



The Christmas Eve Delivery

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: One stormy night was all it took. He's a silver fox billionaire. I'm the small-town girl he left behind...

Ruggedly handsome. Dangerously charming. Like sin in a designer suit. Snow falling outside my struggling inn. He appeared like a dream in expensive wool. Breaking down my walls faster than the storm.

UNTIL... Morning came, and he vanished.

Turns out he's Miles Carlisle. Manhattan's most ruthless developer. The man now threatening my town's future. Yet the memory of his touch still burns.

Now he's back with his billion-dollar offers. At least that's his excuse. Till a Christmas Eve blizzard traps us. And he discovers the secret I've been hiding. A baby bump that's impossible to miss!

Some second chances come with unexpected gifts... And this silver fox is about to get the surprise of his life.

Total Pages (Source): 92

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LYDIA

This didn't feel real. And it didn't feel like a dream, more like a reflection from one of those funhouse mirrors. It was reality, but warped, tipped up on its side. I was being spoken to. More like talked at. All I heard was "Wah, wah, wah." There were no real words, at least none that were getting through my head.

Was this grief? Relief? I didn't have the words for how I was feeling. Was I even feeling? I wasn't numb. But I wasn't sad, either.

The last time I had experienced grief, the deep in my soul, gut-wrenching, thought-my-heart-would-stop-beating grief, was when I found the bunny from the back yard dead on the side of the street. It wasn't even a pet, and yet, I felt that little furry creature's absence so intensely, I threw up from crying so hard.

I hadn't found Aunt Ruth. She had passed away in a hospital bed. I had visited her, told her I would come back the next day to see her. Only, when I came back, she had already passed away. I hadn't cried that day, and I wasn't crying now.

I had a flashback to when Mom had died. I had been too numb to cry, too devastated to function. At least for several weeks. I poked around in my memory and compared those feelings to what was rolling around in my skin this time.

"Not the same," I muttered.

“Excuse me?” the lawyer, Greg Blake, asked.

I had to blink a few times and bring myself back to the here and now. I was sitting in the conference room at his office. I was not floating in the cotton candy fluff that was my semi-consciousness.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m having a difficult time focusing. It’s all so much.” I hoped the words fit the situation. I had no idea what he had been saying, or what I had interrupted.

“It can be quite overwhelming. I’m aware. Would you like a few minutes to gather your thoughts?”

I gave him an unenthusiastic nod. It took effort to move my head. That was part of this whole grief thing, right? The ability to move, to think, all gone.

My hands rested on the table in front of me. There was a stack of papers there as well, but there was no possible way I was functional enough for any level of reading comprehension. Carefully, I aligned the papers before pushing them slightly farther away from me.

My hands rested comfortably in the now empty table space. It was interesting how unprompted, my hands naturally formed two reflective shapes. Was one mimicking the other? Did my right hand copy the left, or was it the other way around? The shadows on my fingers were exactly the same from the artificial lighting in the room. There were no windows, no streams of sunlight, no reminder of a dreary, cloudy day. I couldn’t remember the weather. I was here because Aunt Ruth was dead. The weather should have been gloomy.

But I wasn’t exactly sad, so why did I expect the weather to reflect that particular mood? If sunny weather fit happy moods and rain equated sad, then what was

indifferent weather?

But I wasn't indifferent. Indifferent meant I would simply shrug it off. Aunt Ruth was gone. That meant no more of her snide, passive-aggressive comments. I would no longer have her constantly telling me how I was doing everything wrong. But it also meant that I wouldn't have her to tell me how to fix it. All mistakes moving forward would be all mine. I was going to have to figure out how to correct my mistakes.

I have no idea how long I sat there staring at the way my hands rested on the table. I had no other thoughts at that time, just hands on a smooth table.

"Miss Walsh, do you need anything?"

Slowly, I lifted my head and shifted my gaze from my hands to the face of the assistant leaning in the conference door. I knew her, only at that moment, I couldn't remember her name or how I knew her.

I blinked a few times. Did I need anything?

"No, I don't need her back. It's going to be an adjustment, but I'll figure it all out."

She shook her head at my response. "I'll be right back."

When she left, I just stared at the empty doorway. A few minutes later, Mr. Blake was back.

"Lydia, I think maybe we should do this another time," he said.

"But why? Waiting won't change the fact that Ruth died and dumped the inn on me. Waiting won't bring my mother back. Why did that bunny have to die when it got hit by a car?"

And in a flash, I went from overwhelmed and confused to crying my eyes out. I gasped as I tried to suck in air. I couldn't see, and my face turned into a complete snot factory. Mr. Blake had to place a tissue in my hands. There was no way I would have seen it if he'd held a box of tissues out to me. After I went through several tissues, someone handed me a plastic bottle of water with the top already twisted off.

I sipped, cried, and settled into an embarrassing case of the hiccups.

I was left alone. I was checked on. It seemed to be a repeat of previous motions. I suspected they would continue this way until I was either cognizant enough to move forward with providing a signature that wasn't under duress, or I got my shit together enough to accept the suggestion of rescheduling.

I excused myself to the restroom. No one was in the conference with me, so I wasn't sure who I thought I was talking to. I splashed cool water on my face. My eyes were red and puffy from crying.

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Aunt Ruth's death was nothing if not complicated. To the outside world, it was straightforward. The aged great aunt who raised me after my mother's death died, and she was leaving me everything. A mixed blessing, an unfortunate loss culminating in a reasonably generous inheritance. But people on the outside didn't know the truth of our relationship. I was young enough to believe that adults who took care of children should actually also like them a little bit. I spent years hurt and confused, and then I spent more years trying to figure everything out. I was still in the figuring things out part of my life when all of this happened.

Her illness wasn't a surprise, and honestly, neither was her death. But this reaction, or anti-reaction, I was having was sending me into a tailspin. I didn't know whether I should sign all the papers and pop open a bottle of champagne or eat a pint of ice cream. I was leaning toward the ice cream. Drinking too much gave me a muzzy feeling.

"Sorry about all of that," I said as I returned toward the conference room. Mr. Blake stood at the door to the conference room, probably wondering where I had gone. "I'm ready to sign everything."

We sat down and he began his speech about what I needed to sign and how these documents officially transferred ownership of Sweet Mountain Inn to me. The rest of the documents were granting permissions for transfers of funds between accounts and changing the names on the accounts from Ruth to me, her only surviving relative. Everything was straightforward, business, business, business.

It still sounded like a lot of "Wah, wah, wah," but this time, I was able to listen and comprehend his actual words. I still felt like a shell of my former self. I wasn't

complete. My grief left me without a sense of wholeness.

When I emerged from his office into the daylight, it really felt incongruous that the sun was out. There were still some slushed up, muddy piles of snow that had yet to melt. The world was trying to shake off its icy winter coat and let spring take its turn. A sharp, cold breeze caught me off guard, and with a shiver, I stopped walking long enough to zip up the front of my coat. The sunshine had fooled me into thinking that it might be warmer outside than it really was.

I walked the few blocks of downtown Brookdale back home. The inn sat back from the road and looked more like a run-down mansion than a once fancy hotel. There was one sign on the lawn and a second one across the entryway naming it Sweet Mountain Inn. And I knew there were very clear signs on the door stating that we were currently closed to guests.

The inn had no visitors when Aunt Ruth took ill, and I wasn't in the right headspace to juggle her needs and take care of visitors. I hadn't felt like dealing with running a hotel throughout the process, so the signs stayed up.

So when the man in the expensive wool trench coat was waiting for me on the porch, I was caught off guard.

"Are you Miss Walsh?" he asked as he got to his feet.

"I am."

"You were highly recommended to me," he started.

"Look." I cut him off. "I don't know who told you to come here, but the inn is closed. I'm not taking guests. There's a hotel out by the freeway. They usually have rooms."

He held out a business card. I took it without thinking.

“That’s not why I’m here. I wanted to see if you had thought about selling this old place.” He twisted and looked around the porch. It needed some visible repairs.

“It’s not for sale. I’m not selling.”

“I heard you recently inherited, and it looks like a lot of work to take on for someone as young as yourself.”

I thrust my arm out, finger extended, pointing to the road. “Get the hell off my property, you fucking shark.”

“You have my card if you change your mind.”

I crushed the business card in my hand and feebly hurled the wadded up paper at him.

“How dare you try to take advantage of someone in their state of shock and grief, you charlatan!”

2

MILES

Dreary, late winter clouds hung low over the city, obscuring my view. Instead of sparkling diamond walls of glass towers, all I saw was bleakness and gray and dead. I didn’t expect the weather to reflect my mood so perfectly, but it did. Any minute, I anticipated storm clouds to roll in. My temper was rising, and my mood was not improving.

I spun on my heel and turned my attention to the small team of men sitting around in

my office. I let my disappointed glare rest on each of them, one by one, not saying anything until I was certain they felt the weight of my wrath before shifting my vitriol to the next victim.

I let my glare burn into Jackson Philips the longest of all.

“Explain to me like I’m four. How was it that you were unable to secure even a meeting with the owner of the hotel? What the hell was it called?” I paused and checked the notes scattered across my desk. “Sweet Mountain Inn. That should have been a no-brainer.”

Jackson shrugged. “She’s a viper, Miles. She attacked me before I even got a word out.”

“I thought you reviewed public records on that property. The owner just died, right?”

He nodded.

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“And you said it’s in bad shape?”

“The whole town is in bad shape,” Diego offered.

I shot him a second glare. His information wasn’t lending any assistance to this situation.

“We have a run-down hotel in an economically struggling town, and you let some kid intimidate you?” I tapped the notes on my desk. “It says here the property was inherited by a twenty-four-year-old. Did you do a background check on the kid?”

Jackson released a long breath. “She’s not exactly a kid, and yes, I had her checked out. Just like I had the library checked out. The library is private property leased to the city for something ridiculous like a dollar a year. I’m not sure what the legal technicalities are there. The best I could find is that the librarian is the owner in name only, family property, but the city runs and maintains it. It’s an old house with some expansion work on it. These properties are in the hands of the next generation.”

“Exactly!” I held my hand out, fingers wide, palm up. He hit the nail on the head with that call. “Show me a kid who isn’t itching to get some money in their pocket and a ticket out of the podunk town they grew up in.”

“These young people aren’t letting go of the properties. Maybe if they were townies with nothing going for them, but these youngwomen aren’t what you’re picturing,” Jackson said. “They are smart. They have determination.”

“Are you saying I don’t understand the need to escape the backward-thinking

restraints of a small town?”

“No, Miles, we all know you came from a small Midwest town,” he said.

“Damn straight, I did. Day after high school graduation, I got on a Greyhound bus out of town and never looked back. Towns like that suffocate young adults.” I knew I hadn’t felt like I could properly breathe until I had gotten out of the clutches of that crossroads locals called a town. I hadn’t felt like I belonged in my own skin until I stepped foot in a proper city. I didn’t understand why anyone would want to get out of the city and head into the wilds, or near wilds, for rest and relaxation.

It never made sense to me. The city had art and music and things to keep a person busy. Maybe I had spent more than enough time in my youth with idle hands to not see the appeal. I didn’t have to understand the why to know it was a lucrative market.

“Offer them more money,” I said.

“Can’t offer money if they aren’t willing to speak with any of us,” Jackson muttered.

“We get it, you failed,” I said. “How about the rest of you? Diego?”

He showed his teeth in a grimace. “It’s a tough town. I canvassed the neighborhood to the east of the downtown area. That’s our target area. There isn’t much neighborhood in that area. Mostly abandoned industrial from way back. There is some housing, a blend of retirees and older families with kids in high school or college. I didn’t meet with the same hostility as Jackson, but no one seemed interested—or at least they hadn’t thought about the prospect of selling. I think I made some decent contacts.” He finished with a tilt of his head.

A growl of frustration parked itself in my throat. “Somebody give me better news. I need something we can work with.”

“County records are going to be easy. Once we get titles on the properties, as long as we are not going in for mineral rights, rezoning for hospitality should be a breeze. The clerk I was dealing with” —Harris checked something on his phone— “Crystal Collier, said that the area was a tourist hotspot a long time ago. Lots of trails and skiing in the winter. So the location is prime.”

“How old is this contact in county records? Could you potentially seduce some title changes and zoning records out of her?”

Harris groaned. “Definitely not. She’s my grandmother’s age.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of a MILF? Let her bake you some cookies, let her know you’re interested in more than baked goods,” I said. “We need more wins with this one. Thus far, I am far from impressed with what you’ve been telling me.”

He let out a half-assed chuckle. “MILF, yes, but not a granny. And that’s a hard no from me. If you want to seduce the older women of Brookdale, have at it.”

“Have you checked the place out?” Diego asked.

“No, why?” I didn’t need to see the town to know what it was going to be like. The downtown area would be half empty, most stores having been replaced with one of those super center box stores closer to the freeway. What businesses that were left would either be perpetually going out of business or be old mom- and pop-run services that no one really used anymore, a drycleaners or shoe repair shop.

There would be one of those grocery stores where the food always looked questionable and probably expired. The inn was probably one of those nineteen sixties’ cinderblock constructions with rotting out stairs. I could picture the owner, some skinny, drugged out loser without any business sense. She should be jumping at the chance to sell off. She could buy more drugs.

“Once the locals realize how beneficial this resort will be for the town, I expect a complete change of attitude. Make sure you are selling them on the benefits of bringing in tourist dollars every time you talk to them. The sooner we can break ground, the sooner they’ll have jobs for their kids and people for their restaurants. There are restaurants in this town, right?” I scanned the group looking for answers.

“The diner is passable,” Harris said.

“You ate there? That place looked like it was held together with roaches and stale smoke,” Jackson said with a chuckle.

“It wasn’t that bad. I didn’t even get indigestion. The coffee was decent.”

“You call that decent? It was the only coffee in town. It was barely better than motor oil,” Diego said.

“I want actual results the next time you head back there. Diego, secure those abandoned industrial properties. Jackson, stop running away from little girls. Harris, screw your county records grandma or don’t, but get me results. I want to know we can get demolition equipment up there and get started sooner rather than later. I want to break ground before this summer rolls around. Brookdale doesn’t know it yet, but they are about to get a major facelift and become the poster child for Upstate tourist destinations.” With a clap of my hands, I ended the meeting and then I shooed everyone out of my office.

