know.” She swallowed past the enormous boulder lodged in her throat. “It probably wouldn’t have been any easier to break up with you if you had. Or hurt any less.” She fought the urge to press her cheek against his hand. “And just so you know, I never cheated on you either.” She pressed her lips together and decided to go for broke. “There’s never been anyone else but you, Chace.”

Confusion leapt into Chace’s smoldering brown eyes. “No one?” His gaze

bore into hers. “Ever?”

Holly shook her head.

“Why?”

The raw emotion in his voice sliced clear through Holly’s heart. But was she ready to tell him the truth? That she’d only ever made it to a third date with any other man once, and by the fifth, she couldn’t get away from him fast enough. That every man she met suffered in comparison to him. That she could never just settle when her heart would forever belong to him.

The weight of his gaze was crushing as he silently awaited her response.

Why the hell hadn’t she kept her big mouth shut? Laughed off his comment. Whipped out one of the sarcastic retorts she was famous for and high-tailed it back to her room like she’d done the night before. For someone who shied away from taking risks, Holly had definitely gone out on a few limbs last night and this morning.

Pushing back the stool, Holly started to rise. “Look, Chace. I didn’t—”

Chace grabbed hold of her wrist. “You can’t drop a bombshell like that and then run away, Holly.” He shook his head. “Not this time.”

“How about we just forget this whole conversation ever happened?” she suggested hopefully. “We can wake the girls and take them out for breakfast before we go look for a tree. There are plenty of precut options in town. Or we can go to the woods by Lake Sheridan and cut one down ourselves. Maybe that’s the better option. The twins would have a blast. Only I don’t have a chainsaw. But we could probably borrow my dad’s.”

“Give us the next three weeks, Holly.”

“What?” she gasped around the breath caught in her throat. Surely she’d misheard him.

Right?

“Give us until New Year’s.” He met and held her gaze. “Please.”

Holly’s heart pounded so hard inside her chest she feared Chace could hear it. “Why?” she heard herself ask.

Why the hell was she asking more questions when she wanted nothing more than for this conversation to be over?

Now!

“Because we have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain.” Chance tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Because I want to hold your hand while walking down the street. Kiss you under every sprig of mistletoe I can find. Cuddle up with you on the sofa at the end of the day and

kiss you some more.” He brushed his thumb lightly across her cheek and looked deep into her eyes. “Say yes, Holly. Please.”

Fear and longing flamed to life inside her. Could she put her heart on the line for a few weeks of what they’d once shared? She wanted to. Oh, how she wanted to. She just wasn’t sure if she possessed enough courage to try. “I don’t know, Chace.”

“Why not?” He tilted her face toward his. “What are you afraid of?”

“Everything.” It was the God’s honest truth.

His eyes held hers. “I wish I could assure you that you have nothing to worry about, but like you, I have no idea what the future holds. No one does. Shit, a week ago, I never imagined I’d be standing here in my sister’s kitchen with you. But here we are.”

“And next week? When a call from my brother or one of the Steele brothers could send you halfway around the world to protect some stranger?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“How do you know? You just said you can’t predict the future.”

“When I was in the military, I didn’t have a choice. Now I do. So, if SSI calls, which they might, I don’t have to go.”

“But you will.” He always did. Honor demanded it. And Chace was one of the most honorable men she knew.

He shook his head. “No. I won’t. *That* I can promise you.”

Holly wanted to believe him. Even more, she yearned for precisely what he asked her to give them—time spent together without limitations, restraints, or fears. To recreate the magic neither of them had found with anyone else. And to recapture what had gone missing from their lives since the day she’d given Chace back his ring.

How could Holly deny herself or Chace this opportunity? Especially when they’d be spending Christmas together with the girls either way? Besides, he was right. What did they have to lose?

Drawing a deep breath, Holly swallowed her fear. “Okay,” she agreed, because God help her, she couldn’t say no.

Nor did she want to.

“So, where are we going?” Holly asked once they were all buckled into Chace’s truck.

“Morningstar Farm,” Chace answered.

After their discussion and subsequent agreement, Holly’d gone to wake the twins while Chace researched places in and around Hickory Ridge where customers picked out their trees, but the owners did the cutting. That way, there’d be no reason to borrow anyone’s chainsaw, least of all Holly’s father’s.

Not that Chace had anything against Carter McCade. It was more about timing. And perhaps a little self-preservation. Besides, Holly had only just agreed to this three-week trial, so it was probably best they get used to the idea and test the waters themselves before showing up together at her parents’ home.

He also didn’t want to give Holly any reason to change her mind.

From what he’d read online, the farm, located on the west end of Hickory Ridge, was a family-owned operation that rotated events throughout each season. Beginning the Friday after Thanksgiving, guests could select their tree before or after enjoying the variety of holiday activities in their Winter Wonderland.

“Have you heard of it?” Chace asked.

“Sure. It’s supposed to be quite the experience.”

“You’ve never been?”

“No. Kit and I had planned to go to the Spooktacular at Halloween, but I caught one of the viruses circulating through the high school and had to bail

on her.”

“How is Kit?” Chace asked. “She still playing hard to get with all the men panting after her?”

Holly chuckled. “Pretty much. Although mostly, I really think she’s oblivious to the fact that men find her attractive.”

“Kind of like someone else I know,” Chace replied, glancing across the leather console in time to catch the roll of her eyes. Like always, Chace didn’t understand her *please be real* reaction. How could he when every time he looked at her, she took his freaking breath away?

But that was precisely what made Holly even more beautiful—her lack of expectation for men, or anyone really, to find her attractive based solely on what she looked like on the outside. That wasn’t how she defined herself, so why should others? Holly believed everyone was a sum of their internal and external parts. Therefore, she never relied on her physical attributes for any personal gain.

Not for acceptance among her peers, personal or professional success, making friends, and most certainly not for attracting the opposite sex. What was the saying, *actions speak louder than words*? Well, Holly’s actions always came straight from her heart, which was what completely captured his.

“So, who’s ready to find the best tree on the farm?” Chace asked with a glance at the twins in the conversation mirror.

“We are!” they shouted in unison, pumping their fists in the air. “The biggest and the best!”

Chace shifted his gaze to Holly. “How about you? Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess,” she replied with what would have been a side-long glare if not for the tiny glimmer he couldn’t help but notice in her whiskey-colored eyes.

Honestly, Chace was excited about this adventure himself. From what he’d read online, besides several fields of uncut pines, cedars, and firs, the farm also included a two-acre extravaganza of holiday-themed activities, craft booths, gift shops, and a small café.

Turning right, he drove under the welcome sign. From the backseat, the twins vibrated with excitement, their eyes as wide as saucers when the Christmas village came into view. “Are we gonna pick out a tree *and* go there?” Emme asked, pointing toward the lighted holiday setup ahead of where Chace parked the truck.

Both girls popped their heads between the bucket seats. “Yeah. Are we?” Wren echoed.

Chace scrunched up his nose at them. “You want to go there? Really?” He forced himself not to smile. “Because I thought we’d just grab a tree and head back to decorate it.”

When both pairs of blue eyes narrowed, Chace knew neither twin ever expected that particular response from him. “We have all day, Uncle Chace. Can’t we do all three?”

Try as he might, Chace could not keep from grinning. “Do you actually think we’d bring the two of you here and not let you enjoy the Winter Wonderland too?”

“So, we’re going?” Wren needed to be sure.

Pocketing his keys, Chace reached for the door handle. “Last one out is a rotten egg.”

Already halfway out of the truck while issuing the dare, Chace touched the ground first, followed closely by Wren, then Emme, with Holly bringing up the rear and claiming the auspicious title of *rotten egg*.

Not that she seemed the least bit bothered about coming in last when the four of them met in front of Chace’s truck. Together, they made their way to the gated entrance, where a welcoming committee of five characters from a holiday book or movie awaited.

“Welcome to Morningstar Farm,” an adult version of *The Grinch*’s Cindy Lou Who greeted them, ushering them into an open space that branched off in two directions—one to the tree area and the other toward the Winter Wonderland. She handed them a detailed map of the entire farm. “Where would you like to begin?”

“Does it matter?” Chace asked.

“Not really, but if you’re also selecting a tree today, I’d suggest doing that first so it can be prepared while you visit the wonderland.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Perfect,” Cindy Lou Who replied with a toothy smile, and led them to the left, handing them off to a teenage elf.

“Good morning, everyone. I’m Patrick, and I am pleased to welcome you to the Field of Trees. Is there a particular kind you’re looking for today?”

Chace knew Christmas trees came in many varieties, but as to which ones were which or best, he had no idea. Therefore, he deferred to Holly. “What do you think?”

Eyes wide, Holly shrugged and shook her head. "I'm not sure, but I think my parents always get Douglas firs."

Funny how on all their previous expeditions to find the perfect tree, they never considered the variety, only the appearance. Guess at the Field of Trees, it made a difference. Chace shifted his attention back to a smiling Patrick the Elf. "Right this way."

The four of them followed him down a trail to a section specifically labeled Douglas firs. Patrick handed Chace a numbered red card. "Tag the tree you want and bring the bottom portion back to me at the hut. We'll cut and prepare it for transport while you wait or for pickup later if you want to visit the rest of the farm."

After thanking the elf, Chace tucked the ticket in the back pocket of his jeans and turned to face the twins. "Okay. We're looking for something about this much taller than me." He held his hands out to measure about eight to ten inches, figuring something around seven feet should suffice.

They wound their way through the poker-straight rows, inspecting, considering, and rejecting nearly a hundred trees before finally settling on one they all agreed was perfect. "You're sure?" he asked before retrieving the tag.

Nods accompanied by a chorus of "We're sure" followed.

After attaching the tag, Chace pulled out his phone and beckoned them to join him. "C'mon, we need a picture to commemorate the event."

"What's *camemerate* mean?" Emme needed to know.

"To celebrate or make a note of," Holly supplied, English teacher that she was.

"Oh. I get it."

"Good, now come on over here." He waved his hand toward where he stood.

Happy to comply, the twins grabbed Holly's hand and dragged her forward, where Chace tucked her into his side and positioned the twins in front of them before extending his other arm to angle the camera down on all four of them. "Okay. On three, everyone smile pretty. One, two, three..."

"Cheese!" the girls yelled, and Chace snapped the picture.

"Can we go to the Winter Wonderland now?" Wren pleaded as Emme bounced on her toes, her big blue eyes hopeful.

"You bet."

The *t* on bet had barely sounded before the twins squealed in delight and

took off in the direction they had just come.

“Do they ever walk?”

“They’re seven,” Holly said as if that should explain everything. “Plus, they’re excited about the prospect of having more fun.”

With his arm still around her waist, Chace looked down at Holly. “I’m not seven, but I still get excited about the prospect of having fun.” He tugged on one of her braids descending from under the beanie hat she wore. “Don’t you?”

“Of course.” She smiled at him with a velvety warmth that heated him from the inside out.

If it were ten years ago, Chace would have taken this opportunity to capture Holly’s lips in a kiss. Hell, if it were yesterday, he would most likely be kissing her senseless right now. But after their conversation this morning, Chace realized he needed to exercise patience with Holly.

Take baby steps over the next three weeks, because rushing to the finish line may very well work to his disadvantage. Plus, he needed a game plan.

A mission of sorts.

Something special that Holly would find hard to resist.

A few ideas were already swirling through his mind. One in particular that he considered rather clever and thought Holly would appreciate. But first, he needed to gather everything necessary to pull it off.

“You okay?”

Holly’s voice jerked him out of his thoughts. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“We should go catch up with the girls,” Holly suggested.

“You’re right.” Kissing Holly may have to wait, but there was one other thing Chace had longed to do the day before, and he could easily do that now: hold Holly’s hand.

So when she began to walk out of the field of firs, Chace reached out and linked his fingers through hers as they went to find the twins.

The minute she spotted them, Emme pounced. “What took you so long?” she demanded, emphasizing the question with a cocked head and her fists planted on her hips.

Jeesh. No more than three minutes could have passed since they’d taken the picture. Of course, for a seven-year-old, that probably equated to three hours when an entire winter wonderland awaited.

“Sorry.” Chace made a production of rolling his eyes before smiling and handing the ticket portion of the tree tag to Patrick the Elf.

“We’ll get everything taken care of for you,” Patrick assured him.

Chace turned his attention back to his nieces. “Well? What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

Emme and Wren dashed ahead, each giving her opinion on what they should do first, none of which coincided with the other. Rather than intervening, Chace draped his arm across Holly’s shoulders, and she surprised the hell out of him by slipping hers around his waist as they followed Emme and Wren toward the Winter Wonderland village.

“You know this is going to cost a fortune, don’t you?” Holly inquired with a smile.

Chace didn’t give a tinker’s damn about how much this outing might set him back. All that mattered was spending the day with his nieces. Spoiling them beyond measure. Delighting in the excitement and joy they were bound to enjoy as they raced from one activity to another, not missing a single one.

And sharing every thrilling moment with Holly by his side.

For that, Chace would gladly pay a king’s ransom.

“It’s only money,” he replied with a grin. “Besides, we’ll be creating memories that’ll last a lifetime, making everything about today priceless.”

At least, that was his plan.

“C’mon, slowpokes!” Wren shouted. “We want to take a train ride around the farm to be sure we see everything there is to do.”

“We’re gonna be here all day, aren’t we?” Chace asked.

Eyes gleaming, Holly nodded. “Oh, you bet we will. So when they’ve run you ragged, remember, *this*,” she twirled her finger to include everything around them, “was all *your* idea.”

Chace scoffed at her insinuation that he couldn’t hold his own against two first graders. *Him*, a highly-trained former special forces operative turned senior security specialist for an internationally renowned and sought-after private security and investigative firm. Yeah. Right. “C’mon, Holl, how much work can having fun actually be?”

A few hours and quite a few activities later, Chace realized what a rookie mistake he'd made by underestimating the never-waning stamina his seven-year-old nieces possessed. The more they did, the more energy they seemed to generate. Like characters in a video game that powered up the further they progressed.

Too bad the same wasn't true for him.

Not that he ever planned to admit how right Holly had been. No, siree. Especially since he'd come up with an idea to not only help him power through the day's activities with Emme and Wren but also how to use the holiday season to rekindle the relationship he'd once had with Holly McCade.

For lack of a better term, Chace decided to call it *Operation Mistletoe*.

The idea began to germinate this morning after his conversation with Holly when he'd told her he wanted to hold her hand and kiss her under every sprig of mistletoe. That's why he hadn't given in to temptation back in the field of firs—no mistletoe.

But during the thirty-minute train ride around the farm's perimeter, where the girls eagle-eyed more available activities aside from those they'd already scoped out, Chace observed a young man pointing to a sprig of mistletoe above his companion's head. Grinning like a fool, the dude had swooped in and kissed the daylights out of the petite brunette.

The same way Chace wanted to do with Holly every damned chance he got.

Like, from now on, whenever mistletoe was in sight. And if he had to be

the one to ensure the little white sprigs appeared in some rather unlikely places, well, a man had to do what a man had to do. It was a mission he was beyond ready to accept.

Fortunately, after disembarking from the Winter Wonderland Express, their first stop was visiting Santa's reindeer, where a clump of mistletoe was tacked above each stall. So, while Emme and Wren were engrossed with petting and feeding each of Santa's eight reindeer, Chace officially put Operation Mistletoe into effect by leaning down and dropping a kiss on Holly's extremely surprised lips.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, the little wrinkle appearing between her brows.

Chace pointed above them to the eight sprigs of berries and greenery. "One down, seven to go." And that was just in the reindeer barn.

"One's plenty," Holly insisted, but Chace didn't miss how her tongue snuck out between her lips as if seeking a taste.

"How come there are only eight reindeer?" Emme broke into the moment, which was probably for the best. "Where's Rudolph?"

Good question. Gratefully, Holly was one step ahead of him in producing an answer. "It says right here," she held out the pamphlet Cindy Lou Who had given them upon arrival, "that along with Rudolph, the actual eight reindeer remain at the North Pole with Santa, and that he sends some of his extras to places like this for everyone to see. Since Rudolph is one of a kind with his red nose, there aren't any extras of him to send."

Both girls pondered Holly's explanation for a few seconds before nodding. "Makes sense," Wren confirmed.

And it did.

But as they made their way to decorate milk-carton gingerbread houses, Chace asked, "Did the brochure really say that?" If it didn't, and Holly had made up the story on the fly, he might have to kiss her for that alone, with or without mistletoe.

"Sure did," Holly replied, showing him what she'd read. "I'm sure Wren isn't the first to question Rudolph's absence."

No, Chace doubted she was. Too bad for him, though, considering how much he longed for another reason to kiss his niece's godmother. Guess that only meant one thing—he needed to locate some more mistletoe.

Maybe even find a sprig to carry around in his pocket for moments like these.

“Let’s go over there!”

Tiny gingerbread houses in hand, Emme and Wren dashed toward the oversized candy cane and lollipop-lined path leading toward a refurbished bank barn that housed everything Santa, including the jolly old elf himself *and* another live piece of mistletoe over the door.

Without making a production out of his discovery, Chace pressed his lips to Holly’s cheek.

“Would you stop?” Holly hissed out of the side of her mouth.

“And completely disregard tradition?” He shook his head. “I think not.”

“You’re incorrigible.” She ducked from beneath his arm and took a step away from him.

“That’s only gonna make kissing you more noticeable if we happen upon any more mistletoe,” he forewarned with what he knew very well was a shit-eating grin.

“Let’s go find our names in Santa’s book.” Wren grabbed her sister’s hand and darted toward what appeared to be Santa’s office, where an antique oak roll-top desk sat on one side of a flickering electric fireplace with a wingback chair on the other. A pedestal with a huge leather-bound book was placed just inside the door.

“Me first since E comes before W.” Emme carefully turned the thick brown pages, her finger and eyes scanning each entry until she came to hers. “Look. I’m on the nice list!” she exclaimed, her entire face alight with joy.

“My turn.” Wren edged Emme to the side and paged through to almost the end of the book until she found her name. “Me too.” She jumped up and down. “I’m on the nice list too.”

“Was there ever any doubt?” Holly asked.

Wren scrunched up her cute little face. “Well, sometimes I don’t share with Emme. And there’s this one girl at school that I don’t like to play with because she can be mean.”