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Diego and Jackson gave Harris a hard time about the diner. It sounded to me as if this town was almost too small for our new property. Of course, we would also be bringing in several destination restaurants. I had plans on a Michelin Star within the first year of opening our doors, and that meant attracting a renowned chef. A celebrity chef would be better from a marketing perspective, but those were conversations to start having once I had the land under contract.

Securing the purchase of a bunch of falling down buildings shouldn't be this difficult. It felt almost as if my team wasn't even trying. I would have gotten a meeting about, if not closed on, at least one property by now.

I hit the intercom to my assistant. "How far away is Brookdale?"

"According to the internet, it says it's a four- to five-hour drive. So with traffic, make that six hours."

I grumbled.

"The closest airport is Albany, and you could get a rental from there."

"Do it. I want to go see what's so challenging about this little town for myself," I said.

"Sure thing. Did you have a timeline in mind? You have meetings on Thursday, but next Tuesday is clear, and your Wednesday is virtual, so you can take that call from anywhere."

“Next week is soon enough.” I ended the call. Next week was more than soon enough. I was not a fan of small towns and avoided them as a point of principle. This was not a pleasure trip. The sooner I could get there and back, the better.

3

LYDIA

The stack of books in my collection grew as I added another one. I slid the pile onto the closest shelf as I pulled down a book on plumbing and flipped through the pages. Not enough pictures. I put it back. The next book was full of color, step-by-step photographs. I added it to my keepers and continued to scan the shelf.

“Are you sure you don’t want a cart?” Evie teased in a low, library approved hush.

“Funny.” I crinkled my nose and stuck my tongue out at her.

She pulled the top book from the stack and began flipping through it. “Better Homes Plumbing for the DIYer. Do you really think you can fix the plumbing in that place all by yourself?”

“Somebody has to do it. Aunt Ruth really let the inn go, and there just isn’t the money to hire out all the repairs I need. Especially the third floor of the north wing. None of those rooms can be occupied as they are.”

“But, plumbing?”

I shrugged. “I want to start with smaller projects I can manage. I’m not comfortable taking on something like electricity yet.” I set a book on basic wiring down on my stack. “I should know how to clean out one of those...” —I grabbed the plumbing book back from her and flipped through the pages until I found the information I was

looking for— “P-trap things under a sink. And I should be able to fix a leaky faucet.”

Evie looked at me skeptically.

“Mom knew all of this stuff. She was the best handy-person. She could fix anything. But Ruth had different ideas regarding what a woman should be able to do, and she was cheap. Wouldn’t hire anyone to do the work, and didn’t know how herself. Not that she would have done it if she could. And she refused to let me even try. I was a girl.”

Evie cackled. “You still are.”

I looked down at my boobs. I had more than enough for the two of us. As many times as Evie complained of not being particularly endowed, it seemed a shame that I had enough to share, was willing to share, and was left without a means of sharing. Yes, I was still a girl, a woman. When my mom was alive, that had been something to be proud of. I was capable of anything I wanted to do. I could be whatever I wanted to be. But my life under Aunt Ruth’s thumb had been very different.

Girls were meant to find a man to take care of them. I wasn’t allowed to think about going to college, and there wasn’t money for it, anyway. I certainly hadn’t been allowed to pick up a hammer or a screwdriver. Those were tools for men. The life I was headed toward with my mother was one of promise and independence. Under my aunt, it was full of the expectation of servitude to a future husband while wearing a strand of pearls.

“Are you certain?” I asked. “I’m wearing jeans. Don’t tell Ruth.”

We both suppressed a fit of giggles. I hadn’t been allowed to wear pants in public once I was under Aunt Ruth’s guardianship, and never jeans when she could see me. I was being positively rebellious.

“She must be spinning in her grave,” Evie said, sobering up.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “She’s definitely not pleased with my choices, that’s for certain.”

“Are you doing okay?” Evie reached out and rubbed my arm. Her brows pinched together in an expression of concern.

She knew my rather troublesome history with Aunt Ruth. She had known me before that particular phase of my life, also. Evie and I had been friends forever. We both grew up in this town, both had parents who, despite popular opinion, did their best to preserve the old, beautiful buildings in their care. If there was anyone who understood how conflicted and confused I was in those first few days after my aunt’s death, it was Evie. She also knew exactly why I had stuck it out when I could have walked away as soon as I had turned eighteen.

I nodded. It had taken several days of living in a fog before my head settled and I could think clearly after Aunt Ruth’s death. “It’s still weird. You know, I mean, look at me. I’m in the library pulling out a stack of books so I can start fixing the inn up, and I’m wearing jeans in public. None of these things would have been possible a month ago.”

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“So, you’re keeping the inn?” Evie asked.

My eyes went wide. “Oh, my God, some jerk offered to buy the place the day I signed the papers. The inn had been mine for less than a couple of hours, and some opportunistic charlatan was sitting on the doorstep trying to take advantage of my mental state. How many people do they blindside that way? So rude.”

“Not the guy from JM Carlisle Group?”

I fished the wadded up business card from my pocket. I had kept it to remind myself what was at stake. If I couldn’t manage to reclaim the inn to its former glory, or close enough, I was setting myself up to have to sell out to some guy like that. And I knew the investment firms in New York City were not interested in saving the inn or bringing her back to her former glory. They would level her without thinking twice about it.

But Mountain Sweet was a late Victorian beauty, and she deserved to be rehabilitated. My mom had kept her in decent condition, but the last ten years of neglect were showing. She needed a facelift, power washing and fresh paint, with a few repairs on the gingerbread decorations and a window repair here and there. As far as I was aware, the roof was in good shape, and there weren’t any leaks. A professional inspection would be able to provide an accurate situational report. It was on my to-do list. And the rooms on the third floor really only needed some freshening up with new wallpaper, maybe a bump or two in the walls patched up, and updated plumbing. There was nothing charming about sinks and toilets with rust stains.

I held the card out. “This guy?”

Evie took it and pressed the wrinkles out. “Oh, yeah, him.” A low rumble of a growl started in the back of her throat.

If we had been anywhere other than the library, I would have expected her to let loose with a torrent of profanity. Evie knew when to keep it professional and when to cut loose.

“He had the nerve to tell me that since the family leased this place to the city, it really wasn’t my decision whether he could buy it or not. As if the lease were transferable, and then he could do what he wanted with this old place.” Her voice grew louder as she talked.

I waved my hands, pushing downward to remind her of her own volume rules in the library.

She leaned in and continued to whisper. “He said something about revitalizing the whole downtown area. And to start, they wanted to get rid of, and I quote, ‘these old eyesores’. I can’t believe he had the nerve to call the library an eyesore.”

The library was the same age as Sweet Mountain, late eighteen hundreds. It was the kind of Victorian mansion that people referred to as a painted lady with all the ornamentation and painted in all the bright colors. Were the colors authentic? Definitely not, but the teals and rich blues accented in gold tones and purples made the house such a joy to look at.

“What a freaking dick to insinuate that this place is not a thing of beauty. I mean I get it. From certain angles, Sweet Mountain could use a bit of a facelift, but she’s not ugly, either,” I grumbled.

“I wonder how many other places he approached and called ugly?” Evie pondered.

I thought about that for a long minute. “If he thinks he’s revitalizing downtown, is Dan Breaker in on it?”

“The mayor? No, he’s all mister historical preservation. He’s the one out there hanging all the decorations around the town square no matter the occasion. I mean, yes, I think the mayor would want to revitalize the town but at the same time, I don’t think he’d be the one to want to bulldoze the historical charm. Dan Breaker is more likely to organize a cleanup and painting party than he is to partner with a real estate developer,” Evie said.

“Are you certain?” I asked.

“The easiest way to find out is to ask,” she said.

“Fine,” I said as I picked up the stack of books. “I need to check these out, and then I’m headed over to his office.”

Evie took the top half of the stack in my arms. “Let’s put these behind the counter for now, and I’ll head over there with you.”

When we got to the mayor’s office, we weren’t the only ones there to ask about this JM Carlisle Group. Dan stood in front of the receptionist desk looking at something in his hands. I couldn’t hear what he was saying. When he looked up at us, he asked, “You too?”

“Did that guy try to get you to sell the inn?” Mary from the post office asked. She was in the group standing around.

“And the library,” Evie said.

“We won’t let that happen,” the mayor announced. “We’ll need to organize a

committee?—”

“I’ll help,” I volunteered and raised my hand before he had even finished his words.

4

MILES

“What the hell?” I ducked my head and looked out the windshield. I finally made it to Brookdale. After the nonsense with the airport, it probably would have taken less time to drive the entire way.

But what I was looking at was straight out of a rom-com movie. Small towns didn’t festoon swags of greenery across Main Street in the middle of the year. That was something they did at Christmas.

But I was staring right at an Easter egg and green shamrock laden swag of vines draping from light post to light post. I slowed and I turned left as the GPS instructed.

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I cruised well below the speed limit, gawking at the decorations. The same purple and green poster appeared on businesses' doors. I pulled into an open parking space and got out of the car. The wind was sharp and much colder than I would have expected for this time of the year.

Shrugging down into my sweater, I toughed it out and crossed the sidewalk to read the poster.

Emblazoned in neon colors against a field of green were the words Spring Events in Brookdale. I shot a glance up and down the street. There weren't too many people out walking around. And those who were shrank down into their winter coats.

Rubbing my hands together, I blew hot breath on them. Damn. Was it getting colder?

Sunday afternoon, the high school drum corps performed at the grand opening of the new gazebo in town square. Where the hell was the town square? Wednesday afternoon starting at four, they were hosting shamrock rock painting, also at the gazebo. There was an asterisk next to this listing. Weather permitting. Otherwise, the rock painting would be held at the library.

I checked my watch. Four ten. It was too cold to do anything outside. I needed to find the library. Before I left, I scanned down the other scheduled events. There was everything from a Saint Patrick's Day Parade to an Easter Egg hunt, with multiple events throughout the weeks.

Rubbing the chill out of my arms, I dashed back to the car. The heat roared to life as I started the engine. I entered the Brookdale Library in the GPS and wasn't surprised to

find I was only a block away.

Inside the library was warm and cozy. Maybe that had more to do with the old house the library occupied than anything else. I wandered from room to room taking in how they combined built-in shelving along the walls with modern, practically industrial shelving in the middle of the rooms.

Reading nooks with overstuffed chairs were near every window and in other almost hidden locations.

A studious looking young woman with thick glasses smiled at me. She had an armful of books. She resembled a cartoon character of a librarian the way the top of her cardigan was buttoned and with sturdy, functional shoes on her feet. “Can I help you?”

“I was looking for the rock painting,” I mentioned.

“You must be new in town,” she said.

I gave a noncommittal nod. I was new in town, but not in the way she was thinking.

“If you want to follow me, I’ll show you where the community room is.”

I followed her around a corner, down one hallway, down a flight of stairs, down another hallway, and into what was obviously a modern construction addition. At the end of another hall of doors, like classrooms in a school, she pushed through a set of double doors into a veritable party.

Music played over a speaker in the ceiling, and kids ran between people and tables. There was a row of folded tables with painting stations and piles of rocks.

“Have fun,” she said as she turned and left.

There were people from a range of generations, from kids to the elderly. A table set aside from the painting stations was covered in cookies and a punch bowl. I was here to meet people and get a feel for why my team hadn’t been able to make headway on securing properties.

“Welcome, hi. “I’m Mayor Dan. Come on in, paint a rock.” He was a few years older than I was. He extended his hand and I shook it.

Before I had a chance to really say anything, he was off like a social butterfly. I decided to paint a rock and keep my ears open. Maybe I could get a pulse on this town so I could formulate the next step.

Icy wind slapped me hard in the face as I stepped out of the library a little over an hour later. I pulled my coat collar up and tried to hide from the wind. The cold outside was a sharp contrast to the welcoming warmth of the event inside the library. Brookdale did not match what the numbers on the spreadsheet had told me about this place. Sure, it might be economically depressed, but the people had a strong sense of community.

I had been welcomed, and no one knew me.

This was the kind of place tourists would eat up with a spoon. I might need to meet with my team about making some adjustments to the plans, but if anything, that little rock painting party cemented my resolve that Brookdale was the location I wanted.

I knew it was cold, but the sudden swirl of snow flurries caught me off guard. I cranked up the heat and navigated back toward Albany. A little snow late in the spring wasn’t unheard of. The road leading to the freeway was dark. In the daylight hours, it had been pleasant enough, but in the dark with the snow, it was a pain in the

ass.

I fumbled with the voice memo on my phone. “Fuck.” was the first thing I managed to record. The road needed to have fewer turns in it so I could do what I needed. A shoulder on the side of the road would have been helpful so I could pull over for a moment to start my recording. I didn’t remember it being so narrow on my drive in.

The GPS instructed me to turn. This was not familiar at all. The road to Brookdale had been a relatively straight shot from the freeway exit. There had been curves in the road, but there was no way this was that same road. And it wasn’t the sudden snow that was confusing me. I’d be fine as long as the fucking GPS didn’t get me lost in the countryside.

It was another thirty minutes before the road I was on intersected with the road I should have been on. I turned left, and about a mile later, I could see the freeway on-ramp, gas stations, and a hotel. I pulled into one of the gas stations and topped off the gas tank.

“You aren’t planning on driving in this, are you? I just got a call from the owner. They told me to shut down and go home,” the clerk said as I handed over my credit card to pay.

“For a little snow?” I asked.

“It’s not a little snow. Haven’t you been following the news? They’re saying we should expect one of those polar vortex cyclones.”

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“When is it supposed to hit? I’ve got a flight to catch in Albany.”

The clerk shook his head. “No, you don’t. They are already shutting the airports down. It was on the news.”

I didn’t believe that it was going to be that bad. After I slid back into the car, I pulled out the phone to check the local weather. I saw that I had missed an alert. My flight was canceled. Maybe this storm was something to take seriously.

I considered driving all the way back to the city, but every bit of news and social media was in a panic over the impending storm.

As I pulled out of the gas station, the snow began falling in a thick white sheet. Fine, I could take a cosmic hint. I pulled into the motel parking lot. There was a line inside. I guess I wasn’t the only person seeking refuge.

The clerk worked at top speed even though the people in front of me in line moaned and complained. The woman in front of me stepped up, and the clerk’s face fell from their forced fake smile to horror.

I didn’t figure out that they were out of rooms until the woman crossed her arms on the counter and put her head on them. I could tell from the way her shoulders were lifting and falling that she was crying.

The clerk suddenly had their phone pressed to their ear. The expression on the young man’s face didn’t look promising.

The woman's head popped up.

"Okay, they can get you in. You have to give them your credit card number to hold the room." The clerk handed the phone across the counter.

If this place was out of rooms, would the hotel on the other end of that call have anything left? The woman in front of me needed to speed things up. I wanted a room for the night too.

"Thank you, thank you!" She wiped tears from her face, and with a rattle of keys in hand, she ran out the door.

"I'm so sorry, but?—"

"Yeah, you're out of rooms. That's pretty obvious. Any chance the place you called for her has anything?"

The young man grimaced and shook his head. "That was their last room. There's a town about twenty minutes west of here. They have a hotel. I can call to see if they have any vacancies."

"Brookdale?" I asked.

"Yeah, there. I know it's out of the way. But there's nothing south of us with any vacancy, and frankly, Brookdale is closer than anything north of here." His eyebrows went up.

I let out a long breath. "Um, if that's my best option, can you give them a call to make sure they have a room?"

I tapped my fingers against the counter while he made the call.

“She’s got plenty of rooms available. Always does. You might want to get moving ahead of the storm. I’ll give her a call and let her know you’re on the way,” he said.

“She won’t need a credit card to secure the reservation?”

He shook his head. “It’s an old-fashioned kind of place. She’ll have a room, don’t worry.”

“Okay, thank you,” I said as I headed out.

“Drive safe. It looks like it’s getting worse out there,” the clerk called out after me as I headed back out into the snowstorm.

5

LYDIA

The wind outside forced its way through various cracks and crevices, making the old inn howl like it was in some kind of horror movie. I hated it. It had only gotten worse over the years. It meant there were windows loose in their casings and shingles loose on the roof. It also made everything inside feel so much colder than it really was.

The vacancy rate was up so I closed off a good portion of the rooms on the southern half of the inn. It really helped me to save on utilities. I could easily open up one of the floors if there were a sudden influx of visitors, but the storm had pretty much driven everyone who wasn’t a local out of town.

I had just finished banking the fire in the lobby area when the phone started ringing like crazy.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’m coming, hold on already,” I called out as I ran to answer it.

“Sweet Mountain Inn, how can I help you?” I asked.

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“This is the Quality Suites out by the interstate at exit thirty-seven. I was calling to see if I could send some folks your way. We are completely booked up.”

I tried not to bark out surprised laughter. I literally had one guest staying at the inn and had closed up half of my available rooms waiting for warmer weather.

“Yes, of course I have plenty of space. How many people are you expecting?” I asked.

“I’ve already sent one fellow headed back to Brookdale and I have several people waiting in my lobby hoping I can help them find places to ride out this storm.”

“I still have power, so send them this way,” I said. “I hope the road stays open and clear for them to get here safely.”

“Thanks, I will let everyone know. What’s your capacity?” the clerk asked. “The motel at exit thirty has been sending people to me, and I’m completely full.”

“I have forty rooms and a decent-sized lobby if I get booked up. And if we are super strapped, I can ask people to share.”

“I’m not allowed to do any of that, but we’ll probably have people camping out in the lobby. I mean, this storm isn’t safe,” he said.

“That’s the difference between being privately owned and a corporate hotel,” I said. I could make accommodations in an emergency without risking my job. As we finished the conversation, the bell over the front door chimed and the first guest of the storm

swept in with a gust of cold air.

He stopped inside the door to stomp circulation back into his feet and brushed snow from his shoulders. He shivered and made all the blustery noises that a person made when they came in from the cold. Before I had a chance to welcome him to the Sweet Mountain Inn, he made a beeline for the fireplace and stood close while rubbing his hands together and holding them out to the flames. He was barely dressed for the unseasonably cold spring we were having, let alone being dressed for a snowstorm.

As I crossed the lobby toward him, I grabbed one of the throw blankets from the back of one of the settees.

“Did the hotel out by the freeway send you?” I asked as I handed him the blanket. There were still snowflakes in his dark hair.

I was stunned into place by his model good looks. He was shivering so hard he could barely speak. He stuttered his thanks as he took the blanket and wrapped it over his head and around his shoulders.

“Would you like some hot coffee?” I managed to ask.

He nodded as he pulled one of the wingback sitting chairs closer to the fire.

I grabbed another blanket and draped it over his lap before I went to the bar where I kept coffee service ready for my guests. I had to start a fresh pot anyway since I was expecting more people.

It didn't take long before I had half a cup of steaming hot coffee to give to the man. He wrapped his long finger around the paper cup and placed his face directly over the steam.

“It feels like I barely made it. I had to pull over on the other side of town, the snow is so bad,” he said.

“You walked here?” I asked.

“Only the last half mile or so. I’m surprised I managed to make it as far as I did.”

I sat down in the chair on the other side of the fireplace from him.

“I just got off the phone with one of the hotels out by the freeway. He said he was going to send people this way.”

The man shook his head. “They won’t make it. The storm gets worse as you get closer to town than it was out by the freeway. I can’t imagine anyone getting through behind me.”

“Is it really that bad?” I got up and crossed the lobby to look out the front window, not that I could see anything beyond the snow piling up on the edge of the inn’s porch. “Crap, I haven’t seen snow like this in several years and definitely not in the middle of March.”

I returned to where my half frozen guest was clearly starting to feel warmer. He no longer sat hunched in over himself but stood up taller than I had realized. As he shrugged out of his overcoat, I noticed exactly how broad his shoulders were. He wrapped one of the blankets back around his shoulders and strode to the coffee setup to pour himself a refill.

“I’m really glad you were still open and that I managed to get through on the road. I don’t know what I would have done if I had gotten stuck out there. I’m in a rental with no emergency blankets or supplies,” he said as he stirred sugar and creamer into his drink.

I retreated back behind my front desk. There was something about this man that set my nerves on edge. When I thought he was half frozen he seemed harmless enough, but now that he was more comfortable, there was a very definite aura of strength and power about him. It didn't help that he was ridiculously attractive and just my type.

He strode over, following me, and set his cup of coffee on the counter. He reached into his back pocket. "I guess we should make this official and check in."

"I guess so," I said with a self-conscious giggle. I opened the old-fashioned guest registry and swung the big book around as I handed him a pen and then pointed to the line for him to fill out.

"Shouldn't all of this be computerized?" he asked as he left his chicken scratch of a signature.

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“It is,” I said. “But the inn has kept handwritten registration logs consistently since it first opened in 1895, and it seems like it would be a shame to stop doing so now.” I spun the book around and began copying his information into my hotel guest registry software. As I was typing, the power flicked on and off, staying off for a long, dark moment before flicking back on.

I let out a breath that I had been holding in the dark. “And that’s a very good reason I had you fill out the handwritten registry first.” I clicked the keys on my now off computer, indicating that the power outage had kicked me off my system.

“Your name is...” I squinted at his bad handwriting. “James Miles?”

“You can call me Miles,” he said with a sly grin that made my stomach feel all fluttery.

“I’ll be able to update the system when it comes back online.”

I grabbed a key for one of the nicer rooms on the second floor. I jotted down the room number in the registry before suggesting that he follow me.

“How big is this place?” he asked.

“Sweet Mountain isn’t particularly large by today’s standards, but when it was built, it was considered big. Back in the day, this area of the state was a big tourist destination for health and wellness seekers. There used to be a sulfur spring, but it dried up at some point in the mid-1900s.”

“You say that like it was so long ago,” Miles said.

“I say that like someone who has zero experience of the previous century.”

“Now you’re trying to make me feel old.”

I turned and stammered a quick apology. That wasn’t my intention at all. “You aren’t that old, are you?” I asked.

“Considering I was born in the late 1900s, I don’t really know how to answer that question. I don’t feel old, but when you’re using terms like century and millennia, I have to wonder.” He was clearly teasing me, which was somehow worse than if I actually had insulted him.

I put the key in the door and my stomach sank. There was that telltale chunk as I tried to wiggle the key in the lock.

“What’s wrong?” Miles asked.

“The lock has decided to stop working,” I said with a sigh.

“It’s a simple mechanism. What do you mean it has decided to stop?”

“It might be a simple mechanism, but it’s a really old one and sometimes, they just stop working. If you’ll wait a moment, I will be right back with the key for a different room.” I scurried away as quickly as I could, completely mortified that the lock chose that moment to break.

I dangled the key for a different room as I returned. It slipped into the lock and turned without any problems. I pushed open the door and let Miles cross into his room. The heater was working beautifully, if not overcompensating as the room was almost

obscenely too warm.

I followed him into the room and pointed to the thermostatic valve on the radiator. “You can adjust the heat in your room by turning that.”

I handed Miles the key. “I don’t do anything more than packaged pastries and coffee for breakfast, but considering you are here because of the storm and my other guest is stuck as well, I’ll probably end up making something for breakfast for everyone. Have a good evening,” I said as I began to step into the hallway.

“What if the power goes out?” Miles asked, pointing at the radiator. “That’ll still work, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“And where will I find you if I need anything?” Miles asked.

“I’ll be downstairs reading in case anyone else gets through on the roads.”

“Good night.” He smiled as he closed the door.

6

MILES

I cast my gaze around the room. It was passable. Definitely not five-star quality. Barely three-star worthy. It was clean, but the entire building had that musty old smell to it. I guess that couldn’t be helped. At least the heater wasn’t blowing dust all over everything, and under the circumstances, I was glad to be warm.

It looked like I wasn’t going to be in the office tomorrow. I reached into my back

pocket for my phone so I could message the team and let them know. Only my phone wasn't in my pocket. I picked up my overcoat and searched all its pockets. Nothing.

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“Where the fuck is my phone?” I asked the empty room.

And then I remembered exactly where it was. Resting on the center console of the rental and plugged into the charger. I hadn’t trusted the built-in GPS to get me back here without exploring the back roads it had taken me on when I had tried to leave town the first time. So I had used the GPS in my phone.

It was a good thing I had. The amount of snow had essentially run me off the road at a point where I could see the small downtown area. If I had gotten trapped in the backwoods... A shiver of imagined cold danced down my spine. I wasn’t about to go back out in the storm to track down my cell phone. I knew exactly where it was, and it wasn’t going anywhere soon.

I could go downstairs in a bit and see if that curvy innkeeper would let me use her computer. Damn it, no, I couldn’t. Her computer was down. Maybe in the morning.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at my feet. The leather of my shoes was spotted with large water stains. They were basically ruined. And my socks were wet. I wiggled my toes the best I could within the confines of my shoes. At least I could feel my toes. That could have been a disaster.

I kicked off the shoes and placed them and my socks in front of the radiator.

The room was warm enough that stripping down to my boxers wasn’t an issue. I spread my slacks out so the wet cuffs were closer to the radiator and could also dry.

Crawling into the bed, I clicked on the TV. It powered on just fine, but there was no

signal anywhere. Right, the computer downstairs was offline. Whatever internet connection she had probably also ran the television programming.

I turned the TV off and tossed the remote onto the side table. No TV, no phone. Maybe there was a pad of paper and a pen in this place and I could get some of my thoughts about Brookdale written down. I rummaged in the various drawers in the room until I found a Sweet Mountain Inn branded notepad and a cheap pen.

Armed with some basic tools, I sat back down in the bed and poised the pen over the pad of paper. What were my thoughts on this town? Suddenly, it was as if I had no thoughts. I was pissed about the snowstorm. I was aggravated over the travel arrangements. But mostly, I was distracted by that woman downstairs.

Her mouth, those lips. She had long, silken hair that I wanted to twist up in my fists. Her body was all curves and softness. She would not be merely warm to wrap around. She would be hot. So hot. My groin tightened as I thought about her. I should at least find out her name if thoughts of her promised sexy dreams tonight.

Maybe tomorrow.

With the amount of snow that dropped in such a short amount of time, it could be days before all of it melted. I might be stuck for days. That wasn't such a bad idea. It would give me plenty of time to get to know her.

There was no way she was Jackson's vicious pit viper. No, the woman downstairs was entirely too sweet to have been the same person.

The next morning, after a rather long and boring night, I got dressed and made my way back downstairs to the lobby. Through the front windows I could see that snow was still drifting down. At least it no longer fell in the heavy blanket that buried the region the night before. It was gray and freezing out. The massive piles and drifts on

the ground were a testament to a long and nasty night of bad weather.

Cold seeped in around the edges of the window casing. I rubbed my arms and stepped back into the area where there was still heat. It was a miracle my room had stayed as warm as it had if the larger public areas couldn't hold the heat in.

A soft muttering broke the silence of the world covered in snow. I turned to see the innkeeper push into a sitting position on one of the couches in front of the fireplace. It was one of those old-fashioned, camel-backed styles, and slightly shabby.

She rubbed her face and let out a big yawn. "Oh, I'm sorry. You must be looking for breakfast. What time is it?"

I shrugged. "No idea. My watch lost power sometime last night, and my phone is an ice cube back in my rental car. Did you sleep down here?"

With more yawns, she crossed the lobby and started a pot of coffee. She then crossed to the computer and tapped at the keyboard, mumbling something about it still being down.

"I'll be right back. I'll go get the breakfast pastries. I didn't have anything already set up." Her hips swayed as she walked away. I followed like a puppy hoping to find a snack. I already found the snack. At this point, I hoped she'd let me get a bite of her.

"You know, I didn't get your name last night," I said.

"I'm Lydia."

"So, Lydia, the owners wouldn't have let you sleep on a bed last night?"

She paused and smiled at me. "I am the owner. I wanted to be available in case

someone else made it through.”

“How very big-hearted of you.”

“Here,” she said as she shoved a box of Danishes into my arms. “Help me carry these back out front.”

“You know, I can be helpful in other ways too,” I said.

“Oh, yeah? How?”

“I can take a look at that broken lock, for one. Or I can replace it, if you have a replacement part already. That’s the kind of thing hotels keep, right?”

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“I’m not giving you a discount on the room,” she said. I sensed a teasing tone in her voice.

“Not asking for one. But I’m stuck inside, and without access to the internet or anything on TV. I need something to keep me from getting bored.”

“Are you serious?” she asked. She took the breakfast offerings and displayed them next to the coffee pot.

“Completely.”