“Yeah. Me too,” Emme agreed.

“Sounds to me like something Santa probably expects from every seven-year-old over the course of the year. So I don’t think it’s anything to worry about.”

In awe, Chace watched and listened as Holly removed the twins’ concern they may suddenly be demoted to the naughty list for behavior associated with most children their age. How did she always know just what to say? Or where to look for the answers? Was it inherent? A woman’s maternal

instinct? Or did it come from educating today's youth?

Chace had no idea, but it certainly re-enforced what he'd suspected since the day almost ten years ago when he'd unequivocally decided he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Holly McCade—she'd make one hell of a mother for their children.

“Can we have lunch?” Santa's naughty or nice list long forgotten, Wren was ready to move on to the next item on her agenda.

Food.

They inhaled burgers and fries at The North Pole Café, then checked out the craft booths and various shops, each picking out a handmade ornament to commemorate their inaugural visit to Morningstar Farms. Afterward, Holly and Chace helped the girls pick out a few things for their parents from a few of the vendors. Holly purchased an evergreen and holly wreath for her front door, and because it was Chace's absolute favorite, they picked up an extra-large bag of freshly popped kettle corn.

Unfortunately, Chace couldn't find a trace of mistletoe while they shopped, but that didn't stop him from taking Holly's hand whenever he got the chance. Or stealing a few impromptu kisses as they followed the twins from one activity to the next.

As the third hour passed on their excursion, Holly intervened. “Okay, girls. It's time to visit with Santa and get your picture taken before we head home.”

“But there's still so much we haven't seen or done,” Emme protested.

“I know, but there's no way we can do it all today. Besides, we still need to load the tree and get it home.”

“And decorate it?” Wren piped up, her little face full of hope.

“We'll have to see about that. Tomorrow's a school day, and we need to get everything ready before bedtime because we won't have any extra time in the morning.”

“Maybe we can at least start.” Emme raised her eyebrows with a hopeful smile.

“Not if we keep standing here talking about it.”

Tiny shoulders slumped in resignation. “Okay.” They trudged off toward where, adjacent to his workshop, Santa was set up to receive visitors.

Gratefully, only one child preceded them. When he hopped off Santa's lap, Emme and Wren went together, each perching on one of his legs. Although he heard the jolly old elf ask what they wanted him to bring them

for Christmas this year, Chace couldn't make out their responses. He could only hope that Lyss already knew and was prepared.

Once pictures were snapped, Santa handed the girls candy canes, reminding them to still be on their best behavior. "We will," they assured him before racing back to Holly and Chace. "We're ready!"

"Then let's load up our tree and get our butts home."

ONCE THE TREE was unloaded and set up in front of the family room's picture window, Chace climbed the pull-down stairs and handed Holly several plastic bins of Christmas decorations from what amounted to no more than a crawl space of an attic. From there, Holly passed each well-labeled container to the twins, who set them around the tree.

"Okay. Here's the plan," Holly began. "We find the lights and check each strand to ensure they work. If we have enough for the entire tree, Uncle Chace can begin the stringing process while we," she drew a circle in the air to encompass herself, Emme, and Wren, "prep everything we'll need for school tomorrow."

"Why am I assigned light duty?" Chace inquired, his hands on his hips.

"Do you want to pack lunches, assemble outfits, and check through the red folders in each backpack, *after* we locate them, of course, to make sure we've taken care of anything sent home and needs to be done?"

"No. I'm good with the lights."

"I thought you might be."

Chace opened the container labeled LIGHTS in bold black letters. For the next fifteen minutes, they untangled and plugged in about ten strands, relieved to find each one lit up just fine.

"Looks like we're a go," Chace declared, already moving toward the tree to begin his task.

Holly pushed herself off the couch. "C'mon, girls, let's start with making our lunches."

As they started toward the kitchen, Emme paused and looked over her shoulder. "Just the lights, Uncle Chace. No decorations."

He fired off a mock salute. "Got it."

Chuckling to herself, Holly followed them into the kitchen. As Holly

made their PB and J sandwiches, the twins filled their Bento lunch box compartments with grapes, carrots, fruit snacks, chips, and juice boxes. Upon finishing their portion of the task, Emme and Wren filled their water bottles and tucked them in the fridge with their packed lunches.

“I want to wear my black leggings with penguins on them with my red sparkly Christmas sweater,” Emme declared, heading straight for her closet.

“Not me. I want to wear my green jumper and turtleneck with white leggings,” Wren countered.

With their outfits chosen, the girls grabbed socks and boots to complete the ensemble, laying everything on one of the beds in the room they didn’t sleep in. “Can we go help Uncle Chace with the tree now?”

“What about hair do-dads?” Holly asked for lack of a better term, because she’d learned on Friday that picking out barrettes, hair bands, and bows could take up more time than the rest of their morning routine combined.

Surprisingly, both girls selected cloth headbands in colors that matched what they planned to wear. Holly guessed the incentive of decorating the tree helped speed up the process, for which she was eternally grateful.

“Now, can we go help Uncle Chace?”

“You sure can.”

With shrieks of excitement, the girls raced back to the family room. “We’re finished,” they exclaimed in unison.

Chace was stepping back from the tree as Holly joined them. “So am I,” he replied. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful,” followed by “I love it,” were the twins’ responses.

Presently, multi-colored lights transitioned slowly to white and back again. “This is one setting, but there are several.” He tapped the remote. “They can change back and forth like this. Or you can choose one or the other where they can blink or remain static. Which do you like best?” Chace showed them every option for them to make an informed decision.

“Like this tonight,” Wren stated. “Then tomorrow, we change it to something else.”

Emme nodded. “Yeah. That’s a good idea.”

Chace looked to Holly as if asking for her input. She shrugged. “Whatever they want is fine by me.” And it was.

“Can we decorate it now?”

“Please?”

“Be my guest.”

Wren's brow crinkled. "Aren't you gonna help?"

"Of course." He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "But first, I'm gonna order some pizza."

Holly could have kissed him for thinking ahead to dinner because she obviously hadn't. If yesterday and today were any indication, their teamwork in caring for the twins seemed to be working to their advantage.

"I know we'll need one large, half plain cheese and half supreme." Chace looked up at Holly and winked. It was their standard order when they were together because she didn't like anything on her pizza, and he wanted everything. "What do you urchins like on yours?"

"We're not urchins, Uncle Chace." Wren giggled.

"Close enough. Now, what's your pizza preference?"

"Pepperoni," they chorused.

"Good deal." Again, he looked up at Holly. "Do we need anything else? Chips? Drinks?"

She shook her head. "No. All that's already here."

Nodding, he placed the order as the girls tore the lids off the remaining containers to begin the tree-decorating process. A few minutes later, Chace joined the fun, and everyone pitched in to add as many ornaments as possible to the twinkling branches. By unspoken agreement, they split the fir in half, with Chace and Holly handling the top portion, Emme and Wren the lower.

When the pizza arrived thirty minutes later, they'd made good headway. Chace took care of getting the door and paying the delivery person. Holly got juice for the twins and soda for the grownups. Emme grabbed the chips, and Wren set the table with paper plates and napkins.

Conversation stalled while they devoured their pizza and chips. After finishing her second slice and chasing it down with a gulp of juice, Wren patted her belly. "Thanks, Uncle Chace. That was delicious."

"Yeah, thanks," Emme chimed in before popping a few chips into her mouth. "This has been one of my *favoritist* weekends ever."

Chace smiled at both his nieces. "Yeah? Mine too," he agreed, a look of longing in his beautiful eyes as he took in the scene before him.

Holly's heart expanded as she watched Chace with Emme and Wren. How naturally he interacted with them. How he truly seemed to enjoy everything they'd done the past two days. How great a father he would someday be.

Her breath caught on that last thought. Had she not broken their

engagement, this could have been their life. Married. With children of their own. Celebrating every milestone and holiday. Sharing each accomplishment and achievement as a couple and a family. And working through the challenges life would inevitably throw in their direction.

Together. As a team. The way committed relationships were supposed to be.

Unless she bailed on him when things got tough like she'd done eight years ago, only to constantly wonder *what if* about every damned decision she'd made.

"Can we go finish the tree?" Emme asked.

Blinking, Holly was surprised to find she'd been so lost in thought she hadn't even noticed the girls clearing the table. Or Chace wrapping the remaining pizza slices in aluminum foil. "Yeah. Sure," she finally answered, embarrassed to have been so distracted, especially about something she couldn't change.

"We'll be right there," Chace added on his way to put the leftovers in the fridge.

Holly rose from her seat to follow the twins as he crossed back to the island, but the next words out of his mouth stopped her cold. "Where'd you go just now?"

So much for hoping he hadn't noticed her silence. Rather than divulging the direction her thoughts had taken, Holly simply brushed off his concern with a wave of her hand. "Just in a daze, I guess."

Chace held her gaze for a few long seconds before nodding. "Okay."

Holly harbored no illusion that Chace bought her response. Still, it seemed he was willing to let it go.

At least for now.

“**R**ethinking your ‘how much work can having fun be’ comment?” Holly asked as she collapsed on the opposite end of the sofa from where Chace was already sprawled out, his sock feet propped on the coffee table.

He turned his face toward her without lifting his head off the back of the sofa. “Who knew seven-year-olds had that much energy?”

“Right.” Holly nestled herself in one corner of the couch, pulling her legs up on the cushion to rub her aching feet. “I didn’t think they’d ever settle down.”

After they put the last decoration on the tree, Holly shuffled the girls upstairs for a bath and to get dressed for bed. That had been over an hour ago, and for all she knew, they still weren’t asleep. And since they didn’t show any signs of settling down after their bedtime story and Holly could barely keep her eyes open, she tucked them in, kissed them goodnight, and made her escape.

Her first instinct was to continue to the master bedroom and fall into bed herself when she caught a glimpse of Chace on the sofa surrounded by empty containers, ornament boxes, and bubble wrap. Although he’d been the one to insist on venturing out to Morningstar Farm to hunt for a Christmas tree and have another fun-filled, action-packed day, Holly couldn’t bring herself to leave him to clean up the mess by himself.

So, here she was.

“In the future, let’s remember not to cram so much into one weekend.” She stretched her feet and toes, then continued rubbing them.

Chace gave her a thumbs-up. "Deal."

"Have you heard from Lyss today?" They'd been so busy Holly had forgotten that she was supposed to call Emme and Wren again tonight. Since the girls hadn't mentioned it, they must not have remembered either.

"Not since this morning when she replied to my text about our plans for the day. She said Sean was on his way to Germany, so I told her I'd wait to hear from her. Figured between the time difference, the stress she'd been under waiting and wondering, combined with seeing Sean, assessing his injuries for herself, interrogating the medical staff about his treatment protocol, and getting him settled to her satisfaction, she's likely more exhausted than we are right now."

Holly couldn't agree more. "Yeah. I feel ashamed for even comparing the exhaustion we're experiencing to what she and Sean have and continue to go through."

"Tired is tired. And those girls wore my ass out."

Commiserating, Holly laughed. "Can you imagine if we could bottle and sell all that energy? We'd be set for life."

"Amen to that." Yawning, he lifted his hand to his mouth to cover it. "Sorry," he murmured. "It's not the company, I promise."

"Sure it's not," she teased him.

Chace didn't respond right away. Instead, he studied her in silence, his eyes hooded and locked on hers as if weighing the pros and cons of a decision he needed to make. After several long seconds, he finally blinked, the decision apparently made. "Can I ask you a question?"

Apprehension skirted through Holly. Wouldn't seeking permission imply a better-than-average chance she might refuse?

Probably.

But that didn't stop Holly's curiosity. Besides, just because he asked didn't mean she was compelled to answer.

"I guess so."

"Earlier, after we finished dinner, you clearly withdrew into your thoughts. Yet when I asked where you'd gone, you blew me off as if you were only zoning out."

"Because I was." She wasn't lying. She had zoned out, getting lost in the land of what might have been if the two of them had made different choices all those years ago. But they hadn't, so what was the point of rehashing what could never be changed? "Exhaustion can do that to a person."

“I suppose.”

The expression on his handsome face said otherwise. Therefore, a diversionary tactic was needed. One look at the mess surrounding them was all it took. “I should probably start cleaning all this up.”

“Leave it,” Chace insisted. “I can take care of it after I drop the girls off at school in the morning.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.” She flexed her toes, hoping to ease the ache that always settled in her arch.

“Why doesn’t it? I’ll be here all day by myself while you’re working. How fair is it for me to sit around here doing nothing while you’re off educating our youth?”

He made a valid point. The last thing Holly wanted to do after a full day of teaching was to come home to tackle this mess in addition to meeting the twins’ needs and taking care of her everyday after-work responsibilities. “Okay. If you insist.”

“I do.” Chace dropped his feet to the floor and pushed himself to a sitting position. “Now, come here.” He waved her toward him.

Holly narrowed her gaze. “Excuse me?”

Rolling his eyes, Chace slid onto the middle cushion and pulled her legs onto his lap. “You’ve been rubbing your feet and toes since you sat down.”

“I have not.” She attempted to yank her legs back.

Undeterred, Chace held tight. “Yes. You have.” He circled her arch with one of his big, strong hands. “Just sit back and relax,” he ordered softly before applying pressure with his thumb down the center of one foot and then the other.

And dammit, that one gesture was almost orgasmic.

Holly stifled the whimper threatening to escape the confines of her throat. She leaned back against the arm of the sofa and closed her eyes as Chace’s fingers worked their magic on her painfully tight muscles and tendons. Stroking, tapping, and kneading, the reflexology techniques he’d picked up while stationed in Japan, he worked to loosen the knots, alleviate the tension, and soothe the unrelenting ache in both her feet and calves.

Lord, how she’d missed this. Missed him. Not just his massage expertise, but every damned thing about him.

How he sent tingles through her belly, and lower, with just one look. The electric warmth of his touch, no matter how innocent or deliberate. How he could obliterate the world around them with only a kiss. And the way his

tender yet explosive lovemaking always sent her soaring into the stratosphere.

When they were together, Holly had experienced *everything* with an intensity that was beyond measure. Chace brought her to life. Made her feel beautiful, desirable, and loved to the point no other man ever stood a chance.

Even after all these years.

“Do you still get those awful charley horses?” Chace asked, sliding his hand under the cuff of her jeans and running his cupped hand along the underside of her calf from ankle to knee.

Holly nodded. “Especially when we first go back. Standing on those concrete floors all day makes my legs and hips ache worse every year.”

Chace pulled on her heel to stretch her Achilles’ tendon, and again, it took every ounce of strength Holly possessed to keep from whimpering in ecstasy.

“Do you still enjoy teaching?”

“Most days.” She opened her eyes and looked at him. “No, that’s not totally accurate because, in all honesty, I still love *teaching*. It’s all the other bureaucratic bullshit that gets in the way of actually teaching that I can do without.”

“Sounds like almost every job in the world.” He pressed this thumb into the ball of her foot.

“Yeah, but in our case, we often have people that have never been in a classroom making educational decisions. Or if they have, it’s been so long ago they have no idea what’s going on now.”

Chace switched to her other leg to continue his glorious ministrations. “I imagine things didn’t get any better teaching in a pandemic.”

“You mean when we were flying the plane while trying to put it together?” Laughing, she shook her head. “I hate to show my ignorance, but until March of 2020, I’d never heard of, let alone used, Zoom, Google Classroom, Screencastify, or half a dozen other available forms of technology. Nor had I ever taught a class virtually, which was an experience in and of itself.”

“Good or bad?”

“Neither, really. Just different. And so many extra steps we wouldn’t have had if teaching in person. Everything had to be loaded online. Meetings needed to be scheduled with links provided for the students to join. And if they did—which most didn’t—they didn’t turn on their cameras, so we taught

to a bunch of tiles with empty silhouettes and names. In addition, we had to remember to record the class so it could be uploaded and posted online for those who couldn't attend to watch later."

Applying deeper pressure, Chace rubbed his fingers and thumb up and down the muscle of her calf. "Sounds like a huge learning curve."

"That, it was."

"Have things gotten better since?"

She laughed again. "Unfortunately, that brings us back to where this conversation started, with policies and procedures created by those with little to no firsthand educational experience."

"Ever thought of doing something else?"

Opening her eyes, Holly met his soulful brown gaze. "Sometimes," she admitted. "When things get hectic, I consider what else I could do. But then everything seems to settle back into manageable tasks. Besides, as I said before, the teaching part has never been the problem." Man, his hands felt incredible as he worked out the knots in her legs and feet. "What about you? Have you ever considered doing anything else other than saving the world?"

"Would it matter if I have?"

His response surprised her. Holly couldn't help but wonder if his question was merely asked out of curiosity or was a prelude to something more. The uncertainty compelled Holly to choose her answer with caution. "Only if it's what you want and will make you happy."

Like his was to her, Holly doubted Chace expected the answer she'd given him. But it was the best she had to offer. When she'd broken their engagement, she hadn't asked him to give up his career as a Ranger, and she wasn't about to do so now that he worked in the private sector. That was a decision Chace needed to make by and for himself.

Still, a tiny glimmer of hope flickered to life inside her.

Chace gave her foot one final squeeze. "Better?"

"Gloriously." Holly propped up on her elbows. "I feel like I need to return the favor, though."

"You are." Chace reached for her hand and pulled her against his side. "Just by sitting here with me to admire our wicked tree decorating skills."

Relieved her response hadn't broken the mood, Holly curled into him and rested her head on his shoulder. "I can do that."

The pine-like fragrance of the Douglas fir enveloped them as the lights twinkled brightly on the ornament-laden tree. With one arm around her

shoulder, Chace took her hand and kissed her palm before laying their hands on his chest directly above his heart. “Aside from the exhaustion, I hope you had a good time today.”

“I did.” That much she could admit.

He squeezed her hand. “So did I.”

Leaning back, she looked up at him. “What was your favorite part?”

Grinning, Chace lifted something off the table behind the couch and held it above her head. “Why, the mistletoe, of course,” he answered, a heated gleam in his eyes as he cupped her face and claimed her mouth with his.

Holly expected hard, fast, and demanding. What she got was soft, slow, and almost hesitant. As if he were seeking permission. Or didn’t want to risk scaring her away. Whatever his reasoning, the tentative tenderness in the brush of his lips against hers unleashed a firestorm of need deep within her soul.

Even had she wanted to, Holly could no longer contain the whimpering moans of pleasure Chace elicited with his featherlight kisses. Neither could she keep from pulling him closer or opening her mouth to invite his tongue to dance with hers.

An invitation he immediately accepted with a sexy moan of his own that shot straight to her core. Holly’s blood heated, turning her entire body into a blazing inferno. But just when she thought she might disintegrate into a pile of ashes, Chace began to slow the kiss down without stopping completely.

Instead, he traced the tip of his tongue around the edge of her lips. Then he nibbled. Tasted. Suckled. Holly returned each gesture in full until their breathing calmed and their heart rates settled into a more regular rhythm.

Chace rested his forehead against hers. Apparently, he was as reluctant as she was to break their connection completely. “So that you know, the last thing I wanted to do was stop.”

Holly’s stomach somersaulted to her knees. “I know.” She hesitated but decided to finish her thought anyway. “Me neither.”

When Chace exhaled slowly, Holly wondered if it was a sign of relief. And she couldn’t help herself from hoping that it was.

Easing back, Chace lifted her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I have missed you something fierce, Holly McCade.”

Though it was the second time in as many days he’d admitted missing her, emotion suddenly burned her throat and blurred her vision. Spoken as softly as his kiss had begun, his confession struck something deep in her

heart, the effect more profound than Holly thought possible.

Since she'd experienced similar feelings less than thirty minutes ago, there was only one way for Holly to respond. "I've missed you too, Chace." They probably needed to say a million other things to each other, but for tonight, they'd said enough.

Like clockwork, Chace's internal alarm woke him every morning promptly at five, regardless of the time zone, when he went to bed, or how freaking exhausted he was. Therefore, he rarely, if ever, bothered to set an alarm. Not even last night when he'd barely had enough energy to haul his tired ass upstairs and into bed.

So, with no alarm set, what was that incessant buzzing sound that continued to invade his slumber?

When the noise failed to cease, Chace peeled one eye open to find a completely darkened room that told him absolutely nothing since the sun didn't rise on the East Coast in December until around seven a.m. Groaning in protest, he rolled over and picked up his phone to check the actual time.

As he squinted at the screen, the cell vibrated against his hand.

Lyss.

The time:

04:45

Concerned about why his sister was calling before dawn, Chace scrambled to answer the call. "What's wrong?"

"I could ask you the same thing. I've been trying to get hold of you and Holly for over an hour."

Relieved that she wasn't in tears, Chace sat up and swung his legs over

the side of the bed. “It’s the middle of the freaking night, Lyss.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that. But since you’ve always been a light sleeper, I thought I’d call to update you on Sean while they run some tests on him.”

Scrubbing a hand over his whisker-stubbed face, Chace mentally calculated the time difference between them and realized it was nearing eleven in the morning in Germany. “How is he?”

“All things considered, a lot better than I imagined. That’s not to say he doesn’t have a long road to recovery ahead of him, but he’s alert and seemingly in good spirits.”

“Seemingly?”

Lyss chuckled. “Well, from what I can tell, he’s not wallowing in self-pity, but I haven’t gotten to spend much time alone with him since his arrival unless he’s sleeping. Doctors, nurses, and technicians are constantly in and out of his room, tending to his injuries or running tests.”

“Which, as a nurse, you should understand.”

“I know.” She sighed.

“What are the docs telling you?” Chace asked, knowing full well that if the medical staff weren’t forthcoming with information, his sister would track them down and pepper them relentlessly with questions until she got the answers she wanted.

“Technically, his condition was upgraded from critical to fair before transport yesterday, and as of this morning, he’s maintaining that status. They’re continually monitoring his vitals, of course, and ensuring his internal injuries are healing properly. His leg is immobilized, and the scans they’re running right now will determine if the bone is fusing back together on its own or if he’ll require surgery. Singularly, his injuries are manageable, but they present more opportunities for complications, like leakages, infection, and necrosis when combined.”

Chace had no idea what over half of the information Lyss had just relayed to him even meant. Obviously, as a nurse, she did, and since she didn’t sound hysterical or overly concerned, he’d take that as a positive sign. “How are you doing?”

“Tired, but not as worried now that I’ve seen him.” She laughed again. “Even though he looks like hell.”

“I hope you didn’t tell him that.”

“No. Not yet, anyway.”

“Play nice, Alyssa.”

“You don’t think he’d tell me if I looked like I’d just gone ten rounds with Tyson Fury?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean you have to rub salt into his already painful wounds.”

“Speaking of painful wounds, how’s everything going with you and Holly?”

Leave it to his sister to yank his damned chain from across the freaking Atlantic before he was fully awake, let alone imbibed a drop of coffee. “I’d think that under the circumstances, you’d have enough to worry about without concerning yourself with what’s going on here.”

“You’re taking care of my daughters, asshat.”

“Yet your question never mentioned Emme and Wren,” he countered. “They’re fine, by the way.”

“From the pictures Holly sent me earlier, it looks like they’re having the time of their lives.” She paused after her voice cracked on the last word, and Chace could hear the deep breaths Lyss was taking to control her emotions. He imagined she’d been implementing those exercises a lot lately.

“We’re trying to keep things as normal and busy as possible.”

“I appreciate that.” Lyss sniffled. “More than I can tell you.”

“It’s what families and friends do for each other,” he assured her.

“I know.” He heard her take another few breaths. “I think the best time to video chat with them each day is probably around 4:30 your time. Sean will be settled for the night, and the girls will be home from school. Holly, too. What do you think?”

“Works for me.” He always preferred to have a schedule and figured it would benefit the twins as well. Still, one thing bothered him a little. “What happens when they ask about Sean?”

“As soon as I get a clearer indication of his prognosis, I plan to tell them he was injured. Then, I’ll have more definitive answers to the questions I know they’ll ask. Right now, I don’t know how long he’ll be here, if they’ll transfer him back to the States, or when. But I don’t think it’s fair to tell them anything that will make them worry and wonder unnecessarily.”

Yeah. Chace got that. “But since they think you’re there visiting him, they will expect to see and talk to him.”

“Until I have the answers to give them, he’ll either be asleep or working.”

“Okay.” What else could he say? Especially since he wasn’t exactly looking forward to being on the receiving end of the questions his nieces

would pose after hearing the news and they were no longer chatting with their mother.

“It’s the best I can do right now, Chace.”

“I know.” And he did.

“So, about you and Holly.”

“Alyssa,” he sighed rather than spoke her name.

“Dammit, Chace, the two of you belong together.”

No argument from him there. That didn’t mean he expected his sister just to blurt out what his heart already knew, either. “How about you concentrate on your husband and let me handle everything here?”

“But *will* you?”

Considering the progress he and Holly had made in the last forty-eight hours, especially the night before on the sofa after the twins were in bed, Chace thought he had a pretty damned good handle on things already. Well, with a little help from some mistletoe, of course. But his sister didn’t need all the particulars.

Or any, really. At least not while everything was still in the embryonic stages of development.

“Didn’t you say you saw the pictures from yesterday? Wasn’t that proof of how well I’m handling things?”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“But it’s the only response you’re getting.” He pushed himself off the bed. “Now go find your husband. Tell him we said hello and are praying for his recovery. I’ll set up the call with the twins at 4:30.”

Before she could respond, Chace disconnected the call and headed for the shower in preparation for his first day as a chauffeur and domestic engineer.

Wouldn’t his former special forces teammates and the security specialists at SSI get a kick out of that?

“YOU OKAY?”

Holly glanced up to find her fellow teacher and friend, Taylor Lochran, peeking into her classroom from the doorway. Usually, the two of them ate in Taylor’s room with two other colleagues, but today, Holly couldn’t summon the energy to get up from her desk and walk down the hall to join them.

“Yeah. Just exhausted.”

“Busy weekend?” The sparkle in Taylor’s green eyes revealed she probably knew more about Holly’s weekend activities than she let on.

Well, the public ones, at least.

Of course, some had occurred under the mistletoe in plain view of anyone at Morningstar Farm. Had Taylor been there? Or had the infamous Hickory Ridge grapevine spread the word to anyone who cared to listen?

Not that it mattered because either way, Holly had no doubt Tay was already in the know.

“Have you ever spent the weekend with seven-year-old twins with a never-ending energy supply?”

Taylor shook her head as she entered the room and sat at one of the student desks across from Holly. “No. Can’t say that I have.” She leaned forward. “But please tell me Emme and Wren aren’t the only factors contributing to your exhaustion.”

Holly realized Taylor believed Chace was key to why Holly was so tired. And honestly, he was. Just not in the way her friend presumed.

Had he kept her awake when she should have been sleeping?

Yes. But not because they’d engaged in the horizontal mambo all night. More as a result of the kiss they’d shared before retiring to their separate sleeping quarters. The kiss that had awakened all her girlie parts from hibernation, drenched her panties, and vibrated through every freaking nerve cell in her body.

Even in her bone-weary state, who in the hell could sleep after that? Especially when her mind refused to shut down as her body yearned for more of what only Chace could give. So, she’d tossed and turned, reliving every intimate moment they’d ever shared, until, soaked in sweat and aching with need, Holly sought relief in the shower to quench the burning flames of desire scorching her from the inside out.

“It’s not like that,” Holly insisted.

“That flush creeping up your neck into your face says otherwise, I’m afraid.”

Great. Just great.

Sighing, Holly propped her head in her hands. “What have you heard?” Might as well find out what was going through the rumor mill.

“Oh, sweetie, it’s nothing bad,” Taylor reassured her. “Only that Chace is back, and the two of you are taking care of the twins while Lyss is with Sean.

Some saw the four of you at the festival on Saturday. Others yesterday at Morningstar Farm.”

Holly arched a brow. “Were there any observations reported?”

“Well, mistletoe was mentioned, along with a few stolen kisses.” Taylor smiled. “Kisses you didn’t seem to mind.”

No. She hadn’t. Not at all.

Dammit.

“Arghhhh,” Holly sighed and moaned, dropping her head to the desktop. “It’s been eight freaking years, Tay. Why can’t I get over him?”

“Because the heart wants what the heart wants.”

“You sound like a Hallmark movie.”

“I like Hallmark movies.”

“I know you do.” Especially during the holidays.

“Look, things could be worse, you know,” Taylor pointed out.

Holly raised her head. “Really? How?”

“Well, first off, he could have shown up here with a woman when Lyss called for his help.”

Eww. Talk about awkward.

“Second, the years may have been unkind to him. Think beer belly and receding hairline with a combover.”

Considering Holly ran into Chace several times over the years when their paths crossed at parties and events for the twins, she’d seen firsthand he’d only gotten better looking and more fit with age.

“And third, he could have lost interest.”

Well, that certainly didn’t seem to be the case, now, did it?

“From everything I’ve heard, he’s still got it just as bad for you as you do for him.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Taylor shrugged. “Hey. You asked what I’d heard.”

Yeah, she had.

“I probably should have led with this, but how is Sean?”

Holly relayed what Chace had told her this morning after Lyss’s call.

“So, no idea how long he’ll be hospitalized?”

Holly shook her head. “Not yet. I think Lyss hopes to get more answers as his condition improves and remains stable.”

“Makes sense.” Taylor pushed herself out of the student desk. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Like you said, it could be worse.”

Taylor nodded. “Yes, girl, I can think of a helluva lot of things far worse than sharing caregiver duties with a gorgeous hunk of a man like Chace Dutton.” She grinned from ear to ear. “Especially when there’s mistletoe all around.”

Truer words were never spoken.

AT 4 O’CLOCK, Holly had barely taken three steps inside the door when Chace greeted her. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, he pointed at the mistletoe above their heads, ducked his head, and kissed her like he meant business. “Nice to see you, too,” she eked past her surprise when he removed his lips from hers.

Chace lifted her school bag off her shoulder and set it on the parson’s bench. “How was your day?” he asked as he helped Holly out of her jacket.

“Good. How about yours?”

“It was eerily quiet, but I managed to accomplish quite a bit.”

“So I see.”

As promised, Chace had cleaned up their decorating mess, and from the delectable aroma coming from the kitchen, he’d also started dinner. Dang, she could get used to coming home to this real quick.

Careful, the little voice inside her head warned, but after her chat with Taylor at lunch, Holly decided to ignore it. For the time being, anyway.

She followed Chace to the kitchen. “Where are the girls?”

“In the backyard playing with the neighbor’s dog. She assured me it was okay.”

“Oh, I bet she did,” Holly mumbled, wondering how long after she’d left for work before Willow Bodine, the blonde bombshell of Sycamore Lane, found an excuse to make Chace’s acquaintance. Knowing Willow, Holly probably hadn’t made it out of the driveway.

Chace checked the oven before grabbing salad fixings from the fridge. He laid a cucumber on the cutting board and pointed to a Christmas tin on the counter with the knife he pulled from the cutlery block. “She brought us some brownies.”

Likely hoping it’ll add a few inches to my already wide ass and hips. “Is

that when she said the girls could play with her dog?”

“No.” He continued peeling and chopping veggies. “She brought the brownies when she came over to invite me for coffee.”

“Did you go?” she tried to sound nonchalant. Like she couldn’t care less about Willow, the brownies, or the fact she’d invited Chace to her house. *For coffee.* Yeah. Right.

A grin danced in Chace’s dark eyes. “No. I told her I had a lot I needed to do today.”

His answer pleased Holly probably more than it should.

Reaching into an overhead cabinet, Chace pulled out a large bowl. “I didn’t go to lunch with her either,” he admitted as innocuously as if he were giving a weather report.

Only Holly wasn’t gullible enough to believe he was offering this information just to make conversation. No, he was more cunning than that. Still, she couldn’t keep from gaping at him when she said, “She invited you to lunch?”

Chace nodded and dumped a bag of salad greens into the bowl. “She caught me when I was leaving to run some errands.”

Shameless hussy. “I’m surprised she didn’t suggest tagging along.”

“She did.” He scooped up the sliced cucumbers and dropped them into the greens. “Said we could grab a bite while we were out.” He grinned. “Her treat.”

Bristling, Holly kept herself from marching across the street and telling Willow Bodine and her bodacious assets to back the hell up. But she’d given up the right to stake her claim on Chace eight years ago. This time, Holly didn’t try as hard to temper her response. “It’s a wonder she didn’t jump in your truck anyway.”

“The door was locked.”

“And if it wasn’t?” Dammit, why wasn’t her brain censoring her thoughts before the words tumbled out of her mouth?

The grin still glimmered in Chace’s eyes as he lifted a brow at her question. “Is that jealousy I’m hearing?”

“No.” She quickly averted her gaze.

“Are you sure? ‘Cuz it sure sounded an awful lot like jealousy to me.”

Holly pierced him with a glare. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Immensely,” he confessed, letting the grin loose on his entire face to show just how much.

“As much as you enjoyed the attention bestowed on you by Willow Bodine?”

Chace held her gaze. “Where you’re concerned? Not even close.”

“You’re incorrigible. You know that?” Holly countered, even though his answer had already turned her insides to goo.

“That’s what you keep telling me.” The grin was back, and so was the kaleidoscope of butterflies flitting through her stomach.

Holly crossed her arms for no other reason than to keep her hammering heart inside the confines of her chest.

Or maybe to protect it.

Keep it safe.

Nope, not going there. “So, if you rebuffed all Willow’s advances, how did Emme and Wren come to play in the backyard with her dog?”

“Her name’s Maisy.” When Holly didn’t respond, he added, “The girls told me when we drove past Willow and her ball of fluff on our way home from school. As soon as they hopped out of the truck, they asked if they could go pet Maisy, and one thing led to another, and they’re outside playing in the yard.”

“Without Ms. Bodine?” They better be if he knew what was good for him.

Chace shrugged as he pushed the finished salad toward her. “Cover this and put it in the fridge, please.”

Holly did as he asked. “Well,” she prompted, “is she out there or not?”

“I have no idea. I told them they had thirty minutes until their mother called, and then I came back inside.”

“And she didn’t follow you?”

He made a point to look around the kitchen. “Do you see her?”

“I can’t believe she gave up so easily.” Granted, Lyss had told her more than once that many people misjudged the blonde divorcee. Still...Holly couldn’t completely dismiss her suspicions.

“I may have had something to do with her decision to retreat.”

What? “How?” Holly hated how badly she wanted to know.

“I told her the truth.”

She narrowed her eyes. “About what?”

“About why I’m here.” He checked the contents of the oven before slinging the dishtowel over his shoulder and leaning his ass against the counter to face her. “But more importantly, about us.”

Holly blinked. “Us?” She sounded like a freaking parrot. God help her. Nodding, he braced his hands on either side of his hips. “Yes. Us.”

“What exactly did you tell her?”

“You sure have a lot of questions.” His eyes held hers. “So let me ask one. Why didn’t you insist I go to my parents’ house or get a hotel room rather than letting me stay here?”

“Because this is *your* sister’s house,” Holly answered as if it were a no-brainer. “If anyone leaves, it should be me.”

“Is that what you want?”

“What I *want* is to know what any of this has to do with what you told Willow.” Then, a thought suddenly hit her. “Are you comparing me to her, Chace? Insinuating I had ulterior motives to keep us under the same roof? Because I didn’t.” Holly shook her head before quickly correcting her statement. “I don’t.”

At least Holly didn’t think so. Not intentionally, anyway.

Yet having him here, even for just two days, had given Holly a glimpse into what their life might have looked like had she not broken their engagement. If they’d married. Had a family. Enjoyed weekend outings together, creating priceless memories to cherish forever. Spent their evenings canoodling on the sofa after their children were fast asleep and before heading to their own bed to...

No! That was the fantasy, not the way things would likely have gone down had they stayed together. Hell, in all probability, Holly and Chace would have found themselves in a similar situation as Lyss and Sean were in now. Only Holly would have received the harrowing news that her husband had been injured.

Or worse.

And after losing her oldest brother to the unrest in the Middle East, Holly never wanted to go through that again.

“You’ve got that wrinkle again.” Chace pushed himself off the counter and drew his index finger between her brows.

Holly was surprised her entire face wasn’t one big, confounded brow.