“How are you with small plumbing problems?”

“If you have the tools, I can do a few simple things.”

“Follow me,” she said with a delighted gleam in her eyes.

Lydia led me down to a hot and crowded basement. She showed me a workbench with tools that would have been old fifty years ago. At least a hammer was still the same basic tool it had been since cavemen figured how to tie a blunt rock onto the end of a stick.

She didn’t have a full list, but there were enough small fix-its to keep me busy for the rest of the morning.

Every time I saw Lydia, she had a sexy little smile on her face and a slight blush on her cheeks. She told me there was another guest in residence, but I didn’t believe her

until lunchtime.

The inn's kitchen wasn't particularly large. And by commercial standards, it hadn't been updated in years and would not have passed any intense inspections. There was a small table with chairs in the corner, and the refrigerator was an old avocado green monstrosity that reminded me of the refrigerator in the house I walked out of twenty years ago.

"You don't make meals for your guests here?" I asked.

"Is that your way of saying you don't want me to make you a grilled cheese sandwich?" Lydia laughed.

Her laughter was magical.

"No, not what I meant. You don't serve meals from here, do you?"

"This is my kitchen. It just happens to be located in the inn, if that helps. It's barely commercially graded, and only because of its location in the building. It's not a working kitchen, if that's what you're asking. We don't offer room service or meals. Your breakfast Danish came wrapped in plastic for a reason."

"Excuse me! Excuse me!" someone called from the hallway.

Lydia crossed out of the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. "Hi, we're down here. Come on in."

An older, middle-aged man stopped before fully stepping inside. "I shouldn't have to come to the kitchen to place my order."

"Sorry about that, but with the storm I'm doing the best I can. I wanted to make sure

you had something for lunch. I'm making grilled cheese. I wasn't prepared for there to be a storm," Lydia said.

"Grilled cheese? I'm not in kindergarten. Do you have a menu?" he asked.

Lydia shook her head. "No menu, not a restaurant. I've got cheese sandwiches, and soup for dinner. Unless you want more of the breakfast pastries, that's really all I can offer."

He huffed. "Bring it up to my room when it's ready."

"Hey, buddy, I don't think you heard her. This isn't a restaurant. If you want a sandwich, wait for her to make it, and then you can take it back to your room."

Lydia handed the guy a plate with the first sandwich she made. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. "And this is so you can get something out of the drinks machine."

He didn't even say thank you before leaving.

"You didn't have to do that, you know. Give him money for the drink machine," I said.

"I know, but he wasn't going to accept anything I could offer him to drink. This way, he leaves us alone." She licked her lips as she looked up into my eyes.

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“I shouldn’t be doing this,” I admitted even while I held his hands and backed down the hallway pulling Miles with me. We had a long day, but I didn’t want Miles to get away from me, not yet.

“Then do you need me to stop you?” His smirk was more of a smolder, and I didn’t think he had any intentions of insisting that I stop.

Miles was the kind of man who if I said no, or wait, he would stop immediately. And I also knew from watching him move that he would be strong enough that if he stopped moving, I didn’t have the strength to budge him. So he was following me because he wanted to.

“You keep a room on the first floor?”

“I live here. When Mom ran the inn, she turned half of the first floor of the north wing into our private living space.”

Miles stopped walking. I was right. He was solid, and I couldn’t budge him.

“This is your home, isn’t it?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes. Has been since I was about five and Mom started running the place.”

I tugged on his hands to get him moving again. Instead, he pulled me toward him. I had no choice but to let him reel me into his embrace. I giggled breathlessly as he crushed me to his chest. His fingers skimmed over my brow, brushing back my hair. His eyes searched mine.

“You’re taking me to your bed?” He put a strange emphasis on the fact that it was my bed.

I managed to nod. I tried to swallow, but everything, my thoughts, my breath, my heart, all seemed to be lodged in my throat at that moment. What was he looking for? What did he see inside me?

The soft caress of fingers against my skin tightened as he held the back of my head and then claimed my mouth. At first, the kiss was demanding, and after a second of bruising force, his lips were soft, gentle, seeking. He played with my lips, nipping with his teeth, teasing with his tongue.

I let out a soft moan as I melted against him. I wanted to flow over him and have him guide my body exactly how he wanted me.

His hands grasped at my hips and pressed our bodies tighter. He could have begun peeling my clothes from me in the chilled hall, and I would not have cared.

“Lydia.” My name came out on a low growl.

I placed my hand against his cheek. The scruff of his beard tickled my palm. I was afraid he was going to change his mind.

He continued to kiss along the side of my cheek and down my neck. And then he let out another growl sound as he lifted me.

I gasped. “Miles!”

“Put your legs around me, woman.”

I did as I was told. My slip-ons fell from my feet. His fingers bit into my ass as he

held me. He took a few steps, and then my back was against the wall. I clung to his neck as he shifted, pressing into me. I was supported by his hands under my legs, a strong thigh, and the pressure of his hips against mine. There was no mistaking his arousal as he sandwiched me between the hard ridge in his pants and the wall.

His hips rocked against mine, causing the best erotic friction. His mouth was on mine. I clambered to hold on to him, to keep my legs wrapped around his hips. He ground against me as if he could rub away the clothes between us.

His hands roamed over my ribs and my hips. His lips were on my face, on my mouth, down the side of my throat. Never had I thought anyone would consume me with such desperation. The heat between us was almost unbearable.

The unbearable part really was the clothes. I wanted to feel his skin against mine, his body controlling mine, his lips against my skin.

“Miles,” I moaned.

“Lydia,” he growled.

“Bed,” I somehow managed to say.

He let out a disappointed moan and eased back from my body only enough for gravity to take over. As I slid down the space between his body and the wall, his hands grazed over my breasts, and his cock pressed into my belly.

“Are you sure you want me in your bed?”

“It’s more comfortable than the floor,” I responded. “Yes, I want you in my bed. Please.”

I held my hand out to him, and once again, I began leading him toward the private spaces of my home.

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As soon as I closed the door behind him, he surprised me by picking me up again. He had wrapped his arms under my butt and lifted. I braced my hands on his shoulders.

“Where am I going?” he asked as he looked up at me.

I tried to twist and point, but that felt precarious at best. I pointed behind me to the door on the other side of the room.

“Down that hall, second door.” I laughed as he carried me. I was too big for this, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Duck,” he announced as we reached the doorway.

I leaned over, and he buried his face between my breasts. He staggered, and then I was slipping down the front of his body.

“Sorry, I got distracted,” he said sheepishly.

It was still an impressive display of strength.

“How about I distract you some more?” I asked as I pulled my sweatshirt over my head.

I dropped it on the floor and scurried away from Miles, leading him on a chase into my room. He followed and grabbed me after only a few steps.

“Gotcha!” He let out an appreciative hum as he swung me back against him, turning

me so that he could place his face against my breasts again.

I clutched at his back, holding him against me. I threw my head back, giving in to the delicious passion of the moment. His hands did not fumble when it came to unclasping my bra and setting my breasts free. He covered my exposed skin with his hands and his mouth, sucking a nipple in to tease and play with.

My sense of balance was gone, and I stumbled back. My legs hit the bed, and together, we tumbled.

Miles managed to never release my nipple, licking and sucking on it. He landed with the grace of a cat. While I was pinned beneath him, he wasn't putting any pressure on me. His hands braced against the mattress, caging me in, and one knee between my thighs supported him.

I ground against his firm thigh.

He bucked my legs farther apart before positioning himself between them. I arched up against him, seeking out the hardness of his erection, still contained by his clothing. As he continued to devour my breasts, I lost my mind to my need to feel his skin. I tried to pull on his shirt, but it was as if my hands were useless. He flicked his tongue over my sensitive nipple, and I forgot everything, including how to make a fist or tug on fabric.

Since I couldn't figure out how his clothes worked, I knew how to get out of mine. The fleece-lined lounge pants I wore were simple elastic waist banded things. I managed to shove them down and wiggle.

Miles seemed to understand what I was doing, even though it felt as if all of his attention was on my breasts. He chased his hand after mine, and when I could no longer reach my pants, he took over, skimming the fabric the rest of the way down

each leg, and eventually, off.

His clothes rasped sensually against my sensitized skin. At least one of us was naked.

He dragged his hand back up my thigh, shifting so that he trailed it between us.

I gasped as his fingers sank between my folds. He didn't waste any time playing with my pussy before he was running the pad of his thumb in circles around my clit. He continued to suck and toy with my breasts as his hand and fingers did magical things between my legs.

I don't know, and frankly didn't care, how he managed to get fingers into my depth and rub against my clit at the same time. All I know is it was the most amazing sensation. He stroked and thrust and sucked and played me like I were some kind of instrument and he was a virtuoso.

The aching need that built in my core drove me to a frenzy.

"Miles, Miles," I somehow managed to speak. "I need... Oh, God, Miles, I need you."

I ached with longing when he pulled away from me. I reached out for him as he backed away.

"Let me get out of my clothes." He laughed. He took my hand and kissed my fingertips. I never thought of my fingers as erogenous zones before.

I whimpered with my need. And then the sounds I made turned to gasps and grunts of appreciation as Miles stripped before me.

The man was as beautiful as a Greek sculpture, all defined planes and chiseled

features, and he wanted me, my body. I was the opposite with squish and jiggle. My definitions were soft and rounded, while his were angular and firm.

He crawled back to me like a prowling beast stalking its prey. Only he didn't have to stalk. I was spread out before him, a feast waiting to be consumed. He smiled into my eyes as I welcomed him back into my arms.

He pressed me back into the bed, and I accepted him into my depths. He filled me, stretching me until we were hip to hip.

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I struggled to get enough air. The feeling of him against my skin, and inside me, robbed me of the ability to move or react. I was taut as a bowstring and felt that I was ready to shatter.

He slowly eased back before thrusting forcefully into me again, this time deeper. His thrusts drove me over the edge of reality. I fumbled to grab hold of his shoulders, scratching my nails down his arms as I tried to find purchase. But it was too late. Everything exploded as his passion drove my orgasm. I was lost to the sensations as wave after wave of spasms and electrical pulses took over my body.

I would have been lost to the abyss if it weren't for Miles keeping me grounded, literally nailing me to the bed, anchoring me in place.

His face twisted and he looked as if he let out a silent scream as he joined me in orgasmic bliss.

8

MILES

I had never felt so warm and comfortable. There was something about Lydia's bed, about Lydia, that was comforting. I think for the first time in my thirty-eight years, I understood the concept of cozy. And it was nice. What had I been missing out on all this time?

Why were men supposed to be rough and hard and endure discomfort when this luxury existed?

I bundled the sleeping form of the woman next to me into my arms, wrapping around her curves like a loving big spoon. She hummed and wiggled her ass against my groin. Damn, she was hot, physically warm, and she set my body on fire.

My cock, already half alert simply because I was touching her, sprang to full attention and prodded her.

She wiggled more, rubbing against me. She had to be awake and aware of what she was doing.

I nuzzled in against the back of her neck, scraping my teeth against her skin and placing small kisses under her ear.

She twisted and looked up at me. Her hair was a bit of a mess, and I loved it. My hands had given her that look. My touch put that soft smile on her face.

“I was asleep,” she said. It wasn’t a complaint, just a fact.

“But now you’re not,” I said as I rolled her the rest of the way onto her back. I positioned myself above her.

She wrapped one leg over my hip as I eased into her. Damn, taking her was so simple, so elegant. She was as ready for me as I was for her. We rocked together until I thought her bed was in danger of breaking apart.

Lydia’s moans and cries of delight were like whips driving me to harder, deeper, faster action. When we both had reached our release, I pulled her back into my arms and drifted back into the blissful coziness of sleeping in her bed.

I found her later, with damp hair, straightening up in the lobby. I had made use of her bathroom and taken a quick shower but was back in my same clothes. I would have

loved to change into something fresh, but being trapped by the storm, I was lucky to be somewhere warm and safe.

I slid my hands around her waist and pulled her to me before claiming a quick kiss. “What’s on the agenda for today? More repairs?”

She let out a half-assed chuckle. “It’s never-ending. Unfortunately, it looks like today, I’ll be shoveling snow.”

I cast a glance out the window. The sunlight was blinding as it reflected off the white snow.

“Has it stopped snowing?”

“It’s topped, and it’s starting to melt. The snow plow did the other side of the street already. Once it hits this side, I’ll have to get out and clear off the sidewalk and the walkways.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that,” I said.

She gave me the saddest smile I had ever seen. I had seen bitter smiles, and smiles that were loaded with all sorts of other emotions. Women could twist their expressions to look like one thing while meaning something else, and Lydia’s smile was failing at hiding her true emotions.

“I hate shoveling,” she said. She twisted away and wiped at her eyes.

“Hey.” I grabbed her shoulder and spun her to face me. “What’s going on?”

“The roads are clear, Miles. My other guest has already checked out.” She locked her gaze with mine.

Realization dawned on me. “Oh, I see.”

“Look, I knew what I was getting myself into. You don’t have to worry about me. It was fun.”

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“It was better than fun, Lydia. I’ll be back,” I said as I rubbed her arm. I had business with Brookdale. Of course I’d be back, especially since I knew Lydia would be here. “You know, I don’t have to go back to the city immediately. I could stay and help you dig out.”

She blinked at me a few times. “Are you serious?”

This time, her smile was bright and full of joy.

“Do you even know how to use a shovel?” She looked down at my feet. “I don’t think your shoes would survive.”

I shrugged her comment off. My shoes were already ruined. I didn’t think a little more water damage would make a difference.

“You know,” she started, “the snow will be even more melted tomorrow. Probably won’t have to dig out nearly so much.”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

She lifted her brows and smirked. “If I got all my chores done early, and if you honestly didn’t mind helping to clear off the porch and steps, we could spend the rest of the day and night enjoying each other’s company some more until you had to leave.”

I liked the way she thought. “Where’s your shovel?”

I started with the porch. The wind had blown piles of snow up against the building. If I hadn't already known there was a porch, it would have looked like very deep banks of snow. Fortunately, the snow hadn't been compacted down, and it was more like brushing piles of cold fluff.

Once I was out from the cover of the porch, the snow was very different. It was heavy, full of ice, and wet with the beginnings of the limited amount of melting that the improved weather had brought.

"I didn't think you had it in you," Lydia teased as she walked out onto the porch. "I didn't think you guys from the big city knew how to shovel snow."