He lifted her chin with his forefinger, forcing her to look at him. “For the record, I wasn’t insinuating anything. Nor is there any comparison whatsoever between you and Willow Bodine.” Brushing her hair away from her face, he held her gaze. “For me, anyway.”

Holly’s breath caught in her throat. At his nearness. His earthy, masculine

scent. The words that fell from his lips. But most of all, the way he was looking at her as if she hung the moon.

“What did you tell Willow, Chace?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“The truth.”

“That we were once engaged?”

He nodded. “Yeah. That and how I plan to do whatever it takes to win you back.”

Her heart plummeted to her toes, taking the breath in her lungs right along with it.

Taking a step back, Chace grinned at what she suspected was the wide-eyed, open-mouth shock on her face. “Now, how about you round up the twins while I set up the laptop for the video chat with Lyss.” He dropped a quick but no less toe-curling kiss on her lips before turning for the family room, leaving Holly standing there in stunned silence.

When Chace had offered to handle the twins' nightly bedtime routine so Holly could grade more senior essays, he'd had absolutely no idea what that entailed. But considering he'd been getting himself ready for bed for thirty-four years, how hard could it be, right?

Wrong.

Well, not so much wrong as more complicated than he'd expected. Starting with what they'd wear to school the next day. Apparently, his routine of rolling out of bed and throwing something on was not an option. No, Emme and Wren needed to have their outfit picked and laid out the night before.

At first, Chace didn't get it, but after fifteen minutes of his nieces rummaging through their closets and dresser drawers, selecting and rejecting item after item, he understood completely. If they waited till the morning to do this, they'd never make it to school on time.

"I think I'll wear this," Wren finally declared from inside the closet.

Chace was relieved until she emerged with a ballerina leotard, rainbow-colored tutu, and ballet flats that looked much smaller than she actually wore. Before he could devise a tactful way to steer her toward another more suitable selection, Emme intervened. "You can't wear that anymore. Mommy said."

Ah, trying to get one over on the newbie, huh? Clever. And something he would have definitely tried at their age. Or even now for that matter.

Just when Chace thought he'd dodged the bullet of eighty-sixing Wren's choice, the little minx decided to throw shit into the game by countering with,

“Mommy said Uncle Chace and Aunt Holly are in charge while she’s away, and what they say goes.”

Then she turned puppy-dog eyes on him. “Can I please wear this to school tomorrow, Uncle Chace?”

Fu...dge, he amended his unspoken reaction to Wren’s counter-move to a more G-rated version. Now what? Like his nieces had done with over a dozen outfits, Chace considered and rejected several possible responses, finally settling on, “Wouldn’t you rather wear something more Christmassy?”

Please say yes.

“No.”

Da...ng it! “Well, if your mom said you can’t wear it anymore, I don’t think I should say you can. Do you?”

Her little face fell.

“Plus, it’s *way* too small,” Emme put in her two cents, emphasis clearly on the word *way*.

“I bet Aunt Holly would let me wear it,” Wren countered, sticking her bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout.

“Then I’m afraid you’d lose,” Holly disputed from the doorway.

Though he wanted to pull his weight with the twins’ care, relief oozed out of every cell in Chace’s body at the sound of Holly’s voice. Wren stomped her foot in obvious frustration. *Sorry, little girl.*

And he was, because the next to last thing Chace wanted to do was disappoint either of his nieces. But all *this* was uncharted territory for him, and the last thing he wanted to do was to screw anything up.

Which was a real possibility, considering his nieces seemed to immediately home in on his experience in the child-rearing department, one of them without giving a second thought to taking full advantage of his ignorance. Not that Chace could blame them. At their age, he’d have done the same thing.

Hell, who was he kidding? If it worked to his benefit, he would do it now. As would his sister, making Chace wonder if cleverness in adapting a situation in one’s favor was a Dutton family trait.

“You have five minutes to get all these clothes put back where they belong and have suitable outfits laid out for tomorrow, including shoes and accessories,” Holly instructed, her tone firm and brooking no discussion on the matter.

As the girls hurried to do as instructed, Holly stalked across the room to

pull clean pajamas and underwear from the dresser. She shoved them into Chace's chest. "Take these into the bathroom for their shower. The towels and wash cloths are in the closet."

"But we were going to take a bath," Emme protested, producing a pout that rivaled her sister's.

"And if you hadn't wasted valuable time trying to outwit your uncle, you could have," she countered, casting a look in his direction that said *sucker* loud and clear.

Chace resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at Holly. Instead, he also did as he was told. And in less than the five minutes they'd been allotted, Emme and Wren tromped into the bathroom with Holly on their heels.

Pulling back the curtain, she adjusted the shower knobs for the correct temperature setting and turned on the spray. "They've got it from here," she said to Chace before turning to address the twins. "Five minutes," she reminded them. "And once you're finished, what do you do?"

"Turn off the water."

"And?"

"Dry off."

"And?"

"Brush our teeth."

Holly cocked a brow. "And?"

"Wipe up any water that gets on the floors," Emme answered.

"And hang our towels on the hooks," Wren added.

"Exactly," Holly replied with a wink.

"After that, Uncle Chace will read us *one* bedtime story," Emme lifted one finger in the air, "and tuck us into bed."

"You got it. Now get busy."

Brushing past him, Holly exited the bathroom through the door leading into the hallway. Since he hadn't received any further instructions, Chace followed her out. "How'd you know?" he asked, impressed by everything he'd just witnessed.

"Know what?"

"That I was in deep shit up here."

Holly chuckled, the gesture lighting her eyes and spearing him right in the gut. "After grading five essays and not hearing any bathwater running, I suspected you might have fallen victim to their manipulative ploys of prolonging bedtime."

“Were those suspicions a result of firsthand experience?”

“Let’s suffice it to say this isn’t my first getting-our-goddaughters-ready-for-bed rodeo.”

No, Chace doubted it was. From what Lyss had shared with him, since Sean’s deployment, Holly often helped with Emme and Wren. A helluva lot more than he did. That was for damn sure. “You handled them like a pro.”

“Well, I have a lot of daily practice with their teenage counterparts. Besides, kids of all ages are gonna test the waters and push the limits. The key is to establish boundaries, set expectations, and stick to them.”

Sounded a lot like his military training.

“Uncle Chace! We’re done!”

“Sounds like you’re up.” She looked him in the eye. “Just remember—*one* bedtime story, tuck them in, and lights out,” she restated his objective.

“Any chance I can talk you into tag-teaming it with me?”

Smiling, Holly shook her head and patted his cheek. “Nah. You’ve got this.”

Chace sure as hell hoped so, but one thing was for certain—he would never again wonder how hard anything could be where his nieces were concerned.

Or with the woman who seemed a little too eager to throw him into the seven-year-old lion’s den.

HOLLY HAD JUST GOTTEN herself settled on the sofa to grade a few more essays when her phone vibrated. A quick glance at the screen indicated her sister was calling. While she wanted to let the call go to voicemail, she also didn’t want to risk having Kit or any other family members show up on the doorstep in a few minutes.

Guess that meant she needed to answer. Reluctantly, Holly accepted the call and brought the phone to her ear. “Hey.”

“Glad you decided to answer, since I’m already in my jammies and really didn’t want to get dressed and haul my ass all the way over to Lyss’s.”

Precisely the reason Holly had decided not to let the call go to voicemail.

“How are things going?”

“The same as they were last time we talked.”

“That’s not what I’ve been hearing.”

Of course it wasn’t. Not when Kit’s place of business rivaled The Greasy Spoon and the town newspaper for what transpired in and around Hickory Ridge. If Kit’s staff didn’t have a story to share, the people bringing their vehicles in for service undoubtedly did. Holly would bet her sister could pen a best-seller with everything she’d seen and heard over the years.

“Why is it so hard for people to mind their own business?”

“C’mon, Holl. If the tables were turned, you’d want to know all the juicy details too.”

“But nothing juicy is going on here.”

“No. It sounds like most everything happened at Morningstar Farm.”

Not quite *everything*, Holly thought, remembering last night’s toe-curling kiss on the sofa. The one she hadn’t wanted to end.

Ever.

Sighing inwardly, she replied to her sister’s earlier comment. “Only because they had mistletoe.” Now, why had she said that out loud?

“Mistletoe?” Kit echoed, and Holly could picture her sister’s face scrunched in confusion.

Now, since she’d opened her big fat mouth, Holly had no choice but to give Kit the details. “Yeah. They had it tacked up everywhere.”

“And I’m willing to bet Chace didn’t let a sprig go to waste.”

If he did, Holly hadn’t seen it.

“I’m not sure how I know this or why I even remember it, but mistletoe is actually a parasitic plant. To survive, it has to grow on other trees because that’s where it gets its water and nutrients from.”

More useless information Kit had likely gleaned from one of her customers. “I think most of what Morningstar Farm has on display is artificial.”

“Stands to reason, I guess.” Kit paused briefly. “So, how was it?”

Holly knew Kit was referring to Chace’s kisses under the mistletoe, but she didn’t want to get into that with her sister when he could come downstairs at any minute. Besides, how was she supposed to answer? If she told the truth, Kit would only have more questions. Or warnings, as the case may be.

But if she brushed them off as nothing to write home about, Kit would never believe her. Not after how Holly used to extol Chace’s expertise in the kissing department every chance she got. How, by just touching his lips to

hers, he could awaken feelings inside her she never even knew existed.

Feelings that always led to wanting, or rather *needing* more.

From him.

Only him.

“You still there?”

Kit’s question snapped Holly out of her thoughts. She cleared her throat. “Yeah.” Her voice still sounded raw.

“Well, if just thinking about mistletoe kisses with Chace renders you speechless, there’s only one conclusion for me to draw.”

Probably the same one Holly had drawn herself.

Sensing the conversation was about to veer into territory Holly definitely didn’t want Chace to overhear, she set her essays aside and jumped off the couch. “Hold on. I’m going to Lyss’s room.”

“Where’s Chace?”

“Reading to the twins, but he could come down at any minute,” Holly replied as she hurried to the lowest level of the house.

“You don’t think he’ll come looking for you? Maybe hoping for a little somethin’ somethin’?”

“No.” Though Kit couldn’t see, Holly rolled her eyes as she closed the door and fell onto the bed. “Besides, we haven’t done anything more than kiss.”

“Oh yes, you have.”

“Not in eight years,” Holly countered.

“Do you want to do more?”

Sometimes, more than she wanted her next breath.

But Holly was not admitting that to Kit.

Though Holly had very much enjoyed the physical component of her relationship with Chace, she also loved just spending time with him. Talking. Swapping stories about their day. Watching old movies. Cheering for their favorite sports teams. Taking long walks in and around Hickory Ridge. Dancing, either at The Bootleg or outside under the stars.

So many things that were never the same with anyone else.

Hell, who was she kidding? Holly couldn’t even imagine doing those same things with anyone else but Chace.

She really didn’t want to either.

“Your silence is answering my question again,” Kit informed her.

Yeah, Holly supposed it was. “He asked me to give us until the New

Year.”

Her revelation was met with dead silence for at least ten long seconds. A totally rare occurrence where her sister was concerned because no matter the topic, Kit *always* had something to say. Good. Bad. Or indifferent.

Holly couldn't help but wonder what kind of response her sister was formulating that her normally rapid-fire mind needed to think about before voicing. She didn't have to wait long to find out.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“To not fight the feelings we obviously still feel for each other and just see what happens.”

“And you agreed to this?”

Holly couldn't tell if Kit asked out of disbelief or hope.

Maybe a little of both.

“I had some questions I needed him to answer first.”

“Like?”

“Well, the biggest one was *why*.”

“And his answer was?”

“He said we had everything to gain and nothing more to lose.” Holly recounted the rest of the conversation to Kit. The questions she posed. The answers he gave. The sense most everything made. The doubt she continued to harbor regarding Chace's insistence he could refuse any assignment SSI offered him.

Well, maybe she didn't doubt he had the option to refuse, but whether he would.

“He's there now.”

“But for how long?”

“I think that's a conversation you and Chace need to have. Lay it all out on the table. Tell each other how you feel. What you want. Your expectations. Hell, even your fears. Both of you left a lot of things unsaid eight years ago. Now is the time to put everything out there. Go big or go home.”

“He could break my heart again, Kit.”

“Or he could make it whole. What chance would you rather take?”

Good question. “When did you become so wise?”

“Honestly, I think some of it comes with age.”

“You're only a year older than I am,” Holly pointed out.

“See what you have to look forward to in the next twelve months?”

“Ha ha.”

“All jokes aside, I truly believe you and Chace deserve to give yourselves and each other a second chance.”

A shiver of anticipation mingled with a healthy dose of trepidation skittered down Holly’s spine, settling deep in her belly. “You’re right,” she finally agreed. “But if things go sideways again, you better have plenty of mint chocolate chip ice cream in your freezer.”

“Based upon the non-existence of my own love life, I consider it a staple,” she replied. “But I don’t think you’ll need it this time.”

“From your lips to God’s ears.”

What should have taken ten minutes to read one book and get the girls tucked into bed stretched into a good twenty. And that was after they spent at least five picking out the longest book they could find on the shelf.

He wasn't surprised. Not after observing Emme and Wren in action the last three days. They were always thinking. Or plotting how to manipulate the situation to their advantage. But he couldn't blame them when their ingenuity impressed the hell out of him, making him quite proud.

Chace did feel sorry for his sister and brother-in-law, though, particularly when the girls entered their middle and high school years, and the need to beef up their security system would likely quadruple. To err on the side of caution, he should also suggest Lyss and Sean invest in some high-end tracking devices, since there was no doubt in Chace's mind Emme and Wren were bound to be hell on wheels.

In some ways, they already were.

God love 'em.

Though Chace didn't find Holly in the family room, the sight of her school stuff still spread over the sofa cushions indicated she planned to return at some point. Instead of going in search of her, he sat down to wait.

Fortunately, he didn't need to cool his jets for long.

"Hey," Holly greeted as she entered the room, easing herself among the papers she'd been grading. "Did you cave in and read them more than one story?"

Chace shook his head. "No. But they did pick the book with the most

pages.”

“Of course they did.”

“Clever girls.”

As she gathered her papers, Holly glanced up, a smile tugging at her lips. “Did you expect anything less?”

“No. I’d probably be disappointed if they didn’t push the envelope a little.”

Her right brow arched. “A little?”

Chace chuckled, inclining his head toward the satchel where she was stashing the folder of essays. “Did you get finished?”

Holly shook her head. “No, but I didn’t expect to.” She carried the leather bag to the parson’s bench near the door for an easy grab-and-go in the morning. She was also standing directly under the mistletoe he’d tacked on the ceiling by the door.

Not about to pass up a chance to kiss her, Chace jumped off the sofa and ate up the distance between them in three long strides so that when she turned back, he was right in front of her.

With a little shriek, Holly brought her hand to her chest. “You scared the shit out of me, Chace,” she exclaimed, her eyes narrowed.

“Sorry. But...” He pointed toward the ceiling. “Mistletoe.” He took a step toward her.

She put her hand out to stop him. “What is it with you and the mistletoe?”

He shrugged. “It’s a Christmas tradition.”

“Kit says it’s actually a parasite that survives off other trees.”

Hmm. Interesting. “When were you and Kit discussing mistletoe?”

“She called when you were putting the girls to bed. Seems we’re the topic of conversation around Hickory Ridge since your mistletoe antics at Morningstar Farm on Sunday. Even Taylor mentioned it at lunch today.”

“Taylor? Isn’t she Cole and Levi Lochran’s sister?”

“You know she is, so stop trying to change the subject.”

Chace frowned. “Why would I want to change the subject about kissing you under the mistletoe when it has quickly become one of my favorite things to do this holiday season?”

“Not about the actual kissing, but from all the attention the mistletoe kisses seem to be generating from the general public.”

“We’re not in public now.”

“Still doesn’t mean you need to kiss me whenever mistletoe is present, in

public or private either,” Holly countered, moving past him.

He circled Holly’s wrist with his fingers and pulled her back toward him until barely an inch separated them. “Some legends say it’s bad luck if two people standing under the mistletoe don’t share a kiss.”

“Sounds like maybe you and Kit should compare your knowledge on the subject.”

He edged his face closer to hers. “Now, why in the world would I want to talk to your sister when I’d much rather be kissing you?” *Among other things*, he added sans voice.

Sighing, Holly closed her eyes. “Okay, get it over with,” she said indulgently before puckering up.

WTF?

No way was this how things were going down. Nope, not at all. The way Chace saw it, he had two options. Lean in, kiss her on the cheek, and walk away, which was all that was necessary based on what he’d read on the legend of mistletoe the past few days.

Or he could kiss her on the lips like he really wanted to.

Nah, Chace decided. If she wanted to play games, so could he.

But then she gave a little huff, followed by, “Well? What are you waiting for?” And that was all it took to alter his initial plan.

Game on, sweetheart. Game on.

Chace slid his hands along each side of her neck, his thumbs grazing the edges of her jawline to hold her head in place as he brushed his mouth ever so lightly against hers. He pulled back a micro-inch, took a deep breath, and swooped in to suck her bottom lip between his teeth. Holly’s little gasp of surprise was all the opening he needed to slip his tongue inside her mouth as he backed her up against the wall.

Though his game plan had gone from pecking her on the cheek to kissing the living hell out of her, his intent was still to walk away and leave her wanting more.

So fucking much more.

But once Chace tasted her luscious lips, her tongue greeting and tangling with his, he was a goner. Rather than ending the kiss and wishing her a jaunty good night, he lined his body flush with hers, pressed his growing erection against her belly, and plundered her mouth as if he was a dying man and she was the only thing that could save him.

And maybe she was, because the mere thought of stepping away from

her, even for a second, nearly gutted him. Chace wanted her. Had never stopped wanting her. In his life. His bed. Anywhere and everywhere, no matter what.

Growling against her mouth, Chace dragged his lips across her cheek to her neck. Nipping, licking, and biting her baby-soft, vanilla-scented skin as he went. The little mewling sounds coming from her throat as her arms encircled his neck brought him dangerously close to the edge.

But it was when Holly curled her leg around his and rubbed herself against his straining manhood, over and over again, that was his undoing. And if the way she trembled in his arms was any indication, it was also hers.