"I didn't always live in New York," I said. "I've shoveled my fair share of driveways and sidewalks."

She raised her brows.

"Grew up in a small Midwestern town. As far as anyone was concerned, I had an empty mind and a strong back."

"How long did that last?" she asked.

"The empty head or the strong back? Until the day after high school graduation," I admitted.

She leaned on the thin column that supported the porch roof. Her hands wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee. "No more empty mind, but at least you kept the strong back."

I propped the shovel next to me and leaned against it. This was grueling work, but I spent hundreds of hours in a gym, and not just for my own good looks. My muscles

might be a little sore by the time I was finished, but I had the promise of Lydia's hands on me later. I was willing to bet she would be very willing to massage my aching shoulders.

She held the coffee out to me. "Need a warm up?"

I stepped up the newly cleared stairs and accepted the offered drink. "The walkway would be a lot easier with a snowblower," I said between sips.

She nodded. "We used to have one, but it died on us a few years ago."

"And you didn't buy a replacement?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes, things break and you can fix them. Sometimes, you can't."

"And sometimes, you replace them," I said firmly. I didn't know why it upset me that she hadn't replaced the snowblower. Or that the lock and keys on the rooms would sometimes giveout for no reason. I wasn't financially investing in this place. I wanted to replace it.

But Lydia seemed to have a connection to it, a love of its history. I wish she didn't. That would make her resistant to my proposal when the time came. But maybe I could convince her that she would be throwing her money away If she tried to keep this place.

"And sometimes, you wish for snowstorms to strand more people in your town so you can afford a new one. But that didn't happen either." She pushed off the post and brushed her hands over her thighs. "What's the saying, if wishes were horses?"

I nodded. "If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride."

She shrugged. “Either way, it still smells like a bunch of horse shit to shovel. Snowblowers are expensive, and my late aunt was a spendthrift. You don’t have to finish if it’s too much of a bother.”

“I’m good. Strong back, remember?” I handed the now empty cup of coffee back to her.

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I had pushed a sore spot. She was no longer smiling. She looked tired, worn out.

I climbed the stairs and propped the shovel against the post Lydia had recently vacated.

“You know what?” I said as I reached out for her. “The stairs are clear. Some good Samaritan with a snowblower will take pity on you and clear the rest of this in a day or two. I can’t feel my toes, and I can think of much better conversations we could be having.”

I lowered my head and captured her lips.

She snaked her arms around my neck and held me close as I slid my lips over hers. Her mouth was warm and sweet and much more interesting than talking about snowblowers.

“I think that sounds like a very good idea,” she said with a pleased purr in her voice.

9

LYDIA

Miles sat on the edge of the bed. He was posed like a piece of fine art, all cut marble muscles and a contemplative pose.

I watched him from my cocoon of blankets. My apartment was warm enough, but in comparison, the air was cool, whereas I was enjoying being toasty and warm. Bright

light around the edges of my pitiful blackout curtains hinted at another day full of springtime sunshine to melt the snow. It meant this lovely blip in time was over. Miles was going to leave me now. He had a life in the city to return to.

He rubbed his face, scratching his short nails into the growth of his beard. He glanced over his shoulder in my direction. I don't think he noticed I was watching him from under the blankets. He reached out and ran his hand over the swell of my hip before standing.

"You awake?" His voice was thick with sleep. It rumbled deeply.

The sound was sexy and twisted my insides. I didn't want to be sad right now. I didn't want to be some killjoy because the fun was over. Miles needed to walk away thinking how wonderful our time together was, not remembering how I turned into a whiny bitch the second the fun ended. I moaned an affirmative noise.

"I need to get going. I should probably check out, right?"

I pushed the blanket off my head. "Check out? What do you mean?"

"Pay for the room. You know, check out of the hotel."

I sat up and gathered the blankets around me. "It's an inn, and I cleaned your room yesterday. I'm not charging you for a room when you've been sleeping in here with me."

"What about the first night of the storm?"

I shook my head. "I'm not charging you for that."

"You're supposed to charge people for staying here. You know that's how it works,

right?”

“Yeah, well no one ever accused me of being a successful inn owner. You more than paid for your stay with the help around here. Guests don’t fix locks or shovel snow,” I pointed out. “Guests complain about my grilled cheese sandwiches and how I should have more menu options available when I don’t have a commercial kitchen or a restaurant on site.” I reminded him of the guest I had who had been stuck with us the day after the storm hit. That guy hadn’t been happy about anything. He sure as hell hadn’t offered to help me out with things around the Sweet Mountain Inn to keep from being bored.

“You’re certain?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I’m going to take a shower. I’ll see you later, okay?” He gathered his clothes from where they were draped over the side chair and stepped out of the room.

Part of me was tempted to follow him. But there was part of me that wanted to beg him to stay and knew I couldn’t. The part that wanted to burrow under the blankets and wish the real world would go away won out. Somehow, I fell back asleep.

When I woke up hours later, Miles was gone. I didn’t even have a phone number because he never finished filling out the registry.

With a groan, I sat up. The past few days, being snowed in like we were the only two people in the world had been magical, but reality was calling. Fine, let it call. That’s what voicemail is for. I didn’t feel like doing anything. I had no guests at the inn. All the rooms were clean and ready for occupancy—or closed up, waiting for warmer weather—because I’d spent the morning cleaning while Miles had shoveled snow.

There was no reason I couldn't continue to sleep in. Decision made, I pulled the covers back over my head. I wasn't going to participate in the rest of the day. I hunkered down into my burrow and waited for Morpheus to return me to dreamland.

And then my phone rang. "No! Shut up!"

I tried to ignore it until a tickle in the back of my brain made me think it was Miles. I scrambled to find it on the bedside table.

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I looked at the caller ID. Evie.

“I’m asleep,” I said as I answered it.

“Bullshit, you’re talking to me. Where are you? The door’s locked.”

“The door is locked because I’m in bed with plans on staying here all day,” I said.

“Lydia, get your ass out of bed and let me in.”

“Fine.” I tossed back the covers and rolled out of bed. “Why are you up so early?” I asked.

“It’s hardly early. It’s lunchtime. You’re usually the one up and functional by now.”

“I know, but I don’t have any guests, and everything is clean. I’m indulging.” I opened the front door and turned around, continuing the conversation on the phone as I shuffled to the coffee maker and started a fresh pot.

Evie reached up and pulled the phone from my ear.

“Indulging? Self-pity?”

I shook my head. “Just tired of it all.” I thought about telling her about Miles, but then I decided to keep him to myself.

“You haven’t been on your own for the past three days, have you?”

“No. I was up late expecting people the Quality Suites over on the freeway wanted to send over, but the road got closed. Of course, I didn’t find that out until I had slept on the couch in the lobby. I had a guest leave early yesterday. And I managed to get everything done that needed doing.”

I poured a cup and offered one to Evie.

“Thanks. Part of me is sorry you aren’t packed with guests, but part of me isn’t. We have work to do,” she said eagerly.

I shook my head. “I’m not shoveling anything. The snow can melt.”

“Not that, silly. We have got to set up a historical register and get our properties authenticated.”

I blinked at her a few times. I still wished I were back in bed. Mentally, I think my brain was still there.

“We have to do what?”

“I was doing some research. If we can get the historic buildings like this place and the library officially registered as historical locations, we can keep that developer from buying up the town to build whatever nonsense they want.”

“You mean it would protect Sweet Mountain Inn?”

She nodded. “And from what I could find, it will open you up to lots of grants so you can get some help fixing this place up.”

I let out a long sigh. “I want to do more than fix it up. I want to renovate and restore. Mom was really headed in that direction. Aunt Sylvia barely maintained this old

place.”

“Precisely,” Evie said. “You did volunteer to help out. Remember?” Mary from the Post Office wants to have a planning dinner tonight. So get your butt dressed.”

“Is Mary cooking or are we all bringing our own?” I asked.

Mary was a fantastic cook. There had been times in my youth where I ended up at potlucks with her, and I always loved what she made. After Mom died, she had even brought over a casserole. When Mom died, a lot of people had tried to help out. People loved my mother.

When Ruth died, I had been left on my own, pretty much. Ruth had alienated so many people, including me. But she couldn’t get rid of me, not when I knew I would finally have ownership of the inn.

“Potluck in the community room. Mary is bringing spaghetti. You need to bring a side dish or a salad.”

“What are you bringing?” I asked.

“Side dish or a salad. I don’t know about you, but I have to go to the grocery store. I swear, I ate everything in the house while I was snowed in,” she said. “And I had at least a week’s worth of food.”

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Evie certainly didn't look like she had eaten a week's worth of food in only a few days.

I needed to go shopping too. I had plenty of prepackaged pastries. I bought them in bulk. But I did not have anything to make a decent side dish for a spaghetti dinner.

"Does garlic bread count?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Go get dressed, and we can figure stuff out when we get to the grocery store."

"Fine," I said with a sigh. "Go scrounge up something for breakfast, will you? This is going to take a minute. I need a shower."

Evie headed off toward the kitchen while I went in the opposite direction and took a quick shower and got dressed. I was bundled up in a thick sweater and flannel lined slacks when I found her again. She was still in the kitchen, sitting in front of a plate full of cheesy scrambled eggs.

"You're dressed like you think it's cold outside or something," Evie said.

"Oh, ha-ha, you're funny," I responded. "It's been freezing for days."

"I know, but it's positively balmy out there right now. Didn't you notice what I was wearing?" She looked down at her outfit. Evie was in her standard non-work clothes of jeans and a T-shirt. The hoodie she had been wearing was draped over the back of her chair.

“So this is too much?” I asked, gesturing at my own clothes.

“You’ll be dying of heat exhaustion. It’s in the fifties out there, and getting warmer. Eat something, and then go change.”

10

MILES

Two months later...

The pretty librarian sat across from me, her mouth pinched into one of those sneering smiles. The expression said, ‘I don’t like you but I’m going to be pleasant about it so if you’re rude, you look like the bad guy.’

And in her eyes, I was definitely the bad guy. She sat next to the mayor. He had no recollection of having met me before. His smile wasn’t forced or fake. But he didn’t like me, either. It was too bad. They had both been so nice the first time I had met them when they had no idea who I was.

“I believe there is one more we are waiting for?” I asked.

“My co-chair isn’t joining us today,” she said.

“I’d like to present to them. Maybe I could arrange to meet with them at a convenient time?” I suggested.

The librarian shook her head. “That won’t be happening,” she said with that fake, sweet smile on her face.

“Shall we begin, then?” I suggested.

Jackson pressed the keys on his laptop and spun the device around so that our presentation was displayed to the mayor and the librarian.

“I’d rather not,” she said.

“Evie, we agreed to hear them out,” Mayor Breaker said.

“Why? He wants to buy up the town for profit.”

“I want to revitalize Brookdale,” I countered. “I want to show you how bringing in an upscale hospitality property can breathe new life into this town.”

“By getting rid of our historical heritage,” she snapped.

“No offense, Miss,” Jackson began, “but your historical buildings are falling down. The ones that are standing are doing so out of spite and determination. It would take a Herculean effort to restore several of the properties in question. This town doesn’t have that kind of money in reserve.”

“What makes you so certain about that?” she snapped.

“Because if you did, Brookdale would have already begun the restoration processes that are so obviously in need,” I answered.

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“So you’ll just level them instead? Where is the integrity in that?”

“Evie, let’s hear them out.”

“Thank you, Mayor. What we are proposing is to bring in a resort-level property. It will provide jobs and bring tourist dollars back into Brookdale.” As I continued to present the images and maps on Jackson’s laptop, the librarian, Evie, seethed. I swear, she even growled under her breath like a threatened animal.

She managed to keep her calm for about fifteen minutes before she was ready to lunge at us again.

“Do you see that map, Dan?” She pointed at the computer. “That’s where the library is, the post office, and all those houses on the east side.”

She didn’t mention the inn, but it was in the middle of the highlighted area.

“We aren’t touching any of the thriving businesses downtown,” Jackson pointed out.

“Maybe not businesses, but those are people’s homes. The library is my home.”

“With the revenue from the sales of these properties, Brookdale would be able to put in state of the art facilities for the public library and the post office,” I pointed out.

“The library is state of the art enough,” Evie snapped. “It’s a library. It doesn’t need all the bells and whistles.”

“And the post office? Wouldn’t it be nice to ear-mark funds for additional equipment, or more employees, instead of replacing the roof or the floor?” I asked. “What’s the next major repair? Does the town have twenty thousand in reserve when the HVAC system needs to be replaced?”

”How did you know we had to do that recently?” the mayor asked.

Had these people never heard of doing research?

The rest of the meeting went much the same. Jackson or I would present a feasible plan with recommendations. We even focused on the job creation aspect of this project, both in the construction phase and after it opened. Our proposal was all about potential and growth opportunities. But Evie was like a viper, ready to strike at any flaw, any hint of contention.

The mayor simply nodded and listened. I figured I could get him to see reason. He was a thinker, while the librarian was reactionary. It was always going to be an uphill battle with her.

“I told you, these women around here are like pit vipers,” Jackson said as we left the meeting.

That Evie woman had not gone easy on us.

“At least her co-chair hadn’t shown up. I can’t imagine we would have been able to get a word out with two of them constantly on the attack,” he said.

“Yeah.” I agreed. “Next time, let’s see if we can get Mayor Dan alone. He seems easily swayed. Maybe if he doesn’t have his little bodyguard with him, we could get through.”

“She is like one of those little yappy dogs,” Jackson joked.

“Well, I’m sure in her case, her bite is as bad as her bark. She’s a librarian. She’ll be looking up all the laws and legal precedence to keep this from going forward. We have to win her over.”

“You aren’t going to send Harris up here to seduce her too, are you?”

I laughed. “No, he’s got a grandma to work on,” I joked. “I wouldn’t wish seducing her on anyone.”

“Sure.” Jackson nodded. “We get a cute one with some spunk, and you back down.”

I already had someone I was interested in seducing again, but that wasn’t any of Jackson’s business.

I looked around at the town. The last time I had been there, it had been cold and covered in snow. It was pleasant out. The weather was warm without being overbearing and hot. We hadn’t yet turned the corner on summer. It would be unbearably hot in the next few weeks, and then the heat would turn to fall. Brookdale would be charming in all the oranges and reds of an Upstate autumn, so much tourism potential.

Jackson looked at his watch. “If we leave now, we can be back in the city in time for dinner.”

“You go ahead, head on out. I want to stick around a bit, give this place a good look while the weather is good.”

“Oh, that’s right, you got stuck here during that freak snowstorm. Weren’t you trapped inside that old hotel?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say trapped, but yeah, I was there.”

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Jackson shuddered. “Looks like a fire trap. Glad it was you and not me. How will you get back if I take the car?”

“There’s a shuttle to the airport. I think if I can work the tourist attraction angle, maybe that will let them hear what we’re saying. So I want to get a visitor’s perspective.”

“I thought you hated small towns,” Jackson said.

“I hate the one I came from. This one has potential. Maybe I can get a better feel for the local atmosphere. I’ll be able to devise a plan to get the mayor on our side. Or even win over the librarian without compromising my personal morals.”

“So you don’t want to seduce her like some kind of super spy?” Jackson chuckled.

“Not my type,” I admitted. She was cute enough, but I preferred more curves on my women. I preferred someone like Lydia, and it had been entirely too long since I had seen her.

“Seriously, you expect me to leave you here?”

I nodded. I didn’t want him around when I went back to the inn. “Let’s have lunch at the diner. How bad can it really be? Then you can take off. I’ll follow in a day or two. I packed extra clothes.”

“You’ve been planning this the whole time?” he asked.

“I don’t tell you everything, Jackson. Come on, lunch. I’m buying.”

“Of course, you are.”

There was something nostalgic about the diner. Every town must have a place like it. The food was greasy but good. They had a selection of pies for dessert, and the coffee was, well... it was bad. But the coffee in places like that was always bad. Part of the atmosphere.

I certainly wasn’t going to call it charm, because charming it was not. It was dirty, the waitress had an attitude, and the only reason no one got sick was the grill was run hot and overcooked any germs that might linger.

Jackson was rubbing his chest and complaining about heartburn when he got up to leave. “You aren’t going to fire me for abandoning you?”

“Go before I fire you for not leaving me alone!” I said. I might have been only half joking, but he took it as humor and left.

I asked for another refill on my coffee and ordered a slice of cherry pie. The crust tasted like it was made with real lard. I may have hated the town I was from, but damn, did I miss a good cherry pie.

My eyes were closed and I was enjoying my pie of dessert when I heard a tapping on the plate glass window next to me.

I opened my eyes to see Lydia staring at me. “What the hell, Miles?”

A grin took over my face and I waved her in.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

At the same time, I said, “I was going to head over to the inn as soon as I finished.”

We laughed and gave each other awkward hugs. I would have preferred a passionate welcoming kiss, but maybe that would have been too much in the middle of the diner.

“Sit. Can I buy you anything? The pie here is excellent. No one ever told me how good it was.”

She laughed more. The gentle sound wrapped around my gut and went straight to my cock.

“Damn, I’ve missed you,” I admitted.

11

LYDIA

“What are you doing here?” I couldn’t believe my eyes. It had been two very long months since the last time I had seen Miles, and that view of him walking away toward the shower was seared into my memory, his rock-hard backside, the way the muscles danced up his back as he moved. Sigh.

I slid into the booth opposite him as he motioned for the waitress to come over.

“I haven’t had pie this good since I was a kid,” he said. “Do you want a piece?”

“Sure,” I responded.

“Why are you back in Brookdale?”

“I didn’t really get a chance to take a look at the town. Last time I was here, if you recall, the weather didn’t exactly give me many options.”

I bit my lip and blushed. No, the weather had not left him with many options. He may have been stuck, but he did choose to stay an extra day after the snow had melted.

“What are you doing out and about? Shouldn’t you be at your in, checking in guests? I would think this lovely weather would bring people visiting and they would need a place to stay,” he said.

I nodded slowly, pausing to thank the waitress as she slid a slice of cherry pie and a cup of coffee in front of me.

“I spent the morning training a new part-time person,” I said.

“But I thought you did everything at your little inn,” he said as he slid another bite of pie into his mouth.

I watched the way his lips moved as he ate. His eyes closed and he really enjoyed that pie.

I took a bite of mine. The crust was flaky, but I didn’t get the same culinary pleasure from it that he obviously did. The pie here didn’t suck, but I'd had better.

“I pretty much do everything at the inn, but I can’t work all the time. I need to be able to take a break or I would go insane.”

“So, this new person you have, are they any good?” he asked.

I shrugged. “It’s not exactly rocket science and I just need them to hold down the fort. Get people registered while I spend some time with my focus elsewhere.”

“And where is your focus today?” Miles asked.

I blushed and lowered my eyes. “Honestly,” I started, “My focus was at the inn. I had to miss another important appointment because I didn’t have backup properly trained. That’s what actually instigated my hiring somebody. I had to mess up before I realized I couldn’t be in two places at once.”

“That’s why you are out walking around?” he asked.

“Exactly. I could, and I probably should, do some shopping. But this is a rare moment where I don’t have any expectations and I don’t have to be anywhere.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I ran into you, then,” he teased.

“And why is that?” I asked.

“Because I find myself in Brookdale, not knowing what to do next.”

“I thought you just said you were here to check out the town.”

“I am, but where do I start? Downtown is barely two blocks long. I’ve seen the library. What else should I explore?”

I chewed my lip and thought about it for a while. “When I was younger, we used to go party up at the cemetery,” I admitted. “But that’s pretty much limited to high school students. However, the cemetery is a great place to start. There is a great hiking trail that leads up to a small waterfall if you’re into that kind of thing,” I mentioned.

“I did bring proper walking shoes this time.” Miles laughed. “A hike sounds like it would be good. You don’t happen to know if there is room at that local inn of yours for me to check into?”

I wanted to laugh. He was so on the edge of being proper, it was ridiculous.

“Somehow, I don’t think the innkeeper would let you have a room, not when she would be very happy to let you stay with her.” I felt the blush heat my cheeks before I finished. “That is if you’re still interested.”

I hid my embarrassment behind a very large bite of pie.

Miles set down his fork and looked directly into my eyes. “I was hoping you would say something like that. I was also hoping you might be interested in giving me another one of those historical tours of your inn.”

“Oh.” I laughed. “Is that what you’re calling it?”

“I didn’t exactly want to be presumptuous, but yeah, I’ve missed you, Lydia. You look better than this cherry pie.”

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This time, I was really blushing because it was very clear how much he was enjoying that slice of dessert.

“You know,” he started, “We could always hike out to the waterfall later if you were so inclined.”

I shook my head. “I have a new employee who would tell everyone they knew that their boss hired them to watch the front desk so she could take guests into the back. There is no way in hell I’m going to let that happen.”

“But you’re okay with my being there tonight?” he asked.

“I am okay with your being there tonight. I’m okay pretending to check you into a room if that’s what I have to do, but I’m not okay with parading you past the front desk in the middle of the afternoon. This is a very small town. Let me try to keep some secrets.”

“I’m a secret, am I?” he asked.

I felt my insides twist up in a moment of panic. I hadn’t met to insult him, but I also wasn’t so free with my affections that I didn’t care if other people knew what I got up to in my own time.

“Does that bother you?” I asked.

“Does it bother me that I’m your secret?” A smirk crossed his lips and he narrowed his eyes at me in a sexy smolder. “Not really,” he answered with a slight shake of his

head. "Can I ask? How many secrets do you have out there?"

I sat back, placing my hand across my collarbone in feigned shock. "I have no secrets. I'm an open book."

I cleared my throat, continuing the farce of my delicate constitution that Miles has so roughly besmirched. "How could you ask that of me?"

Miles continued to narrow his eyes at me. I could tell he wanted to laugh. I was being overly dramatic on purpose.

"But seriously," I started. "I don't have those kinds of secrets other than you," I admitted. "I'm not going to ask you how many secrets you might have back in the city."

Miles sat back and took a long drink of coffee. He set the cup down with a satisfied exhalation of air. "I don't keep secrets. If I am seeing a woman, I don't try to hide her away. If I had you in the city, I would take you out and show you off."

"Well, enough people have seen us sitting in the front window of this place. I'm sure that's more than enough eyes and loose tongues to start the rumor mill around here," I said.

"So what you're saying is we're some kind of open secret?"

"What I'm saying is the next time you leave town, I will be answering a lot of questions."

"Like what?" he asked.

I had to think about it for a minute. What would I say if Evie came charging over

demanding to know who that man was that I was eating with in the diner? I didn't really know much about Miles other than he was from New York City and he kept coming up to Brookdale for some reason, and that there was something that I couldn't identify between us. Something stronger than attraction, or maybe it really was as simple as that? I found him incredibly sexy and by some stroke of luck, he seemed to think the same of me.

"I would probably say that you're a handsome stranger who got stuck during the snowstorm and rerouted from the hotel by the freeway, and that you were particularly clever with your hands."

Miles chuckled as he pressed both palms against the Formica table. "Let's get out of here." He stood and reached into his back pocket, pulling out his wallet as he crossed the floor to the old-fashioned bronze cash register sitting at the end of a long dining counter.

I waited for him just on the inside of the double doors.

"What would you like to do first?" I asked.

"If you're willing to indulge me, I would really like a local perspective of town."

"You really do want me to play tourist guide and drive you around?"

Miles shrugged. "Seems like a reasonable place to start unless you really want to show me this spot in the local cemetery where the kids all drink beer and smoke pot."

"Who said anything about drinking beer and smoking drugs at the local cemetery?"

I chuckled. "I grew up in a small town, and you said it was where the teenagers liked to party. I seem to recall that was the very definition of partying when I was in high

school.”

“I think we’re both a little too old for that to be appealing anymore. At least I am,” I said. “I would be happy to show you around Brookdale. There’s not a lot here, but what we’ve got is so charming and lovely.”

He held his elbow out to me. “It sounds like you really love it here.”

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I slipped my hand under his arm. “I do.”

12

MILES

Having someone who loved where they lived show off their town was a completely unique perspective. The fact that Lydia even jokingly told me about where she partied in her youth without any embarrassment was refreshing. She loved this little place. She wasn't interested in cashing out and escaping.

I knew how to work with and motivate someone willing to and wanting a change. What did I do with someone who loved what they had?

If it had been me giving a tour of where I grew up, it would have been a very short afternoon as I drove from the factory where I would have been expected to sell my soul for the rest of my natural life, to the bar where my folks and older brother regularly blew their paychecks getting drunk before coming home to smack me around, to the trestle bridge where me and my friends drank too much and smoked pot. And that would've been it.

I didn't have happy memories of the elementary school where I met my best friend who ended up turning on me in the eighth grade. I certainly didn't have funny stories to tell about being in high school, considering how often I had been suspended for fighting. Maybe I would have shown Lydia the football field where I spent one season on the team dreaming NFL dreams and thoughts of making it big in professional football. But I would've messed that up by showing her that secret space

under the bleachers where I lost my virginity and was given the virginity of half the girls on the cheerleading squad.

But this was Brookdale, not that crap hole of town that I had escaped from. And this was Lydia's tour of a place she deeply loved.

She drove us into the country, and the road began to wind up into the mountains before I bothered to ask any questions.

"So, where are you taking me?"

"You'll see."

"You aren't planning on losing me in the woods, are you?" I teased.

"No one is getting lost," she said with a little smirk playing across her lips.

After another ten minutes of winding road, she pulled over onto a gravel shoulder where the road got wider.

"Come on," she said as she got out of the car.

I climbed out and followed her across the road as she made her way into the tree line.

"There aren't any bears out here, are there?" I asked.

"We get bears occasionally. When I was younger, there was even a report that somebody in town saw a moose. We're not very high up in the mountains, so we should be fine."

"Are you seriously taking me out into the woods with wild animals?"

Lydia stopped and put her hands on her hips as she turned around to glare at me. “Are you calling me a wild animal?”

I could not help myself. I stepped in close, wrapping my arms around her for the first time in months. I spoke quietly, placing my lips right next to her ear. “I remember exactly how you screamed when I made you come. You were very much a wild animal, and I cannot wait to see you unleashed in all your passionate glory again.”

She stiffened in my grasp, and I heard the gulp in her throat.

“Miles, Miles,” she sighed as I placed a trail of soft kisses under her ear and down her neck.

“This is exactly what I’ve missed about you.”

“Miles.” She chastised me with my name and pressed her palms against my chest before pushing me away.

“It’s not as if anyone else is out here to discover our secret,” I said.

She grabbed my hand and started walking again. “I don’t want some bear to catch us,” she teased.

The trees cleared and we stepped out onto a rocky ledge. I was speechless as I took in the view. Below us, spread out like a detailed map, was the perfect overview of the town. From here, I could see the Sweet Mountain Inn, the library, and even the gazebo at the end of Main Street. The houses and buildings all looked like miniature children’s toys.

I glanced back at Lydia. She looked out over the town. I stepped in close, and she turned her head to face me before I lowered to claim her lips. She tasted like cherry

pie and dreams.

“I would make love to you right here if I didn’t think you would evaporate from pure embarrassment at being outside in the nude.”

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Her cheeks burned bright red with another blush.

“I think you might be right and I might just die right now,” she said.

I sat on one of the outcroppings of rock as we both looked at the view. “How many people come up here?” I asked. I didn’t see any garbage or abandoned beer cans or cigarette butts. Clearly, this was not a space where kids liked to party.

“I’m pretty sure everybody knows about this place. It’s pretty special, and fortunately, people treat it that way. It’s pretty popular for things like engagements or other private moments.”

I nodded in understanding. This would be one of those near sacred places that small towns were rumored to have. This was where romance and longing came together to make happy memories.

“Didn’t you have a place like this where you grew up?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Definitely not. It wasn’t that kind of small town. And if it was, I wasn’t that kind of kid who would have paid attention. Brookdale is very much not like the kind of place I came from.”

“You really don’t miss anything about where you grew up?”

“God, no. If I had to say I missed anything about it, it would probably be the food. When I was a kid, all I wanted was to eat fast food and we didn’t even have a local McDonald’s. And now I can have all the junk food I want, and I pay someone far too

much money so that I have a home-cooked meal.”

“You miss home cooking, meatloaf, and mashed potatoes?” she teased.

“I don’t think anyone ever misses meatloaf. However, there are times I don’t want to have to look at a menu to decide what I’ll be eating that night. Sitting down and having that decision made for me is probably the part I miss the most.”