For several minutes or seconds—who knew for sure?—neither said a word. They couldn't. Not with their chests heaving to catch their breath and their hearts pounding out a synchronous staccato reminiscent of a jackhammer. When Holly dropped the back of her head against the wall, Chace dropped his face to her shoulder. It was the only move he dared in fear anything more would have them sliding bonelessly to the floor.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her voice low and husky as she unwound her leg and dropped her foot to the floor.

“Yeah,” he managed despite the embarrassment of creaming his jeans like some horny-ass teenager. “You?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

He raised his head and met her luminous brown eyes. “I, um, should probably apologize.”

A sly grin stretched into her cheeks. “Why? It’s not the first time that’s ever happened. To either of us.”

“It’s the first time since we were teenagers and didn’t know what the hell we were doing.”

Holly ran her finger down the center of his chest. “Oh, I think we knew exactly what we were doing. We just had no idea what to expect other than what our equally inexperienced friends had told us.”

“Or read in a girlie magazine.”

“I never read any girlie magazines.”

Oh, but Chace had and had lost his load more than once imagining what he read or saw on the pages was actually happening with Holly. Eventually, it had. But thank God things had gotten better over time.

Well, until tonight.

“As much as it pains me to even think about letting you go, we should

probably get cleaned up, don't you think?"

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

He leaned toward her. "Will you come back?" His question was a breath against her lips.

Holly cupped his face in her palm and closed the gap with a butterfly soft kiss. "Don't take too long."

"I won't," he promised and snatched another kiss before forcing himself away from her to dash upstairs and clean himself up.

Fifteen minutes later, they met back in the family room—Holly in black pajamas with white snow people all over them and Chace in navy blue athletic shorts and an Eagles band T-shirt. After what had transpired between them earlier, sitting on opposite ends of the sofa seemed pointless, so Chace wrapped his arm around Holly's shoulder and pulled her into his side.

With her head on his shoulder, Chace rested his cheek against her head. "You smell delicious," he murmured into her hair. She always did. The scent made him think of home.

"So do you." Holly snuggled a little closer.

"Better than I did, I'm sure."

Holly grinned. "I wouldn't exactly say that."

Chace toyed with a loose strand of her hair. "Be careful, or you'll turn my head."

"I thought I already had."

"Yeah." Chace pressed his lips to her head. "You have. Over and over again."

Silence followed, and although it wasn't uncomfortable, Chace thought a change of topic might put them both more at ease. "Did Lyss have any updates on Sean?" he asked.

Since he'd had the pleasure of speaking with his sister before the ass crack of dawn that morning, Chace enlisted Emme and Wren's assistance getting dinner on the table after they finished videochatting with their mother, providing Holly and Lyss a little time to talk privately.

Holly nodded. "She said the doctors are pleased with his test results. And though his recovery will take a considerable amount of time, if all goes well, he could be sent stateside to start PT and rehab by the end of the week."

"To a hospital or home?"

"She didn't specify, so I'm not sure. But now that she's seen for herself that he's going to be okay, Sean was encouraging her to come home with the

girls.”

“Bet that went over like a lead balloon.”

“Lyss assured him the twins were in good hands.”

Chace picked up the hand Holly had laid on his chest when she’d snuggled against him. He brought her palm to his lips. “I would have to agree.”

“Me, too. That’s why I told her we were fine and to take all the time she needed.”

“She’s lucky to have you as a friend, Holly.”

“It goes both ways.”

He imagined it did, considering how fiercely loyal his sister was. “Oh, I almost forgot. The girls brought home a flyer about a Christmas program they’re participating in next Tuesday. Primarily choral, I think.”

“Oh yeah. Lyss mentioned something about that when I drove her to the airport. She rattled off so many things as they popped into her head that day, I had a difficult time keeping up.”

“I also thought if Lyss isn’t back this weekend, we could check out what we didn’t see or do at the festival on Saturday.” He waggled his brows. “Maybe even go ice skating.”

“Sounds good.” She tipped her head back to look up at him. “Now, although my heart overflows with love for all four of them, could we please talk about something other than your sister, brother-in-law, and our goddaughters?”

Surprised yet pleased by her request, Chace tried not to let it show.

At least not too much.

“Do you have a specific topic in mind?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Shifting to face him fully, Holly sat up straighter. “Us.”

Chace wasn’t expecting that response. Granted, he realized that at some point, they would need to talk about their relationship—the past, present, and hopefully future. He just assumed it would happen more indirectly.

Not that it mattered. For them to have any chance at a future, they first needed to work through their past. Revisiting the reasons for their breakup eight years ago would stir up a ton of shit that continued to pose a risk to their happily ever after, but Chace was willing to do whatever it took if there was even a glimmer of hope they might have a future together.

“Okay.” He nodded. “What about *us* do you want to talk about?” he

asked, bracing himself for her answer.

Holly pulled her legs onto the sofa cushion, crossing them yoga-style as she concentrated on picking at the cuticle around her thumb. “Earlier, when I was on the phone with Kit, I told her about your request to give us until the New Year.”

Chace didn’t know if that was good or bad. He guessed it depended on Kit’s reaction. Rather than automatically assuming the worst, he took heart that even if Kit insisted Holly kick his ass to the curb, Holly hadn’t. That and what happened under the mistletoe between them earlier gave him more reason to hope Holly might be willing to give them a second chance.

“Are you upset that I told her?” she asked.

Chace shook his head. “No. Of course not. Just a little concerned about how Kit took the news.”

A smile lifted the right corner of her mouth as she peeked up at him through her veil of thick lashes. “I was too.”

Knowing that made Chace feel even better. “Well, don’t keep me in suspense. What *did* she have to say?”

“A *lot*,” Holly replied, exhaling slowly. “In a nutshell though, she said we needed to talk.”

“Makes sense.” Because it did.

Pressing her lips together, Holly nodded. “I’m just not sure where to even begin.”

Chace got that because, in all honesty, he felt the same way. But if both of them wanted a different outcome from eight years ago, they had to start somewhere or risk ending up right back where they were before Sean’s accident brought Chace home to help care for the twins.

“I suppose the best place to begin is determining what we want and if we’re willing to do what it takes to make it happen.”

CHACE WAS RIGHT. But what if they weren’t on the same page with what they wanted? There was only one way to find out.

Holly forced her gaze to meet his. “What is it that you want, Chace?”

“The same thing I’ve always wanted, Holly.” Taking her hand, Chace threaded his fingers with hers. “A future with you.”

Her breath hitched a little in relief. Okay. So far, so good.

At least, she hoped so.

“That’s what I want too.”

“But?”

Pressing her lips together, Holly shrugged. “But it’s also what we wanted before, and look what happened.” She shook her head. “And in eight years, the reason we’re no longer together hasn’t changed.”

“We’ve changed, Holly. Grown up. Matured. Already seen what our lives are like without the other one in it.”

Yes, they had. But even that didn’t change the reason for their breakup.

Chace took Holly’s other hand. “What happened to Sloane was tragic. I would never dispute that or diminish his death’s effect on those he left behind.” He swallowed hard. “But those incidents don’t happen to every soldier, Holly.”

“It happened to Sean.”

“And he survived and will make a full recovery.”

“Physically,” Holly conceded. “But what about mentally or emotionally?”

“That’s a crap shoot for anyone in the military. Even those lucky enough to escape physical injury.”

Holly understood that.

But still.

“What if he hadn’t made it, Chace?” Her heart hurt just thinking about the possibility.

His massive chest expanded as he pulled a deep breath into his lungs. “I don’t know, Holly. All I *can* tell you is that we can’t live our lives based on what-ifs. Not when walking across the street—or hell, even going to school can be just as dangerous as going off to war these days.”

If he meant to hit her right where she lived, he’d more than succeeded, especially with the amount and senselessness of mass shootings occurring worldwide. Many of them targeting innocent children and educational staff in schools across the country.

“Besides all that, I’m not in the military anymore.”

“You might as well be, working for the Steele brothers.” She pulled her hands free as she remembered telling her sister that she wouldn’t bet SSI wasn’t somehow on the government’s payroll.

“It’s nowhere near the same.”

“Really?” She pinned him with her gaze. “Then why were you in Cairo?”

“Heading up a security detail for an American dignitary.”

“Because he was in danger?” She phrased it as a question.

“Like I said before, everyone is in danger these days, Holly,” he countered. “In his case, he was also traveling with his family.”

“And your job was to protect all of them? Which tells me that if their lives were in danger, so was yours.”

Chace scrubbed a hand down his face. “Hiring SSI was a protective measure. No threats had been made against our client. But considering his position and the areas where he was scheduled to travel, he wanted to ensure his family's safety.”

“Sounds like he felt threatened in some way, doesn't it? What other reason would he have to hire a private security detail?”

“I can't answer for him specifically, but he's one of many who avail themselves of SSI's security services. Some have been threatened; others just want the peace of mind.”

“Yet regardless of why, if you encountered even a hint of trouble or danger, you still wouldn't give a second thought to jumping in front of a bullet to protect them. Am I right?”

“That's one of the reasons people hire us, Holly. But no matter the circumstances or the client, we take every precaution to keep things from escalating to that point. Most of the time, I'm not directly involved in the day-to-day security because I coordinate and set everything up for the other specialists to implement.”

“But for this particular case, you *were* a member of the team providing the actual security straight through the holidays, though, weren't you? From Thanksgiving till the end of January.”

“How do you know that?”

Holly swung her feet to the floor and put a foot of physical distance between them. “I told you Alex keeps me informed.”

“Yeah, that's something I've never understood either. How come it's okay for your brother to put his life in danger but not me?”

“I never said it was okay, Chace. Or that it didn't keep me and the rest of my family awake at night whenever he's on assignment. Or that every time the phone rings, we wonder if one of the Steele brothers is calling to say my parents have lost another son.” Her voice cracked on the last few words.

“Have you ever told Alex how you feel?”

She whirled on him. “Of course I've told him. So has everyone in my

family, except for Nick, who seems to be just as much of an adrenaline junkie by running into burning buildings for a living.”

“What was Alex’s response when you told him how you feel?”

“The same as yours.” She shook her head. “But it doesn’t make the worry any less. The only difference is that I can’t break up with my brother, but I can and do distance myself.” Holly raised her eyes to meet his. “And so does he whenever possible.”

Chace sat forward on the sofa, his elbows resting on his muscled thighs. “I’m sorry, Holly.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Does it make any difference that I came home as soon as my sister needed me?”

“But you still went, Chace. During the holidays.”

“Because I’m a single man, Holly.” He plowed his fingers through his hair, disheveling it more than it already was. “With our parents taking a Mediterranean cruise and Sean deployed, Lyss had already made plans to spend Christmas in Florida with her in-laws. So I accepted the assignment to allow my colleagues to spend the holidays with their families. Figured I’d get together with Lyss and the girls when I got back since, as military brats, she and I are accustomed to celebrating special occasions at odd times.” He laughed. “One year when we were kids, we even combined Christmas and Easter in February when our dad was between naval deployments.”

Holly felt like the scum of the earth. How could she fault Chace for considering others? With his parents out of the country and Lyss in Florida, what reason would Chace have to come back to Hickory Ridge for Christmas? Certainly not to be with her, since she’d sealed that deal the day she’d given him back his ring.

What if she hadn’t? What if they had gotten married and started a family? Would Chace still have chosen the assignment, leaving her and their children behind? Or would he have chosen differently?

He’s here now, isn’t he?

Yes, he was. And when he’d asked her to give them until New Year’s as a couple, he’d also promised he wouldn’t accept any assignments during that same time frame. Though she believed he would try to keep his promise, one question dogged her. “What happens in January, Chace? Or if Sean is released at the end of the week and Lyss comes home?”

Holly knew exactly how she wanted Chace to answer. What she hoped in

her heart of hearts he would say because God help her, she wanted a second chance with this man more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life.

“If Sean gets sent home, he'll likely be sent to Walter Reed or another facility for additional treatment and rehab. Lyss will want to spend as much time as she can with him, so she'll still need help with the twins.”

That made sense.

Chace pushed himself off the sofa and bridged the gap between them. “As for what happens in January? That pretty much depends on what happens between you and me in the next three weeks.” He stopped when they were toe to toe. “And I already told you what I wanted.”

Tingles spread like wildfire all over her entire body. And in that moment, despite all her fears and concerns, Holly also knew what she wanted. Or at least where she wanted this new journey with him to start.

Besides, hadn't her sister told her to go big or go home?

Looking up at him with her heart pounding in her ears, Holly stood and placed her hands on his rock-solid chest. “You know what I want right now?”

Chace rested his knuckles under her jaw and brushed the rough pad of his thumb ever-so-softly across Holly's cheek. “Tell me.”

“You.” Rising on her tippy toes, Holly wound her arms around his neck, her fingers threading through his thick hair. “In bed.” She touched her lips to his. “But without our clothes on this time.” Smiling, she kissed him again. “That is if you don't mind.”

Mind? Hell no, Chace didn't mind.

How could he when he wanted the same damned thing? But that wasn't all he wanted. Not by a long shot.

But there was something he needed to know before any of this went any further. Cupping her face between his palms, Chace forced her to meet his eyes. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"You really have to ask?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I need to hear you say the words."

"I thought I just did."

"Indulge me." He stared into the deep chocolate brown of her eyes. "Please."

"Okay." Holly nodded and held his gaze. "I'm sure I want you to take me downstairs and make love to me. But only if you want to."

Chace couldn't keep the soft laugh from escaping. "You need to ask that after what happened against the wall earlier?"

"You just did," she reminded him.

Touché.

Then again, if Holly hadn't been fully on board with what happened between them, Chace had no doubt he'd still be nursing the excruciatingly painful aftereffects of a swift knee straight to his groin. "Well, I guess it's settled then." Scooping her into his arms, he carried her downstairs while trying not to think of their destination as his sister's bedroom.

Nope. For tonight and any other night they shared a bed at Lyss's, Chace would consider the master suite their private lair. Yep. That definitely had a better and more provocative ring to it, he decided, kicking the door shut behind them.

Without missing a beat, Holly released her left hand from around his neck to turn the lock. "Better to be safe than have to explain what we're doing to a pair of overly inquisitive first graders."

Chace couldn't agree more. "Let's hope they stay tucked in bed. All..." He paused long enough for Holly to slide down the front of his body. Leaning down, he kissed one corner of her mouth. "Night..." Then the other. "Long." This time, full on the lips.

Holly flattened her palms against his chest. "While all this is very nice, we're forgetting two of the most important components of what I told you I wanted."

"Really?" He nipped at her bottom lip. "I thought I was the most important component."

"Oh, you are," she assured him. "But you'll be even better in that bed," she hooked a thumb over her shoulder, "without any clothes on that delicious body."

"You in a hurry?"

"Yes. I am."

"Why?" Was she afraid she'd change her mind?

Looking up, she laid her palm against his cheek. "Because it's been a damned long eight years, Chace. And I'm tired of waiting."

Her admission sucked the breath right out of his lungs.

Slowly, she stepped back and began stripping out of her pajamas. When she finally stood before him wearing nothing but a lacy pink bra and matching bikini panties, she returned her gaze to his and motioned her finger up and down at him. "Your turn."

Uncertain if he could even blink, let alone move, Chace simply stared at the luscious swells and curves of Holly's trim and toned body. Memories rushed back like a flash flood. The softness of her skin beneath his hands. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon when he breathed her in. The strength of those long, slender legs wrapped around his waist as he moved inside her, urging him deeper.

And the love shining in her beautiful eyes when they reached the pinnacle of ecstasy as one.

“You need some help?”

Her question shook him out of his reverie. “No.” He yanked his shirt over his head. “I’ve got it.” He kicked off his slides, shucked his shorts, and smiled when her eyes dropped appreciatively to the front of his boxer briefs, where his arousal was clearly outlined.

Her gaze lingered for a few seconds before slowly moving up his torso until her eyes again met his. “Nice to see you haven’t let yourself go.”

“Nice of you to notice.” He gestured toward her with his hand. “You look pretty damned good yourself.” So good, in fact, his blood felt like lava coursing through his veins. Then again, she could have been dressed in a burlap sack, and he’d have had the same reaction and wanted her just as much.

Probably more.

“Thank you.” She pulled in a deep breath. “So, are we gonna just stand here complimenting each other or…” she trailed off.

He took a step toward her when she hesitated. “Or what?”

“Or are you gonna give me what I want?”

Smiling, Chace cupped her bare arms, lifting her off the ground and depositing her in the center of the king-sized bed she’d already turned down for the night. “Your wish is my command,” he answered, bracing his arms on either side of her on the mattress before claiming her lips with his.

God, she tasted good. Like mint Chapstick and everything uniquely Holly. Just as he remembered and desperately longed for these last eight years. Every time their paths crossed. Every time he thought about her. Every night in his dreams.

He wanted this. Wanted her. Not just for tonight. Or the next three weeks. But forever.

One step at a time, the little voice of reason reminded him. *Right now, just enjoy the moment.*

Moving his lips from hers, Chace traced a path with his tongue along her jawline and down the side of her throat. He nipped and suckled, leaving a tiny mark on her skin as if branding her as his.

Which she was.

Just like he was hers.

Now and forever.

Reaching beneath her, Chace deftly unclasped her bra, peeling the garment from her body and freeing her breasts from their lacy confines. He

kissed one and swirled his tongue around the darkened areola before tugging the pebbled nipple between his teeth.

Holly whimpered and squirmed beneath him, her hands fisting in his hair.

Chace moved his mouth to her other breast, hoping to elicit the same reaction. From their first time together as inexperienced teenagers when neither had a clue what the hell they were doing, Holly had been incredibly responsive to the ministrations of his touch, be it with his mouth or hands or body.

And those little sounds she emitted in the throes of passion fueled the fire already blazing through his entire body.

“You taste so good,” he murmured against her neck as he made his way back to her mouth.

Their tongues met. Tangled. Dueled. And danced.

He massaged her breasts, kneading and squeezing the soft round globes and pinching her nipples between his fingers.

She wrapped those mile-long legs around his waist, anchoring his pelvis tightly against hers as she slid her hands lightly down his back, slipping her fingers beneath the waistband of his boxer briefs and pushing them off his hips to free his rock-hard erection against her belly. Reaching between them, Holly enveloped him with her hand.