“You miss having a mom,” Lydia said.

“I shook my head. “I don’t think my mom was that person, but maybe you’re right. Maybe I miss someone taking care of me.”

Lydia came and stood in front of where I sat. “You know, if you came home with me, I would take care of you.”

I looked up into her eyes. Her eyes were full of tenderness and something else. Maybe it was caring or hope. Or maybe I was simply projecting what I wanted from her onto what was really there. I stood and pulled her back into my embrace once more.

“I thought you were trying to keep me a secret from your new front desk employee,” I said.

“She’s going to be off duty soon. I don’t think we have to worry about that for too much longer this evening.”

“And then what?” I asked.

“Are you going to make me spell it out and beg?” Lydia asked.

“Begging is always nice,” I teased.

“Come home with me, Miles. Let me make you a home-cooked meal, and stay with me tonight.”

I lowered my head and claimed her lips in a kiss. That kiss was everything I could have wished for. Lydia was the embodiment of the small town past I never had and a future that I had never even thought about.

We were quiet on the drive back into town, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a connection happening between us. I did not stop touching her. If she didn’t hold my hand while she navigated the car, I had my hand resting on her leg. There was no denying the burning spark of attraction and desire between us.

If she could have safely driven faster, I’m sure she would have. Once we were back in town, I followed her into the lobby of the inn, but instead of going to the counter to check in like a guest, I took a seat in the lobby and focused on my phone.

Lydia and the older woman talked about how the afternoon went. They discussed any questions she may have had regarding the computer system. It was all very efficient and on topic for the job. I was never once bothered, and my presence wasn’t questioned. I continued to pretend to ignore them until the other woman said goodbye and left, and then Lydia was standing in front of me

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Everything is fine,” she said. “I have a phone-in reservation to expect later this evening, but other than that... she didn’t quit on the spot, so I would say it was a success.”

“What’s next?” I asked.

“Next, I go clean up and start making your dinner.”

“And after that?” I reached out and took her hand in mine. I rubbed my thumb over the backs of her knuckles. I wanted her to say that after that, she would welcome me back in her bed.

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“We wait until the reservation checks in before we get to have dessert,” she said.

“And what would that be?”

“Hmm,” Lydia said. “I was thinking I would like you for dessert.”

13

LYDIA

There was something very domestic about Miles helping in the kitchen. He rolled his shirt sleeves up, exposing powerful forearms. I don’t know what it was about a man in a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, but it was so damned attractive. And there he was in the kitchen, looking completely out of place and somehow, completely perfect. The bell from the front desk sounded.

“Oh, crap,” I said. My hands were covered in orange juice and cilantro with flecks of finely chopped onion.

Miles picked up a dish towel and turned on the sink. “I can’t check someone in for you. I don’t know how your system works, but I can finish dinner.”

He guided me to the sink and washed my hands for me like I was some little kid. His long arms wrapped around me, and he rubbed soap in his palms until he had a frothy lather. He washed, rinsed, and then patted my hands dry on the towel.

I kissed him on the cheek before scurrying out to the front. A couple with suitcases

stood with impatient looks on their faces as they waited for me. I pressed my hands down against the apron I still wore as I walked around the desk. “Sorry about that,” I said. “I was just putting my dinner together. You must be...” I checked the notes on the computer. “The Fondas?” I asked.

The woman looked around as the man grunted an affirmative sound.

“Are you the chef too?” she asked.

“Oh, no. We don’t have a restaurant here. I was literally making my dinner,” I said. There were hazards to living at the inn. Mealtime was one of them.

“No? Where can we eat around here?” she asked.

I directed them to the diner a few blocks away.

“We saw that as we drove in. Is there anything else?” she asked.

“Not unless you want pizza delivery. We don’t have many restaurants in town. You would have to go back out to the freeway,” I said.

She continued to make other unhappy noises about the food situation, but I really couldn’t be bothered. It wasn’t my fault. No one seemed to understand that I didn’t have a restaurant onsite. There was literally no mention of dining facilities in any of the promotional materials put out by the inn. Maybe when I got this place fixed up, I would consider expanding and adding a restaurant. And that was a big maybe. I had no experience running a restaurant.

I handed them their key and watched as they headed upstairs before going back to the kitchen. Miles was closing the oven door and setting the timer as I watched from the door.

“How long have you been standing there?” he asked.

“I was admiring the view,” I said. And I was admiring everything about him.

“Well, everything should be ready in about forty-five minutes. What should we do to pass the time?” He sauntered over to me and slid his hands over my ribs and down my hips before grabbing my butt and holding me tight against his chest.

I danced my fingers over the buttons just below his throat. “Forty-five minutes doesn’t seem like enough time to get anything done properly,” I teased. “It is more than enough time to get the job done.”

“You’re right, why be in a hurry when I want to take my time with you?” His voice was a low, sexy grumble.

“We could do something boring,” I suggested.

“Or you could pour us a glass of wine and tell me what your plans are for this place,” Miles suggested.

“Like I said, something boring.”

He laughed and released me. “Fine, I’ll go look for the wine. You have to have some around here someplace.”

“Of course I do. It’s in the pantry, second shelf,” I said as I pointed to the small walk-in pantry beyond the refrigerator.

Forty-five minutes in Miles’s company did not feel like much time at all. Before I knew it, the timer for dinner was going off. We sat, laughed, ate, and shared stories about living in a small town compared to what it was like in the city. I had only ever

been there for school trips or weekends away and never really knew what it would be like to actually live there.

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“Thank you for dinner,” Miles said, standing and reaching for the empty plates.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said as he began filling the sink with water.

“You cooked. I clean,” he announced.

I picked up the rest of the glasses and flatware from the table and carried them to where he stood rinsing dishes. “You helped make dinner too,” I said.

I pulled out glass storage containers and put what was left of the citrus chicken and rice away. I scraped dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher.

For someone who claimed to have professional cooks and cleaning help, Miles certainly knew his way around cleaning a kitchen. It must have been his growing up in a normal family situation and not as a super rich kid.

“Aren’t you going to rinse that first?” he asked.

“Why should I? That’s what the dishwasher is for.”

“But it won’t get everything clean.”

“Maybe not the first time, but you can always run the dishwasher again,” I said.

He laughed. “My mother always made me wash everything by hand before putting it into the dishwasher.”

“That’s a complete waste of time,” I said. “The dishwasher can do that twice as fast with less water.”

Miles closed the dishwasher and pressed start once everything was rinsed and loaded. I untied the apron that was still around my waist and dropped it onto the kitchen table.

“And now,” I announced, “we have time for other things.”

“Like what?” Miles asked as he started to stalk toward me.

I turned and started to walk away, swishing my hips back and forth to the best of my ability. “How about some dessert?” I asked.

I squealed in delight as Miles lifted me off my feet and carried me toward my apartment on the other side of the first floor.

“It’s a good thing I remember where I’m going,” he said. He didn’t even sound like he was struggling to carry me. And I wasn’t a light load.

He remembered exactly where everything was, and I meant that in terms of the apartment within the inn and my body. I had missed him. His touch stole my ability to process thoughts.

All I knew was that I wanted him. I needed him.

His lips against mine were heaven. I didn’t kiss him. I consumed his lips and tongue, sucking him into me as I pressed against him.

We tumbled together onto my unmade bed. Immediately, we were twisted up in sheets and blankets as we struggled to get out of our clothes. He seemed as eager and

needy as I was. I sighed with a sense of belonging and satisfaction as I was finally able to smooth my palms over the firm planes of his chest and over his shoulders. He was so firm and strong, and the dark hairs of his chest tickled my fingertips.

I gasped as he moved his hands over my skin and cupped my breasts.

A low moan escaped his throat. It sounded as if he was overcome with sensation as I was. Neither of us spoke. We made needy sounds of want and desire, moans and whimpers, and gasps.

I threaded my fingers into his hair. It was longer than the last time he had been in my bed. His lips trailed a burning trail of lust down my neck and across the tops of my breasts.

“Oh, yes,” I moaned. I lifted my breast, bringing my sensitive nipple closer to his mouth.

He laughed as he sucked me into his mouth. The sensation pulled on every part of my body. The throbbing between my legs pulsed hard. I needed his touch there. I needed his touch everywhere.

I somehow managed to reach between us and cup his cock and balls. They were hot and heavy against my palm. I stroked him and was delighted when he moaned and thrust his hips, increasing the stroke.

I loved touching him, loved being touched by him. We were frenzied with urgency. I wanted to slow down, to make these sensations last. But a strong tug against my nipple and a brush of his cock against my thigh drove me crazy. I may have wanted to go slow, but I couldn't. I was desperate.

“Miles,” I gasped. “I need you.”

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Abandoning my breasts, he brushed my hand aside and pressed my thighs apart. His expression was feral, dangerous. And it made me needy, so desperately needy.

I cried tears when he slid the tip around my pussy, bumping against my clit, teasing my folds. I stopped breathing when he slid into me.

He stretched and filled me to the point I thought my heart would stop. He rocked his hips, sliding back and forth. The friction wasn't enough. I needed so much of him.

“More!” I demanded.

And he delivered. He pressed me back and captured my wrists in one hand, holding them above my head. I was his to do with as he wanted. He had me effectively pinned in place, physically and mentally. His touch rendered me incapable of anything other than this one thing. He drove me toward that edge, and I reveled in his actions as he pounded me toward an orgasm.

I screamed and seized when it hit. Wave after wave of undulating muscle spasms took over my body as my inner walls grasped at his cock deep inside me.

He was relentless as he pursued his own release. He roared and pressed against me as he spilled into me, hot and wet. He finally released my wrists, and I was able to wrap my arms around him as he collapsed against me.

We rolled to our sides, wrapped tightly together. His lips found mine, and he began kissing me with tenderness. I was already limp and weak, and his lips against mine melted me completely.

I slept satiated and safe wrapped in his embrace.

14

MILES

I rolled over with Lydia as a blanket. She was warm, and I didn't mind that she was pinning me in place. In fact, I quite liked that she was comfortable enough to claim me in her sleep this way.

Her alarm was going to go off sooner or later. Waking her up, it just didn't seem fair when she never got to sleep in.

I traced my fingers back and forth over her soft skin. She practically purred in her sleep.

I gently tickled down the side of her ribs. Instead of waking up, she mumbled something in her sleep and rolled away from me.

I took the opportunity to climb out of bed and turn off her alarm clock. I got dressed and headed out to the kitchen on the opposite side of the first floor. As I crossed through the lobby, I started a fresh cup of coffee. It would be done brewing by the time I returned from the kitchen. I knew exactly where she stored the pastry products that she set out for the inn's meager breakfast offering.

I grabbed an assortment of Danishes and small powdered donuts before returning to the lobby and putting them in the basket she used for this. I wrote a quick note and set it on the counter, letting people know that the innkeeper would be up by 8:30 and to please help themselves to the coffee and pastries.

I didn't think anybody was scheduled to check out. Lydia hadn't mentioned anything.

Hopefully, she wouldn't mind that I was getting into her business this way. She needed the rest. If I knew how to run the hotel software, I may have even set myself up to do that for her.

She was still asleep when I returned to her bedroom. I kicked off my shoes and crawled back in bed, wrapping my arms around her warm, soft body

She moaned softly, "Why are you all dressed? Is it time for you to leave?"

She placed her hand on the center of my chest and then sat up with a start. "Oh, crap. I've got to put breakfast out." She glanced at her clock. "What happened to my alarm?"

I bundled her into my embrace and nuzzled against her soft hair. "I turned your alarm off," I admitted. "And I also put out pastries. Nobody's checking out early, not that you mentioned, so I left a note saying you'd be out later."

"Are you serious?" she asked.

"I hope that's okay with you."

"That's very okay with me. So, you're not leaving?"

"I was thinking I might hang around for another day, if that's also okay with you. I want to make sure you don't need anything from me."

"That's a loaded question." Lydia chuckled. "Do I need you? I certainly did last night."

"Do you need me to do anything for you?" I rephrased.

She continued to giggle. “Also a loaded question. What would you say if I said I did need you?”

“I would ask how I could be of service?” I smirked. “I know where you keep the screwdrivers and wrenches. Unless your new desk clerk is coming today, I thought I could help you out around here again, like I did last time.”

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“Are you trying to earn your keep or something? You already know I’m not going to charge you for a room when you sleep in here.”

“I’m aware of that, but I also know this place needs constant attention.”

“You’re going to pay attention to the old girl?” Lydia asked.

“I thought it would be a good way to worm my way into the affections of the woman who looks after the place.”

Lydia tossed back the blankets and put her feet on the ground before standing with a large stretch and yawn that put her breasts on the most distracting display.

I completely forgot what I was saying as all the blood from my brain rushed straight to my groin. “You keep that up and I’ll end up only screwing one thing around here,” I said as I ogled her.

With a giggle, she turned and grabbed a pillow off the bed to throw at me.

“You are incorrigible.”

I ended up completing a shortlist of little tasks that she had set aside. Holding up the sheet of paper with her to-do list, I said, “You really need to think about the big picture and not focus on all the little things.”

“That would involve a much more in-depth time and financial investment than I can make at the moment. I know the inn needs someone to come in to do a full

assessment, but at the same time, I need to be able to keep it running. I get that major bathroom remodeling for all the rooms on the north wing is what really needs to happen. I can really only manage to make sure that everything works properly.”

“Why redo one bathroom at a time if ripping out fifteen bathrooms all at once is too daunting?” I asked.

“Honestly, I know it’s more cost-effective to rip out and do fifteen bathrooms at once. I’m stuck juggling the whole how to be cost-effective and how to get the job done since it’s just me right now. My goal is to keep it running long enough to save up enough to take care of the second and third floors of the north wing. But I’m stuck with the limited finances that I do have.”

It was clear she had put a lot of thought into the rock and the hard place she was stuck between.

“It’s easier and cheaper to get a crew of a couple of guys to come in and rip everything out one day, and then production-line assemble the rebuild. It’s more efficient, in both time and money. Unfortunately, it takes money to be cost efficient at that level. So, until that can happen, I keep things running the best I can.” She shrugged. It was a lot to process.

“If this place were a boat, it would constantly be sinking,” I said.

“No lies there,” she said. “But Sweet Mountain is really pretty, and I think she’s worth it.”