Chace sucked in a breath, hoping like hell he didn't prematurely lose his shit for the second time that night.

“Please, Chace,” she pleaded. “I need you now.”

In one swift move, he lifted away from her enough to rip the panties right off her hips. Taking another second, he removed his briefs the rest of the way. Like Holly, he wanted no barriers between them.

Except maybe a condom.

Did they need one? Holly had been on the pill when they were together, and since they'd only ever been with each other, they hadn't seen the need for extra protection. But that was a long time ago.

“What's wrong?” Holly asked, propping herself up on her elbows.

Chace scrubbed a hand down his face. How could he be so fucking stupid? “I don't have a condom.”

“Good thing I never went off the pill, then.” She smiled and wrapped her legs around his waist. “More for cycle regulation than anything else,” she added.

Her explanation made Chace feel worse instead of better. Why? Because

the other night she'd confessed she hadn't been intimate with anyone but him even after they'd broken up. And though he wished differently, he couldn't say the same.

Rolling to his side, Chace forced himself to look Holly in the eye. "Before this goes any further, you should know that you're not the only woman I've ever slept with since our breakup," he admitted, his voice strained.

"Oh-kay," she replied as if it were a no-brainer. And no big deal. "Certainly you didn't expect me to be naïve enough to believe you'd remained celibate the last eight years, did you?"

"You were," he pointed out.

"Well, not to sound sexist, but it's kind of different for a man, isn't it?"

"I don't know." Chace shrugged. "I guess. Maybe."

"Did you use a condom?"

"Of course." He realized where she was going with this. "And I have yearly physicals. Everything's been good. Clean and clear. The last one was a month ago." He saved her the trouble of asking what he would consider the next obvious question. "And I haven't been with anyone since then."

Honestly, it had been a long damned time since he'd felt the need to scratch that particular itch.

Until he came back to Hickory Ridge.

"Well, I'm not seeing a problem." She pushed herself into a sitting position. "Are you?"

This woman never ceased to amaze him. "No, but I understand if you want to wait."

"I'm pretty sure I've waited long enough." With a sly smile and a gleam in her eye, she poked his shoulder with her index and middle fingers, pushing him flat on his back and trailing her fingertips up the length of his less-than-fully erect penis. "So, what do you say we get back to business?"

Rearing up, Chace caught her lips in a kiss before switching their positions. Their lips fused together in a frenzy of movement, tongues tangling in an erotic battle as their hands massaged, caressed, and paid homage to the other's body. Getting reacquainted. Awakening muscle memory. And languishing in the sheer pleasure each wrought from the other.

Chace skimmed his lips to the pebbled peak of her right breast, his hand massaging and plucking the left until he needed more. He glided the tips of his fingers along her ribcage and over the curve of her hip before detouring to

the apex of her thighs. He separated her womanly folds, dipping one finger inside while thumbing her sensitive nub.

“You’re so tight,” he murmured near her ear. “And wet.”

Holly writhed against him as he slid his finger deeper into her petal-soft canal.

“You like that?”

“You know what I’d like more?”

He dropped a kiss on her lips. “I need to make sure you’re ready first, sweetheart,” he whispered, allowing his middle finger to join the fun.

“Omigod!” She thrashed her head from side to side on the pillow. “Please, Chace.”

“Okay, baby.” He pulled his hand free and nestled himself in the cradle of her thighs. He nudged her entrance, and Holly wrapped her glorious legs around his waist, allowing him to give her what she wanted.

What they both wanted.

Slowly, he pushed in a little and eased out. He went in a little farther, pausing momentarily to allow her to get used to his girth before easing back to the starting point. This time, he groaned and thrust deeper until he was fully seated inside her.

“You okay?”

“I’d be better if you were moving.”

“So demanding.”

She dug her feet into the mattress and tilted her hips upward. “Now, Chace.”

Bracing himself on his forearms, Chace framed her face with his hands. Only when his eyes locked with hers did he begin to move. Their hips rocked together in perfect rhythm as if no time had passed at all. She met his thrust for thrust, taking him as deeply as possible and clenching her muscles around his burgeoning desire.

He kissed her, long and hard. She raked her nails down his back. Sweat beaded on their skin as the slide of their bodies intensified. “More,” Holly pleaded, locking her ankles in place.

Chace plunged deeper. Harder. Faster. What he offered, she took. What she wanted, he gave. Her fingers dug into his hips. “Omigod, yes.” She urged him with words and sounds as well as her body. She begged him not to stop. He didn’t. And then, finally, it happened. Her body began to tremble as the first wave of her climax took hold. “Oh, Chace,” she cried out, clinging to

him as her body continued to tremble and rock against his.

With one final thrust, Chace found his own release, his body convulsing repeatedly until he'd completely emptied himself while still buried deep inside her.

The only place he ever wanted to be.

“THAT WAS ABSOLUTELY AMAZING.”

As they descended back to earth and their breathing settled into a normal rhythm again, Chace wrapped his arm around Holly, pulling her against his side, her head on his shoulder and her hand splayed on his chest over his heart. He'd never felt as content in his entire life.

Chace laced his fingers through hers, bringing her palm to his lips. “*You were amazing.*”

She snuggled closer. “I wasn't here by myself.”

Laughing softly, Chace pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “No, you most certainly were not.” There were so many things Chace wanted to say. Questions he wanted to ask. Promises he wanted to make.

But he refrained. Right now, patience was essential as they continued to explore the second chance they'd agreed to give themselves. What was that saying? *Slow and steady wins the race?*

Chace hoped so, because the last thing he wanted was to return to where they'd ended up eight years ago. If that happened, they would definitely be over.

For good.

There was no way they'd ever recover from a second breakup.

That meant Chace needed to make some decisions. From their earlier conversation about his leaving the military and going to work for Steele Security and Investigations, Holly obviously equated the move to jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.

Maybe it was.

Reflecting on the assignments he'd accepted over the last few years at SSI, he couldn't deny the risks associated with many of them. Granted, none took place in combat zones, but they had consisted of kidnapping attempts, assassination threats, witness protection, and run-of-the-mill bodyguard

missions, each with the potential to escalate into dangerous territory quickly and without warning.

To date, Chace's cases had all ended without bloodshed.

Did they have loose cannons?

Yes.

Close calls?

More than he cared to remember.

Arrests?

Invariably.

But no loss of lives, for which Chace was eternally grateful. He'd experienced enough of that to last a lifetime while serving his country.

"You sure are quiet over there." Raising her head, Holly propped her chin atop her folded hands on his chest. "Not having any regrets, I hope."

"No." He brushed a few loose hairs away from her beautiful face. "Never."

She arched a brow. "Never?"

Chace shook his head. "Never about time spent with you, Holly." It was the truth. "But I will admit to one regret where you're concerned."

He felt as well as heard her quick intake of breath at his response. Saw the flicker of concern surface in her doe-like eyes before she asked, "What do you regret?" Her voice was soft, barely audible, as if she feared his answer.

There was no need. At least, he didn't think so.

"I regret not fighting." Propping up on his elbows, he held her gaze. "For us."

Pressing her lips together, Holly swallowed hard. "I should have probably been more reasonable with my expectations."

"You'd just lost your brother, Holly."

"Still no reason for me to take things out on you."

"You didn't take things out on me."

"Yes, I did," she insisted, pushing herself into a sitting position and pulling the sheet along to keep her breasts and lady bits covered. "By insisting you choose between us and your career, I put you in an impossible situation, Chace. How can you not consider *that* taking things out on you, especially when I knew you couldn't just leave the military before your time to serve was up."

"You weren't thinking clearly, Holly. Hell, neither of us were." He sat up straighter and leaned back against the headboard of the bed. "You'd just lost

Sloane in a freaking war zone only to find out a few weeks later I was being deployed to an area of similar unrest and uncertainty in the Middle East. You were scared, and I should have realized that the emotional strain, grief, and fear you were battling were the driving force behind your reaction.”

“Don’t you mean my ultimatum?”

At the time, an ultimatum was exactly how Chace had interpreted the words she’d hurled at him.

Choose, Chace. Me or the military. Because I refuse to sit here waiting for the call telling me I’ve lost another person I love to this never-ending conflict in a foreign land.

More than anything but a court-martial and dishonorable discharge, Chace wanted to choose Holly. But he couldn’t. Not with two years left to serve and a team of fellow Rangers counting on his return.

Still, he should have explained the situation to his CO and requested a leave extension, even if it was only for one additional day. Anything to help Holly better understand and accept why he had no choice but to return to active duty and serve his remaining two years. Beg her to give them at least that much time before breaking their engagement. And promising that once he’d fulfilled his military service, he’d request his separation papers for an honorable discharge.

But Chace hadn’t said or done any of that. Instead, he did what he thought was best, because he didn’t want to cause Holly any further heartache or unnecessary worry. Without a word, he’d gone wheels up with his team, praying that once he formally left the military, she’d understand, accept, and forgive his reasonings for the choices he’d made.

She hadn’t.

No, that wasn’t a fair assessment either. The truth was Chace hadn’t given Holly the chance to do anything. During his remaining time to serve, he rarely came home, and the few times he did, their paths never crossed, primarily by design on both their parts. It wasn’t until the twins’ baptism that they stood in the same air space again, and that was only because, as the girls’ godparents, it was expected.

They were civil at the christening, the reception afterward, and all events centering around their goddaughters that followed. If and when they spoke, the conversation only revolved around Lyss, Emme, and Wren.

Until he came back to Hickory Ridge to help Holly take care of the twins after their father had suffered life-threatening injuries while serving his

country.

He couldn't help but wonder if that was irony or divine intervention.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked.

Chace wasn't sure Holly would view their current circumstances the same way he did. But what the hell? "How a situation similar to what broke us up brought us back together eight years later."

"It's not quite the same."

"It's close enough."

Holly wrapped her fingers around his hand. "At least this time no one died."

"C'mere." He tugged her closer until she was nestled on his lap, her body curled against him with her head on his shoulder. Though his mind whirled with all those things he still wanted to say, Chace contented himself with just holding her in his arms right where she belonged.

After a few minutes, Holly broke the silence stretching between them. "So, what happens now?"

"Right this minute now? Or now in general?"

She drew circles on his chest with her finger. "With us."

"What do you want to happen?"

Her brows drew together, forming that little wrinkle above her nose. "Didn't we just have this conversation?"

"But we've already taken care of that request."

"Was it a one-and-done?"

"God, I hope not." He caught her lips in a kiss.

Holly chuckled. "That's a relief."

With his thumb and forefinger, Chace lifted her chin so he could see her entire face. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes." She laid her palm against his cheek. "I absolutely do."

He brushed his thumb across her cheek as he stared into her big brown eyes. "I need to ask you something."

"Sounds serious."

"No." He shook his head. "Not really serious, just something I'm curious about."

"Okay. What do you want to know?"

"Saturday night, you never answered my question about why you haven't been with anyone else."

She pulled in a deep breath. "You're a smart man, Chace. I think you can

figure it out.”

“I want to hear you say it just to be sure.”

“I can’t believe you’re fishing for compliments.”

Chace couldn’t either, but for some reason he couldn’t explain, he needed to know why. “Just tell me, and I’ll leave you alone.”

She reached up to nip at his bottom lip. “What if I don’t want you to leave me alone?”

“Holly,” he cautioned.

“Okay,” she relented with a roll of her doe-like eyes. “But you have to tell me something first.”

“What?” He had no idea what she might want to know, but if he expected her to answer his question, he needed to answer hers.

“Why did you leave without saying goodbye?”

He felt her words slice right into his heart. “The easy answer is because I was trying to convince myself you never wanted to see me again.” He picked up her hand from his chest. “So, in my mind, I was abiding by what I thought were your wishes.”

“What’s the other answer?”

“I simply couldn’t do it. Because if I’d come to see you before shipping out, I would have begged you not to give up on us. Pleaded with you to wait for me. Made promises that were out of my control. And that wouldn’t have been fair to you. You deserved better. To be happy again. So, although it nearly killed me, I decided walking away would make everything easier to bear for both of us.”

Tears welled up in her darkening eyes. “Did you think that’s all it would take for me to get over you?”

He shrugged. “At that point, I wasn’t sure of anything except that I didn’t want to hurt you any more than I already had.”

She swiped at her eyes. “Well, for the record, you’re a hard man to get over, Chace Dutton. So much so that I *never* did. And it wasn’t for lack of trying either, because I dated quite a few very nice, attractive, and respectable men, only to run into the same problem every damned time.”

“Yeah? What was the problem?”

“They weren’t you.” She poked him in the chest as she uttered the last word. “Nothing about them measured up, and I gave them more than one opportunity.” She wrinkled her nose. “Well, not all of them, but some.”

It was getting harder and harder to keep the smile off his face. “Did you

kiss them?”

She averted her gaze. “Most of them.”

He nodded. “And none curled your toes?” He leaned in closer and ran the tip of his tongue around the shell of her ear. “Or soaked your panties?”

“Only one man has ever soaked my panties,” Holly countered, her voice low. Seductive.

“Good to know I don’t have to worry about any competition, then,” he murmured as he sucked her earlobe into his mouth.

“Have I sufficiently given you the answer you needed to hear?”

“You have.” Though he wanted to continue kissing, tasting, and devouring every inch of her body, Chace pulled his lips away from her skin. There’d be plenty of time for that later. But first, since she’d been so open with him, he decided Holly more than deserved the same from him.

Slowly, he put a few inches between them. “Now, I want to let you in on a few things.” Chace took her hands in his. “First, I never expected to get over you, which is a damned good thing since it didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of ever happening. Second, even though you said you never expected celibacy from me, I need you to know that the only women I ever slept with were only hook-ups. Nothing more.”

“So, no sleepovers?”

He shook his head. “No sleepovers. Just sex. In a hotel room. Always with a condom.”

Holly leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. “Thank you.”

“I’m not finished.”

“Okay.”

“Second, there hasn’t been a single day in the last eight years that I didn’t think about you. Wondering what you were doing. If you ever thought about me. Us. Hoping that someday we’d be lucky enough to get a second chance.”

“You were always right here, Chace.” She placed his hand over her breastbone, where he could feel her heart beating beneath his palm.

“I have a thousand other things I could say to you right now, but I think I have something that pretty much sums everything up.”

“Tell me.”

“I love you, Holly McCade. Always have and always will.”

A solitary tear slipped onto her cheek as she straddled his lap and framed his face with her hands. “Show me, Chace,” she murmured against his lips. “Please.”

“Oh, I intend to, sweetheart. Every chance I get.”

Chace didn't disappoint.
Not in word or deed.
That night or any night since.

Yet the way he showed her wasn't only confined to the bedroom. Oh no. *Everything* he did, morning, noon, and night, was proof positive of his feelings. And in the grand scheme of things, that proof was far from just what he could do with his mouth, his hands, and his body when they were alone.

It was about the details. The little things. The time and effort he put into regular, everyday occurrences. The sharing of responsibilities. The ease with which they fell into a compatible routine.

In the mornings, while Holly prepared for work, Chace took care of getting the girls up and ready for school, fed them a breakfast that always consisted of much more than a cold bowl of cereal or frozen waffle fresh from the toaster, and after ensuring Holly's breakfast was on the table, he drove Emme and Wren to school.

During the day, he cleaned, did laundry, shopped for groceries, and had dinner well underway when Holly came home, where he never missed a chance to kiss her under every sprig of mistletoe around the house. And every day, there seemed to be more dangling from places she never expected.

Like on the shower head in the master bath.

Yeah, that one was quite an interesting find this morning, and delayed her departure by at least fifteen minutes. Not that she was complaining.

Nope. Not one bit.

In the evenings, if Holly had schoolwork to attend to, Chace oversaw

homework, packed everyone's lunches, and entertained the girls until she was finished or it was bedtime. At first, they alternated the nightly routine with the twins. But the night before, they'd shared the experience, which, in turn, awakened a longing in Holly she'd given up hope of ever happening—having a little family of their own someday.

It was something they'd used to talk about all the time. Getting married. Where they wanted to live. The kind of house they'd build. Although the styles changed as they got older, the number of bedrooms remained the same at four. A master for them. A room for guests. And one each for their two children they hoped would be a boy and a girl but would love and appreciate however they might be blessed.

Holly couldn't help but wonder if that was still what Chace wanted.

From the way things were progressing between them, Holly was cautiously optimistic he did.

But she didn't ask.

Not yet, anyway.

Instead, each evening, they returned to the family room and snuggled on the sofa in front of the glittering Christmas tree, listening to holiday music and talking about the events of their day. He rubbed her feet and legs. They engaged in some extremely heavy petting before he carried her to bed and showed her without words just how much he loved her.

Surprisingly, despite the few hours of sleep she was getting the past few nights, Holly was not even close to feeling exhausted. If anything, she felt more energized and invigorated rather than less. She probably had the feel-good endorphins generated from those multiple orgasms Chace was responsible for wringing out of her to thank for that.

Plus, she always slept like the dead after he'd rocked her freaking world.

For the first time in a long time, Holly had no desire to hit the snooze button on her alarm in the morning. In fact, she no longer set it because Chace had his own unique way of awakening her with his light-as-a-feather kisses. Or soft nibbles on her flesh as his big, strong, and very skillful hands worked their magic over the most sensitive parts of her body.

And, of course, like this morning when he'd carried her to the shower to make good use of the mistletoe.

"You've got that faraway look in your eyes again," Taylor observed from the doorway.

Yeah, Holly supposed she did. She only hoped she wasn't also drooling

over the papers on her desk. To be sure, she swiped at her mouth and chin, grateful to find both of them dry. “You heading out?” she asked, since the bell had rung to dismiss the students over half an hour ago.

“Yeah. I’m meeting my brothers for an early dinner and to do some Christmas shopping for our grandparents, since the old farts refused Levi and Cole’s offer to help them downsize from the farm into something smaller and easier to manage.”

Lottie and Lewis Cole had raised Taylor and her brothers after their parents perished in a freak boating accident while celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary. All three children were under the age of six at the time.

But like always, Lottie and Lew rose to the occasion to provide the best life possible for their grandchildren. That’s why it was no surprise that their successful grandsons wanted to use the wealth they’d acquired, Levi in the tech field and Cole as a major league baseball player, by ensuring their grandparents’ retirement was physically and financially more manageable.

It was equally unsurprising that the recently turned octogenarians had turned them down flat.

“Do you have any ideas?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Hell no.” She shook her head. “They have everything they need or want. And anything that would lighten their load, they refuse. Stubborn old coots.”

“What about a trip? Any place they’d like to visit or tour?”

“The only trips they take for enjoyment are usually on a bus for the day. They like going to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for the *Sight and Sound* shows. Or to festivals celebrating everything from honey to buckwheat to cherry blossoms.”

“Then get them an open-ended season pass with a tour bus group or groups they can use at will.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“And what might be even better is for the three of you to join them for at least one of them.”

“Have you met my brothers? If no computer is involved, Levi will likely short-circuit. And Cole? If there’s no ball to throw, catch, or kick, fuhgettaboutit. Plus, since he retired, he’s too busy planning his mini resort.”

Yeah, Holly had heard murmurings around Hickory Ridge about that. It sounded interesting.

“So, back to what—or should I say who—you were thinking about a few

minutes ago. I take it things are still working out.”

“Yep. So far.”

Taylor narrowed her gaze. “That sounds like you’re not expecting it to continue.”

“Just a little apprehensive about getting my hopes up, I guess.”

“Why?”

Holly shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably because it doesn’t seem real.”

“What do you mean?” Stepping inside, Taylor let the door close behind her.

“Well, we’re both still staying at Lyss’s. Taking care of the twins. Doing stuff like we’re a family.”

“You *are* a family.”

“No.” Holly shook her head. “*They’re* a family.”

Taylor made a face. “You’re just as much a part of that family as he is, Holly.”

“It’s only been a week, and he only asked for three,” she pointed out, obviously taking the role of devil’s advocate seriously.

“To give you both a chance to see if there was a possibility for more,” Taylor countered, lifting a brow. “Is there?”

Holly drew in a deep breath. “I want there to be.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“That the perfect little bubble we’ve created will burst. Either when Lyss comes home, and it’s just the two of us without the twins. Or after the holidays are over. Or his job sends him to God knows where.” She let out a heavy sigh. “Or it’s just a freaking Tuesday afternoon, and he realizes he was better off without me.”

“That’s a little melodramatic, don’t you think?”

Yeah, it was. But that didn’t mean it still didn’t scare the shit out of her. “You asked.”

“Yeah. I sure did.” Tapping her chest, Taylor grinned. “My bad.”

Holly laughed and pushed herself out of the chair. “So where are you going to eat?” she asked, deftly changing the subject.

“Who knows? It’s Cole’s turn to pick, so probably somewhere with ten thousand televisions and a different sporting event on each one.” Her eyes lit up. “Hey, you could come along. Give me someone to talk to while Levi

writes code on his phone and Cole is glued to the TV screen.”

“I like sports too.”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Okay.” She moved toward the door and opened it before turning back to Holly. “Do me one favor, will ya?”

“If I can.”

“Don’t borrow trouble by worrying about things you can’t control anyway.”

Good advice. Just not so easy to follow. “I’ll do my best.”

“GUESS WHAT?!” was the first thing Holly heard when she opened the door and was rushed by twin tornadoes.

“Daddy was hurt in an explosion.”

“But he’s gonna be all right.”

“Yeah, he just needs to stay there a little longer to make sure everything’s fixed good as new.”

“And he’s got a lot of cuts and bruises, ‘specially on his face.”

“But Mommy’s taking good care of him.”

As each one took her turn relaying the details of their video chat, all Holly could do was nod and shift her gaze to whichever twin was speaking. When they paused, Holly looked up to find Chace leaning against the arch between the family room and kitchen, his arms folded across his chest, a towel slung over his shoulder, and a grin on his ridiculously handsome face.

“Hi, honey,” he greeted her. “Welcome home.”

Wren tugged on the hem of Holly’s shirt to snatch back her attention. “Did you know Daddy was in the hospital, Aunt Holly?”

Unsure how to answer, she looked to Chace for guidance.

He simply nodded.

“Yes. I did. But...” Now what?

“Remember your mommy telling you she asked us not to say anything so the two of you wouldn’t worry?” Chace intervened.

“Yeah. ‘Cuz he was hurt really bad,” Emme replied.

“Yes, he was,” Holly concurred.

“We got to talk to him. He looks like he’s been in a fight, but Mommy said not to worry, that he was healing up real good.”

“And Daddy said it really doesn’t hurt much anymore. Except when he takes a deep breath,” Wren added. “So we told him to just take little breaths.”

“Good idea,” Holly agreed. Unsure of how to proceed since they seemed to be taking Sean’s injuries in stride, she didn’t want to ask or say anything that might upset them.

“Even though we’re sorry he got hurt, it means he’ll be here for Christmas.” Emme’s face was wreathed in excitement. “Isn’t that awesome?”

Holly nodded. “It sure is.”

“Okay, dinner’s ready, so go wash up,” Chace instructed.

As they sprinted past Chace, Holly set her bag on the parson’s bench and removed her coat. “They seem to be taking the news well.”

“Yeah. The doctors want to monitor him through the weekend to ensure there are no signs of infection and that everything is healing properly before shipping him stateside. Since that could happen as early as Monday, they wanted to prepare the girls.”

“Makes sense.” Holly bridged the gap between them. “Sorry I wasn’t here when Lyss and Sean called.”

“Lyss had texted to tell me their plan so I wasn’t blindsided.” He shook his head. “But Lyss explained everything to them before Sean joined the video chat. It went well from start to finish.”

“Guess we worried for nothing, huh?”

“Seems that way.” Chace shrugged. “I figure the best thing is to follow their lead. If they want to talk, we listen. If they appear okay, we just continue to monitor the situation.”

Nodding, Holly braced her palms against the solid wall of his chest. “Sounds like a plan.”

Chace captured her lips with his. “How was your day?”

She curled her fingers into the fabric of his shirt. “It’s a week before Winter Break. The kids are bouncing off the freaking walls. And *they’re* high school students.” She shook her head. “I can’t even begin to imagine what it’s like at the elementary level.”

“I think what you just witnessed was a double hint of what those teachers face at this time of the year.”

“I don’t even want to think about it.” She shivered at the notion. “Something besides you smells awfully yummy,” Holly observed, inhaling deeply to savor the aroma.

Chace took her hand and led her into the kitchen. “I made meatloaf.”

“With cheese?” Holly asked hopefully.

“Do you actually think I’d serve you meatloaf without any cheese in it?”

“I didn’t know if you remembered.”

He caged her between his body and the counter. “Baby, there isn’t anything about you that I don’t remember,” he growled against her ear, the warmth of his breath sending a different kind of shiver through every nerve cell in her body.

“Uncle Chace, there isn’t any mistletoe above your head.”

Sighing in frustration, Chace and Holly both looked up. Sure enough, there wasn’t a single sign of mistletoe in their general vicinity. “Guess I’ll need to remedy that first chance I get,” he replied.

“Yes,” Holly agreed, tapping her forefinger against his lips. “See that you do.”

“Are you growing fonder of the mistletoe, Miss McCade?”

“Well, I will admit it was definitely a pleasant surprise this morning,” she murmured for his ears only before skirting around him to join Emme and Wren at the table.

Like the previous evenings, they ate, shared the happenings of their day, cleared the table, filled the dishwasher, and restored the kitchen and breakfast nook to order before everyone settled in the family room.

“Can we watch a Christmas movie?” Wren asked.

“I want to watch *Prancer*,” Emme shouted her vote.

“But I wanted to watch *Elf*.” Wren pouted. “And it was my idea.”

Both pairs of little girl eyes swung toward Holly and Chace. “Which do you want to watch?” Emme posed the question neither of them wanted to answer.

“I think we should decide what we’re doing tomorrow,” Holly replied to keep the peace for a few minutes longer.

“I want to go back to Morningstar Farm.” Wren pinned Chace with her gaze. “You said we would.”

“You also said we could go ice skating,” Emme quickly pointed out.

So much for keeping the peace, Holly silently berated herself.

“I’ve got an even better idea,” Chace declared, a gleam in his clear blue eyes. “How about we go ice skating at Morningstar Farm?”

Both Emme and Wren’s mouths dropped open. “I didn’t see an ice skating rink when we were there on Sunday,” Emme stated.

Holly hadn’t either.

“That’s because they were still putting the finishing touches on it. And since there was no guarantee it would be completed by this weekend, they didn’t want to advertise the possibility and risk disappointing everyone if it wasn’t ready. But because I happened to run into Cindy Lou Who at the grocery store this morning, I asked her about it, and she assured me everything was a go.”

“Yay!” Emme and Wren shouted in unison. “So we’re going?”

“As long as it’s okay with Aunt Holly.”

All eyes shifted in her direction. “Well?” Wren prompted.

Holly raised her hands, palms out, in the universal sign of surrender. “Far be it for me to stand in the way of participating in the inaugural ice skating event at Morningstar Farm.”

Emme scrunched up her face. “What does that even mean?”

“It means yes,” Chace answered, grabbing each twin around the waist and tossing them on the sofa. “And since I saved the day, I get to pick the movie.”

Snatching the remote off the coffee table, Chace pressed the microphone button, activating the voice option, and winked at Holly as he spoke into the device. “*National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation.*”

Yeah, he really did have a good memory where she was concerned, since it was one of her all-time favorites. Well, both of theirs, really.

Since asking her to give them three weeks, everything Chace did, he did for them, proving how much he still cared about her and showing her that they still belonged together. And always would.

Holly wanted that. She really did. She just wasn’t sure if it was possible for the long haul. Because despite how spectacular the last few days had been with Chace, their circumstances were contrived. They may be in Hickory Ridge, but they weren’t in their own homes or living their regularly scheduled lives.

No, everything was occurring in Lyss’s world with Lyss’s children in Lyss’s house. Hell, even in Lyss’s freaking bed. Here, she and Chace were insulated from the real world. Protected from outside forces that could drive an irrevocable wedge between them, severing their connection for the second time in a decade.

And that would be it.

The end of them for good.

Holly doubted her heart could survive the devastation of losing him again, especially since it had never completely healed from the first time.

Which was probably why she was having such difficulty following Taylor's request not to borrow trouble. Because regardless of how hard she tried, it always felt like she was constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Or for something or someone to swoop in and snatch him away from her all over again.

"Hey, you okay?" Chace asked as the credits began to roll.

"Yeah. Just tired. It's been a long week," she lied, because she was far from being anywhere close to okay. "C'mon, girls. It's time for bed."

As she rose from the sofa, Chace snagged her wrist. "You go on downstairs, and I'll take care of the twins."

She didn't argue with him. What was the point? Besides, if she hurried, she could be in bed feigning sleep by the time he got Emme and Wren settled for the night. She needed time to think before answering the questions she knew he had.

Holly had just snapped off the bedside lamp and snuggled beneath the covers when Chace walked into the room. Laying perfectly still, she hardly dared to breathe as Chace removed his clothes and got into bed. From what she could tell without looking, he was lying on his back, probably staring at the ceiling and wondering what the hell had happened when all they'd done was watch a fricking movie.

She had no idea how long they lay there listening to each other breathe. Then again, maybe he had actually fallen asleep. No, Holly dismissed that idea as soon as it entered her mind. Chace slept better on his stomach, sometimes on his side, preferably with his body curled around hers.

Dammit! Holly figuratively thumped the pillow beneath her head. She didn't need to think about Chace spooning her. The warmth of his breath tickling her neck. The musky, all-male, purely Chace scent teasing her nose. The prickly hair on his legs against hers. The weight of his arm around her waist, holding her close.

No, those memories playing on a continuous loop in her brain were the last thing she needed if she was ever going to fall asleep.

Yeah. Like that even has a remote possibility of happening while the heat from his big, strong, beautiful body lights an inferno in your soul.

The mattress shifted as he rolled onto his side. Was he facing her? Or the wall?

"How long are we just gonna lie here suffering in silence, Holly?"

She should have known he wouldn't leave well enough alone. "Can't we

just try to go to sleep, Chace? Please.”

Again, the mattress shifted, and she suspected he was propped on his elbow, staring at her back. Willing her to turn around. “I don’t think I can do that.”

“Then maybe we should sleep in separate rooms tonight.”

“Or maybe you should just tell me what the fuck happened upstairs when all we were doing was eating some damned popcorn and watching a movie we’ve seen so many times we can recite the lines right along with the actors?”

Sighing, Holly adjusted her pillow unnecessarily. “I told you I was tired.”

“Then why aren’t you asleep?”

“Because you won’t let me.”

“Bullshit.” The mattress dipped as he moved again.

“What are you doing?” Holly rolled over to find out. She found him sitting with his back against the headboard, wearing only a T-shirt and boxer briefs. His legs were bent, his forearms resting atop his knees.

Holly lifted her gaze upward. His lips were pressed together in a flat line, his eyes shadowed and dark. A muscle ticked in his tightly clenched jaw. And his hair looked like he’d plowed his fingers through it about a million times.

He probably had.

For the next few moments, Chace just stared at her, his eyes never wavering. Holly couldn’t help but wonder what he was thinking, but she wouldn’t ask.

Or maybe the better answer was that she couldn’t.

“Is it because Lyss and Sean will be coming home soon?”

“Somewhat.” There was no point denying it.

“What does that mean?”

Holly mirrored Chace’s position on her side of the bed. “Earlier, I realized we agreed to give ourselves a second chance in a world that doesn’t even exist. Not for us, anyway. In the real world, this is your sister’s home, not yours or mine. Emme and Wren are Sean and Lyss’s children, not ours. Basically, we’re playing house in a perfect world for a finite period of time. Even Hickory Ridge is playing dress-up for the next few weeks.

“But like in *Cinderella*, the clock will strike midnight at some point. Lyss and Sean will come home. I’ll return to my townhouse; you’ll go back to your place. Decorations will be packed away, and trees will come down. The streets of Hickory Ridge will be restored to their non-holiday charm and

quaint ambiance. I'll get settled into the second semester at school. And you'll get your next SSI assignment."

"Essentially, what you're saying is this all comes right back to my job and the dangers associated with it."

Holly averted her gaze.

"I guess that also means you didn't believe me the other night when I assured you that I have a choice in the jobs I accept. Or refuse."

"I believed what you said. I just—"

"Don't think I'll actually turn down the assignments I'm offered."

Holly shook her head. "Not if they put pressure on you."

"That's not how the Steele brothers work."

"I'm not just talking about the Steele brothers."

"You don't think I can refuse *your* brother."

"I grew up with him, Chace. I know how tenacious he can be when he wants something."

Chace angled his body to face her and reached across the bed for her hand. "So can I," he assured her. "More than anything, I want you to let me back in your life for the long haul." He pulled her toward him. "And I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen."

Hope bloomed in every cell of Holly's body. But were his words enough?

"Just give me the chance, Holly. Please."

She wanted to. God, how she wanted to—not just to give him but *them* a chance. She didn't want to borrow trouble, always waiting for the other shoe to drop or expecting the worst. No, Holly wanted to trust this man and his promises. To believe in him.

And to love him with her whole heart.

She looked into his beautiful dark eyes and swore she could see their future. Sinking her teeth into her bottom lip, Holly cupped his cheek in her hand and nodded. "Okay," she murmured. "But please don't give me any reason to regret it."

"Deal," Chace promised, his mouth inches from hers when Holly's phone vibrated on the nightstand.

Holly put her hands on his chest to stop his forward momentum. "I should check that," she said, stretching across the bed and plucking the cell off the charger. When her eyes fell on the screen, her heart stopped cold.

Alex.

An ominous feeling of foreboding began to smother her, stealing the

oxygen from her lungs and burning a hole in her gut. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Holly met and held Chace's questioning eyes with hers as she greeted her brother. "Hello, Alex."

"I'm trying to reach Chace, and he's not answering his cell. Is he with you?"

She didn't even blink. She didn't think she could. "Yes. He's here."

"I need to talk to him. It's urgent."

Those eight words ripped the first hole in her heart. "Just a minute." Lowering the phone from her ear, Holly never broke eye contact with Chace. "My brother's impeccable timing is uncanny, isn't it?" Climbing off the bed, Holly extended the phone to Chace. "You probably shouldn't keep your boss waiting."

"Holly."

When he didn't take the phone, she tossed it on the bed and turned to leave. Only Chace was faster. He lunged across the bed and grabbed hold of her wrist, halting her retreat with a gentle tug before slamming the phone against his ear. "What the fuck do you want, Alex?" he demanded.

Holly yanked free of his grasp, making it to the bedroom door when she heard his heavy sigh, followed by five words that tore her heart completely in two.

"Okay. I'll be right there."

“Where’s Uncle Chace?”

Just hearing his name was like a knife ripping into what was left of Holly’s shattered heart. But despite the searing pain ripping through her entire being, steely determination combined with a healthy dose of pride kept her from falling apart in front of Emme and Wren.

Holly slid a plate of scrambled eggs and sausage on the table. The food looked nothing like Chace ever fixed for breakfast. The eggs were runny, the sausage burnt. “He’s at work.”

“But it’s Saturday.”

“And he promised to take us ice skating at Morningstar Farm,” Wren added as a reminder.

Yes, Holly was well aware of Chace’s promises. Had tossed and turned most of the night because of his promises. “It’s still early.” She slathered butter on two crispy slices of toast. “I’m sure he’ll be back in plenty of time.” *Please don’t make a liar out of me, Chace Dutton.*

“But what if he’s not?” Are we still going?” Emme asked as she dubiously surveyed the poor excuse for a breakfast Holly had served.

Holly forced a smile she didn’t feel. “Of course we will.”

Wasn’t this scenario exactly how she always feared their life might be if she and Chace had children? They’d make plans. He’d get called away. And she would be left to explain his absence, pick up the slack, and do her best to keep things as normal as possible, all while wondering if he’d make it back in time to join them.

Or at all.

Her insides clenched at the thought of never seeing Chace again. Of something horrible happening to him and never again being on the receiving end of his beautiful smile or irresistible grin. Of never being held in his strong arms, listening to the steady beat of his heart. Of never savoring the warmth of his touch or basking in the magnificent afterglow and spellbinding delirium of his tender yet passionate lovemaking.

But most of all, never feeling as vibrant and alive, cherished and loved as she did when she was with him.

Holly drew a deep breath to stem the tears suddenly blurring her vision. Why did loving someone have to be such a freaking struggle?

“Aren’t you going to eat your breakfast, Aunt Holly?”

Already viciously churning, her stomach strongly protested the mere thought of any food passing her lips. “I’m not that hungry right now.” Before either of the twins could ask any further questions, Holly’s ringtone sounded from across the kitchen.

Part of her wanted to ignore whoever was calling, but Holly suspected that would only elicit more questions from Emme and Wren. Reluctantly, she pushed herself away from the table and went in search of the device, hoping the voicemail would pick up before she found it.

No such luck. And when she looked at the screen to see who was calling, she wanted to hurl the device straight through the window over the sink.

Alex.

The fricking bane of her existence.

Knowing he’d keep calling until she answered—or worse, show up in person—Holly accepted the call and snatched the phone to her ear. “What?”

“That’s exactly what I want to know.”

Holly pressed her thumb and forefinger to the bridge of her nose. “I am not in the mood for riddles this morning, Alex, so could you kindly just cut to the chase?” *Pun not intended.*

“I’d like nothing more. In fact, that’s why I’m calling.”

She glanced over her shoulder to check on the girls before easing into the laundry room, where they were less likely to overhear, particularly since Holly couldn’t guarantee keeping her side of the conversation G-rated. “Well, Chace isn’t here. And hasn’t been since your inopportune call last night.”

“I know.” He sounded weary.

Not that Holly gave a rat’s ass. “Then what do you want?”

“To find out why our best security and investigative specialist resigned

last night.”

If Alex had reached through the phone and slapped her, Holly couldn't have been more stunned by his response. “Chace resigned?”

“Yes. Directly after spending several hours helping us resolve an issue with his previous assignment. He asked if we needed anything else, and when I said no, he verbally gave his two weeks' notice and walked out.”

Her conversation with Chace the night before played through her mind until she got to the part where she questioned his ability to refuse an assignment, even if the request came from her brother, who had an annoying knack for always getting what he wanted. “Did you ask him to take another case?”

“No. Why?”

Holly wasn't getting into all that with Alex. For one, it was none of his business. And two, since he also thrived on living life on the edge, she doubted he'd be any more sympathetic to her plight than he'd been eight years ago. “Didn't he give you any explanation as to why he was resigning?”

“No. But he's been talking about making some changes for a while now.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What kind of changes?”

“Things like scaling back on international jobs and spending more time in the States. At one time, he even mentioned focusing more on consulting gigs. That's why I called him last night. Besides, it was originally his case, so we knew his intel could help resolve the issue. And it did.”

As Holly tried to wrap her head around Alex's words, shame, guilt, and regret battled within her. Had Chace been considering a career change? Even before returning to Hickory Ridge to help with Emme and Wren? And if so, why hadn't he mentioned it to her?

Maybe because you never gave him a chance, Genius.

“He did it for me,” Holly murmured as the realization hit her like a ton of bricks.

“You asked him to leave SSI?”

Holly sank to the floor in front of the washer and dryer, tears blurring her vision and burning the back of her throat. Is this what Chace thought she wanted? For him to give up his career entirely?

Because it wasn't. All she wanted was for him not to put himself in the line of danger willingly. To choose safer options. Not quit his damn job.

But perhaps Chace considered resigning the ultimate path of least resistance. If he didn't work for SSI, there were no assignments, dangerous or

otherwise, for him to accept or reject. Or no Alex breathing down his neck.

“Holly?”

She shook herself out of her thoughts. “No,” she answered his question. “At least that’s not what I meant.”

Or did she?

Oh God, what had she done? “Last night before you called, we’d been talking about our relationship. How we still felt about each other. What broke us up and kept us apart. If we wanted a second chance. Then, as well as now, the sticking point always came back to one thing—the dangers of his job. He tried to assure me that working with SSI wasn’t like the military. That he could refuse any job offered to him. So, I asked if he could refuse *you*, since I know firsthand how tenacious you can be. He told me he would do whatever it took for us to be together. Thirty seconds later, you called.”

“And you didn’t allow him to explain anything,” Alex correctly presumed.

“No. I told him he probably shouldn’t keep his boss waiting.”

She jumped at the loud thump reverberating through the phone and realized Alex had slammed his fist into something hard. Probably his desk, since she had no doubt he was at work. “Women!”

Years of fury surfaced in a flash. “Don’t even start that, Alex.”

“Oh, here we go.”

Holly could picture him leaning as far back in his cushy leather executive chair as possible. Plowing his fingers through his hair and rubbing the back of his neck in frustration. And she didn’t give a flip. “Shut up, Alex. Caring about the well-being of those we love is not a character flaw. And even though it’s hard for you to believe, some people even appreciate the concern.”

Like Chace, who was willing to give up a career he enjoyed to prove he was a man of his word—that having her in his life was far more important to him than anything else in the world.

“Looks like you got exactly what you wanted, then.”

“This isn’t what I wanted, Alex.” Her battered and broken heart seized. “I never asked Chace to quit. I only wanted him to make safer choices.”

“Teaching isn’t exactly the safest profession in the world anymore either, you know.”

Hadn’t Chace alluded to the same thing? “C’mon, Alex. That’s like comparing apples to oranges.”

“Is it? Do you actually believe victims of school shootings and their families would agree with that? Granted, school was never intended to be a combat zone, but it's become one, like a host of other places once deemed safe. Because in this day and age, life is dangerous, Holly. And though most people don't wake up in the morning and consciously put themselves in a targeted situation, it doesn't mean someone else won't. Because life happens. So, when people hire us for protection, at least we have the training and skillsets to carry out the job more safely and successfully than most.”

On sibling principle alone, it pained Holly to admit Alex was right. “Point taken.” But it didn't mean she had to like it.

“Just offering a little perspective.”

Along with a few other well-meaning people in her life lately.

“Chace loves you, Holly.”

Her heart flipped inside her chest. “I know.”

“Then put your trust in him,” he advised as an older brother should. “And when he contacts you—”

“I'll tell him you called.”

WHERE THE HELL WAS HE?

After checking her phone for the nine hundredth time, Holly gave up on the hope Chace would return to take the twins ice skating.

Or that he even would call.

Or that he was coming back at all.

Other than for his sister and nieces, why should he? She'd insulted him. Practically branded him a liar. All while he was actually considering a career change. Or at least taking his career in a different direction. *A safer direction.* But rather than being rational and keeping her own promise, she'd automatically assumed the worst without giving him the benefit of the doubt.

Fear. Such a little word to impact so much.

But what exactly was she so afraid of? Losing Chace? Well, she'd done that all on her own without any assistance from his potentially life-threatening job as an Army Ranger. Being so afraid of taking a chance and enjoying the present without worrying about the future, she'd done nothing but rob them of the last eight years.

Did she really want to lose even more?

Maybe she should text him. Just to be sure he was all right. Despite typing out the words a dozen times, Holly never hit send. Nor did she tap the call icon the other thirty times she'd pulled up his number.

With every second that ticked by, Holly kicked herself in the ass. Not only for how she'd reacted the night before but for leaving him in the first place. How could she be so stupid when being with the one person she loved most in the world, however long or short the adventure, was all that ever really mattered?

When the grandfather clock struck one, Holly decided Chace wasn't going to call, text, or return. Since she'd promised to take the twins ice skating if he weren't back in time, they might as well get ready and leave.

"C'mon, girls. Grab your coats and skates." The time for wallowing in self-pity and living in fear was over. It was definitely time she moved forward.

"He's here. Uncle Chace is here!" Emme squealed.

Holly's hand flew to her chest as her heart leaped for joy behind her sternum. Tears of relief and gratitude washed over her entire being as she raced to the foyer, the twins hot on her heels. Holly prepared to launch herself into his arms. Apologize profusely. Plead for his forgiveness. And beg him never to leave her again.

But when she opened the door, Chace wasn't alone.

"Willow?"

Impeccably dressed, the blonde bombshell from next door flicked her thickly lashed blue eyes over Holly's oversized shapeless hoodie and ratty leggings. Then, she genuinely smiled. "Hello, Holly."

The twins shouldered their way between Holly and their guests. "Uncle Chace! Are you finally here to take us ice skating?"

Chace dropped to one knee to be on eye level with his nieces. "Yes, only a little later, okay? Right now, I need you to go with Ms. Bodine because I have something I need to talk to your Aunt Holly about."

Emme wrinkled her nose. "Grownup stuff?" she guessed.

"Yes. So, if you two will go with Ms. Bodine now, I promise we'll go skating and anything else within reason you want to do later." He lifted a brow. "Deal?"

Both girls looked up at Holly. What could she do but agree, since she'd already made enough scenes with this man to last them a lifetime? "It's

okay.”

“And you’re sure we’ll still get to go ice skating at Morningstar Farm?” Wren needed to be sure.

Holly nodded. “Positive.”

Both girls turned back to Chace. “Deal,” they agreed before sprinting for their coats, zipping them as they returned. “Can we take Maisy for a walk?” Emme asked as they squeezed out the door past Willow and Chace.

“Sure,” Willow answered to thin air. She turned back to Holly. “I’ll take good care of them,” she promised with another genuinely warm smile.

Yeah, maybe Holly had misjudged the divorcee. “I appreciate this, Willow.” And she did.

Their eyes met and held. “You’re a very lucky woman, Holly.”

She sure was.

Chace waited until Willow left in a cloud of White Diamond perfume before speaking. “Can I come in?”

“Please,” Holly answered and stepped out of the way.

After entering, Chace closed the door and turned back to face her. Holly’s heart pounded, sending her blood pulsing through her veins and roaring in her ears. Though she wasn’t sure she could formulate words coherent enough to speak, Holly knew there was something she needed to say to him above all else. “I’m sorry.” Her voice cracked, but she didn’t let the tightness in her throat stop her. “So very sorry.”

“Old habits die hard,” he replied with a smile that sparkled in his smoldering dark eyes. “I get it.”

“But—”

Chace laid his forefinger against her lips. “How about we just pick up where we left off last night before we were rudely interrupted.”

Agreeing would have been the easy thing to do. But Holly didn’t believe she deserved easy. “I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did last night, Chace. I should have waited and listened. I should have trusted you.”

“And I should have told your brother to go to hell.”

“Like you said. Old habits die hard.”

“That, they do.”

“I never meant for you to quit your job, Chace. I only—”

“Wanted me to be safe.” He nodded. “I know. Guess we’ve both talked to Alex this morning, huh?”

“He called here looking for you.”

“Yeah, he told me when I finally answered my phone.” He tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. “I don’t want to talk about Alex. I want to talk about us.” He grazed the back of his fingers against her cheek, his eyes never leaving hers. “Please tell me there can still be an us, Holly.”

“I can’t believe you still want to be with me after everything I’ve put you through. The things I’ve said. Demands I’ve made. The years I cost us.” Pressing her lips together, she shook her head. “I’ve been so incredibly selfish.”

“All you’ve ever done was care about me, Holly. Nothing you wanted from me was ever unreasonable. Nothing at all. I’m just sorry it’s taken me eight years to get my head on straight enough to realize and appreciate it.”

Needing the connection, Holly placed her hands on his biceps. “Why did you wait so long to come back today?”

A grin eased into his cheeks. “Because I needed to make a few stops to ensure everything was ready.”

Holly narrowed her gaze. “Ready? For what?”

“One, to seek Kit’s assistance with Emme and Wren. When I found her up to her elbows overhauling a transmission, I was forced to go with Plan B, *Willow*, to fully execute the rest of my mission.”

“What mission?”

Chace pointed to the ceiling. “Operation Mistletoe.”

“So the mistletoe was all part of a master plan?”

“Initially, it was just an excuse for me to kiss you. Then, it became an integral component of my strategy.”

“Like when it magically appeared on the shower head.”

“Now you’re catching on.” Grinning, he slid his fingers along the sides of her neck and into her hair. Lowering his head, he captured her lips in a kiss so sweet it turned her knees to jelly.

“If Kit, then Willow, were step one, does that mean there are other steps in this master plan of yours?” Holly asked after he finished kissing her.

“Of course.” He stole another kiss. “After enlisting Willow’s help, I stopped to see your parents.”

“My parents?” she echoed. “Why?”

Chace moved them under an archway, which led to another butterflies-in-the-stomach-inducing kiss. “Because the next step needs their blessing.” He took her hand and dropped to one knee.

Tears immediately filled her eyes.

Chace reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a familiar blue velvet case, flipped open the lid, and revealed what looked much like the emerald-cut diamond ring he'd given her over a decade ago. Taking her left hand, Chace looked up at Holly. "Ten and a half years ago, I put this ring on your finger and asked you to marry me. Today, I'm asking to marry you."

Unsure if she was capable of speaking, Holly nodded.

Smiling, Chace slid the ring past her first knuckle. One tear fell, then another, until twin rivers flowed down both of her cheeks. Happy tears from a heart so full she could barely breathe.

"I want to build a life with you. To make children and grow old with you." Chace finished sliding the ring on her finger. "I love you, Holly McCade. Now and forever. Will you please allow me to be your husband?"

"Yes!" she answered in a combination laugh, snort, and cry. "A thousand million times, yes!"

Rising, Chace pulled her into his arms and swung her in a circle. "I promise I'll never give you a reason to regret it."

"I love you, Chace. And I can't wait to be your wife."

He gently wiped the tears from her cheeks before kissing her again. "There's just one more thing."

"I think you've done plenty."

"Not quite." Reaching inside his jacket, he retrieved a folded document and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"Open it and find out."

Curious to know what else this magnificent man had done, Holly unfolded the paper. "A deed?" She looked up at him through a fresh sheen of tears. "Is this—"

"The land where I first proposed."

"You bought it?"

"I did."

"When?" It certainly couldn't have been in the last twenty-four hours.

"The day after I promised to build you the house of your dreams."

"And you've kept it all this time?" She simply couldn't believe it.

"What else was I supposed to do with it?" He took her hand and placed it in the middle of his chest. "Because just like my heart, this land has always belonged to you."

"I can't believe you did this." She looked at the deed. The ring on her

finger. The mistletoe he'd pinned or taped everywhere. "All of this."

Leaning in, Chace stole another kiss. "Haven't you figured out that I will do anything for you?"

Yeah. She truly believed she finally had.

Still, she needed to ask. "Anything?"

His eyes darkened with desire. "*Anything.*"

When he started to show her, Holly braced both hands on his chest. "I don't want to be the reason you leave your job with SSI." Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her phone and handed it to him. "I want you to call Alex and rescind your resignation."

Chace took the phone but tossed it on the table. "I've already talked to Alex."

"And?"

"And he asked if, instead of starting my own security consulting firm, I'd be interested in taking the lead on expanding SSI in that direction."

"What was your answer?"

A wicked grin eased into his cheeks and danced in his beautiful eyes. "I said I'd have to discuss it with my fiancée first."

"Pretty confident, were you?"

He brought her left hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to the spot where the sparkling diamond rested on her ring finger. "No. But I wasn't giving up this time until you said yes."

Just when Holly didn't think she could love him any more than she already did, he melted her heart all over again. She raised her arms over his shoulders, linking her fingers behind his head as she pushed up on her toes and pressed her lips to his.

Chace wasted no time taking the kiss to a whole other level, which she reciprocated in full. When he started dancing her toward the sofa, Holly once again stopped him with her hands on his chest. "As much as I like the direction this seems to be going, you did promise the twins we'd go ice skating today."

"And we will." He dropped another kiss on her lips. "Just a little later," he said while nibbling her neck. "But first, I have a few more sprigs of mistletoe you haven't seen yet."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Chace confirmed and swung her into his arms. "They're all in very special places too." He carried her down the stairs and kicked the

bedroom door open. “And I’m pretty sure you’re really gonna like all they have to offer.”

And indeed, Holly did. Some even more than once.

ROSEWOOD NEWSLETTER

We hope you enjoyed *A Christmas Changes Everything*. Sign up to the [Rosewood Books newsletter](#) (Isabelle's publisher) to learn when her next book is out. You'll also get news of our other great romance titles, and hear about special offers.

[Sign up at bit.ly/3D3Hpxb](http://bit.ly/3D3Hpxb)

WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED THIS BOOK

If you could spend a moment to write an honest review, no matter how short, we would be extremely grateful. They really do help readers discover new authors.

[Leave a Review](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It definitely takes a village to write and publish a book, so special thanks to the following:

All the wonderful folks at Rosewood Books who took a chance on me and made my dream of becoming a published author come true. You are the best!!

Jen whose guidance never fails, even when email correspondence does. 😊

Wendy for her beta/proofreading, honest opinions, suggestions and never-ending support and encouragement.

All my readers, especially those who eagerly await the next Hickory Ridge novel. I am humbled and inspired by you each and every day.

My sisters by heart, Sherry, Peachy, NJ, and Mariah for being the best friends a girl could ever hope to have. None of this would be possible without you. And also for our dear Sara, the biggest cheerleader for all of us, your inspiration and love of books will live forever.

And of all, my mom, sister, nephew, nieces (and all the rest of my family near and far), your love, support, and encouragement leave me speechless. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything, but most importantly for just being you.

To find out more about Isabelle and her upcoming releases, sign up for her

newsletter by clicking on the link below and receiving a bonus fake relationship, forced proximity novella.

The Medic's Fake Date

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isabelle Grace is a retired educator who writes sweet to steamy contemporary romance full of heart, humor, and all the feels. Each book contains swoon-worthy heroes and strong, often sassy heroines on their journey to happily-ever-after. Each story is primarily set in a small town, loosely based on her own surroundings in the foothills of West Virginia's section of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

When not writing, Isabelle loves to read and spend time with her family, friends, and her rescue Pomeranian, Bella.

www.isabellegracewriting.com



ALSO BY ISABELLE GRACE

The Hickory Ridge Series

[A Baby Changes Everything](#)

[A Proposal Changes Everything](#)

[A Summer Changes Everything](#)

[A Wedding Changes Everything](#)

[A Christmas Changes Everything](#)