I did the best I could in the time between breakfast and just after lunch when Lydia’s new desk clerk came in to give her the rest of the afternoon off. Mrs. Griffin showed up, Lydia reviewed the computer system with her, and then we left. I noticed she hadn’t introduced me, so maybe I was still somewhat of a secret.

“I didn’t think your new employee was coming in today,” I mentioned to Lydia.

“She wasn’t. I called her to see if she was available, and she was,” Lydia confessed.

“I don’t want you to think I expect you to do handyman work every time you come to visit me. Yesterday, you were so eager to take a look at Brookdale. I thought maybe today, we could walk around town a bit?”

“What about our secret affair?” I teased.

“Maybe after spending more time with you, I realized that there are some things that don’t need to be kept hidden in the shadows.”

“Are you saying you want to show me off?”

Lydia blushed. It was very charming and adorable the way she would smile and her cheeks would plump up. She would turn pink and try to look at anything but me.

“I don’t think I have anything to wear that would be appropriate for showing off,” I said.

“And what would you wear to show off?” Lydia asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. A tux?”

“Now you’re just being silly,” she responded.

“Is that a complaint?” I asked.

“Not at all. I think I like you kind of silly. People are too serious and too angry these days. A little levity is very attractive.”

“I will take that as a compliment.”

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I gave Lydia my arm as we scrolled toward the small downtown area. “What do you want to show me this afternoon?”

She pointed to the gazebo. “Isn’t it pretty? Could you picture it surrounded by roses?”

I narrowed my gaze and tried to look at it from her perspective and surrounded with red roses.

“That’s all I can think about,” she confessed. “Brookdale is very picturesque and yet there’s nobody here taking pictures. That gazebo is a replica of an early Edwardian style. Half the buildings in town are from that era, or slightly earlier. I think if we did something as a town, we could become one of those destination wedding places. What do you think?”

“Depends on what the something you are thinking about is.” I had to agree with her. The town was very charming. That was one of the reasons I wanted to build the resort in Brookdale. I thought people would be attracted to not only the natural resources around, but the town itself.

“I don’t know,” she continued. “If we could get a social media influencer to come have a wedding here, or maybe even convince a designer to open a bridal shop or something like that, I think we could really turn this town around.” As she spoke, she walked in a slow circle and stopped so that we were looking at the side of the library.

“Can’t you picture that as a backdrop for wedding pictures?” she asked.

I gazed down at her as she looked out at some vision she saw in her mind.

I could tell she wanted that as a backdrop for her wedding. She would make a beautiful bride in front of that very house, surrounded with roses.

15

LYDIA

I was sad that Miles had returned to the city, but I honestly hadn't thought I was going to be so sad that it would make me sick. I hadn't felt well on and off before he showed up, but after he left, it was almost like I was sick. Almost.

I felt sick to my stomach like I had eaten entirely too much, but the problem was, I was barely eating at all. I was sad, uncomfortable, and depressed. Was I sad because I didn't feel well, or was I not feeling well because I was so sad?

When Miles had been around, I had been too distracted to notice whether my stomach felt woozy or not. He made me feel giddy and like I was floating in the clouds. There was no possible way I would have admitted to feeling slightly off during my time with him.

I didn't want to do anything. When my most recent guests checked out, I just didn't have the energy to go clean and prepare their room for the next guest. Instead, I called Mrs. Griffin to see if she was interested in picking up an extra shift and put the Closed sign on the door. I went to take a nap until she showed up.

When I got up from my nap, I stumbled my way out to the lobby. I had one of those uncomfortable nap hangovers, like I wasn't quite awake yet.

Mrs. Griffin took one look at me and started cooing. "Oh, sweetie, you look about done in."

I felt 'done in'. I pressed my palm to my forehead and then to my cheeks, trying to feel whether I was running a fever or not.

"Are you feeling unwell?" she asked.

"I am so exhausted." I admitted. I did not mention how incredibly sad I was that Miles had left, but she was smart enough to figure it out. After all, he wasn't sitting in the lobby playing on his phone like he had been the past few days.

It had been nice having him around. I wished he would have stayed longer. But it wasn't as if we had some kind of arrangement for whatever this relationship thing was between us. Was what we had even a relationship? Whatever it was, I wished I could have more.

"I'm just not feeling right," I admitted. "Thank you for being able to come in. I'm going to head back to bed, I think."

"Have you eaten anything today?" she asked.

I shook my head. It made me dizzy. I braced against the front desk and closed my eyes tight, hoping the spinning would stop.

"You sit down right here," Mrs. Griffin said as she took my arms and guided me to one of the lobby chairs. "If anyone needs anything, you tell them I will be right back."

She bustled down the hallway toward my apartment, and then she turned around and marched right past me. "I keep forgetting your kitchen is on the opposite side from where you live. Stay put, I'll be right back."

I certainly did not feel like moving. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes later, she returned

from the kitchen carrying a steaming mug.

“I made you some chicken noodle soup. It’s still hot, so blow on it.” She set the mug down on the side table.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to do that,” I said.

“Somebody did, and I thought you were about to fall over. If your tummy is sour, just sip the broth. The noodles are good if you think you can handle a little food. Get that in you, then go back to bed.”

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I had to blink back tears. Right at that moment, she reminded me so much of my mother. Aunt Ruth hadn't had a compassionate bone in her body. I forgot that people could be nurturing.

After I finished the soup, I excused myself back into my little apartment and left Mrs. Griffin to handle the front desk. I knew she could handle it.

My stomach felt somewhat settled. I headed back to my apartment with cautious optimism. It really wasn't much of an apartment—two bedrooms, a common bathroom, and a small common room with a TV. On my dream list of renovations to the inn was a proper apartment, complete with a kitchen. As it was, my kitchen was on the opposite side of the lobby, and I treated the lobby as my private living room, where I could curl up in front of a fire and read. I knew it wasn't typical, but it was home. Now it just seemed like an empty hotel suite. Something was missing.

Someone, not something. Miles was missing. Before I dissolved into a puddle of tears, I crawled back into bed and hugged the pillow that still smelled like him.

I must have fallen back asleep. I never took naps like this before. I really hoped I wasn't getting sick. I couldn't afford to get sick.

In the morning, I woke refreshed and felt perfectly healthy when my alarm went off. I got up to put out the pastries and start a fresh pot of coffee brewing. The smell hit me wrong and then next thing I knew, I was running for the bathroom.

I was going to have to see the doctor if this kept up. I didn't have a stomachache, just all this annoying sickness. It took a while for my stomach to settle, but then I felt

perfectly fine.

The Fondas, the couple who had checked in a few days earlier, were now standing in the lobby with their suitcases, ready to check out when I came back out front. The woman kept opening the pastries, smelling them, and then she would make a very unpleasant sound that I thought might inspire my stomach to revolt again.

She handed pastry after pastry to her husband. “I can’t eat this, you take it.”

He set the pastry down on the counter.

“Is there something wrong with the pastries?” I finally asked. I don’t think I would’ve been bothered if she had sat there and eaten everything in the basket, but she wasn’t eating anything. She was opening them and wasting them. Her husband wasn’t eating them either. I needed to know if they had gone bad or something.

“Everything smells bad to her right now. If she took a bite, she would realize they were perfectly fine,” he said.

“I can’t get past the smell. He’s right, everything smells absolutely disgusting,” she said.

Panic washed over me. Was there something in the inn that I couldn’t smell?

“There’s nothing here,” she said as she looked at me.

I didn’t have a good poker face. I must have had a very obviously concerned look on my face.

“I recently found out that I’m pregnant,” she said. “Everything smells horrible. At least I’m not throwing up every ten minutes.”

“Congratulations.”

She moaned unhappily.

“You can congratulate us after the baby is here. Her first few months of pregnancy are always miserable. She’s uncomfortable, she’s tired, and last time, she was constantly throwing up.”

“So you have kids at home?” I asked.

“This was our anniversary getaway. Our boys are home with my mother. She will be thrilled and think I got knocked up on vacation,” the wife said. “I’m probably a month or so along at this point. After all, there’s really no way of knowing until the body decides to make it known.”

“You haven’t taken a pregnancy test yet?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized it was a completely inappropriate question.

Fortunately, she didn’t seem to be bothered by my nosiness and shook her head.

“Not yet, but I don’t need one. I recognize all the symptoms.”

I finished checking them out and congratulated them again anyway as they left.

I thought about what the woman said about how she’d already been pregnant for a while before her symptoms really kicked in, and then she knew for certain. I couldn’t stop thinking about how she had described her symptoms.

Was there any way of knowing if that was what was going on with me? I wasn’t going to need to go to the doctor if I could go grab one of those cheap drugstore home

tests. I needed to go shopping anyway, so why not add that to my list? If I took the test and it came out negative, I could tell the doctor I definitely wasn't pregnant when I made an appointment because I kept throwing up.

The joke was on me that afternoon. I went shopping and purchased a pregnancy test, and after stressing about taking it for another few hours, I finally did. My expectation was that it would be negative. Except that two little purple lines indicating that I was definitely pregnant showed up.

I sat on my bed and stared at the positive results on the test stick. What the hell was I going to do now? I had no way of contacting Miles. He never did fill out the visitor registry completely the last time he was here. And he didn't register at all this time. How was I supposed to contact him and let him know what was going on?

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I was completely overwhelmed. What would I do now? I had a historical registry of local buildings to help manage. I had to keep the inn in business. I had to face the reality that the man of my dreams wasn't even in a long-distance relationship with me. I was just a convenient local hook-up for him.

I was pretty sure I had messed everything up big time.

Evie was going to be so very disappointed in me. I really didn't know how I was going to tell my best friend.

16

MILES

Trees passed by the window of the car in a steady rhythmic pattern, like pulses, letting the light through. It was almost like Morse code, the way the light flashed off and on. I really wasn't looking out the window of the car. I wasn't looking at anything. I was completely lost in my thoughts. I was tempted to tell the driver to turn the car around and take me back to Brookdale, or take me to the airport and I could catch the first flight to Albany and get a rental to take me the rest of the way north.

I couldn't do that. That was a dream. I couldn't give up everything simply to be with Lydia, but that's certainly what the gaping emptiness in my chest felt needed to happen.

Other than my recent trips to Brookdale, I didn't get out of the city much. I never saw a reason for it. Business associates could come to me. But today, my driver was

taking me out to meet with an investor on Long Island. Normally, I would have insisted that he come to me, but money talks, and this guy had plenty of it, so when he insisted I come out to his office, I agreed. And there I was, getting lost in my thoughts of Lydia instead of focusing on the presentation I was headed into.

I found my thoughts turning to Lydia more frequently than not. She was like some elusive drug I could not get enough of. My fingers longed to caress her skin again. Until that could happen, I would have to find solace in my memories. The problem was I was turning into a bit of a daydreamer, and not a man of action. There were so many things that I didn't understand until after I met Lydia that seemed so clear to me now.

Pulse, shadow, pulse, pulse, long shadow, more pulses, more light. Wouldn't it be ironic if the trees and light were actually sending me a message to go back to Lydia and confess that I wanted to put a resort into the heart of Brookdale? If the trees were sending me a message, I was completely missing it. I really needed to shake myself up and stop thinking this way.

Putting a resort into Brookdale was the right thing to do. I was aware I was misleading Lydia, but in the end, she had to understand.

I guess it didn't really matter. We were both clearly lying to each other. She acted as if my short visits were fine instead of confessing that she missed me and wanted me around. I was lying, pretending that I cared anything about that podunk little town when the only thing I cared about was getting in while the property values were low and the return rates were high.

If we were both lying, then were we both the bad guys? I genuinely enjoyed my time with her, so the lies I was telling were clearly to myself.

The car slowed and pulled into an office park. I was genuinely not expecting the

bland suburban sprawl for this investor's offices. Then again, I wasn't getting a look at where he lived and I knew that tucked away on Long Island areas were some impressive properties.

"I will give you a call when I'm ready to return," I said as I stepped out of the car.

"Yes, sir," the driver said.

I adjusted the front of my suit and stepped inside. "Miles Carlisle to see Donald White," I said to the receptionist.

"Mr. Carlisle, welcome. Mr. White is expecting you. Please follow me." She stood and led me into the back area of the office. We passed by several rows of cubicles before she tapped on an office door before opening it and announcing I had arrived.

I smiled my thanks as she left, and I stepped into the office with my arm extended, eager to shake Mr. White's hand and discuss and present the plans for the Brookdale resort.

"Have a seat." He directed me toward one of the chairs across from his desk.

I cast my gaze around his office quickly, trying to get a feel for who I was dealing with. I was not impressed. The furnishings looked old and cheap, and overall, the office had a school principal field to it. As if everything had been rented and put together, almost like some kind of movie prop. Donald White's office did not speak to me of investment money so much as investment wannabe.

I pasted a smile on my face and had zero intentions of wasting my trip out here. There was always the possibility that he was playing me. I knew many investors who did not like to present their wealth to the world, almost putting up a front as it were to hide the wealth of resources they had at hand. Yet I knew this man to have backed

many projects. He had money.

It wasn't any more or any less deceptive than what I knew I was doing with Lydia. She did not see the man who wanted to buy up her property. She saw what I wanted her to see, a man who found her incredibly sexy and intriguing. The problem was that neither was a lie and both men were me.

Mr. White sat back in his chair and folded his hands together so his fingers made a crisscross pattern as he rested his hands over his middle. "Tell me," he said in a booming voice, "why do you think a small-town resort is a good use of my money?"

"People want to get back to nature. People are nostalgic for picturesque small towns, especially when they never lived in one. Upstate New York is an underexploited resource of both nature and the idealistic small-town way of life. The location my group has identified is tucked away right next to the Adirondack mountains with plenty of access to hiking trails and winter cross-country skiing. And this town..." I paused for a moment. "This town is perfectly picturesque and economically struggling. It would charm anyone who stayed there, but they need more tourist attraction resources." It almost sounded as if I were falling in love with Brookdale, the way Lydia already was.

"So you want to buy it up and replace it with your hotel?"

"The properties we are looking at are in need of rehabilitation and in all honesty, they are money pits. It's more cost-effective to level them and use them for firewood and put in new construction than it would be to try to save them," I said.

"How do you explain this grassroots campaign? They are trying to register half of their buildings with the historic record, thus protecting them against your particular project," he said with a knowing smirk on his face. It was the kind of smirk that assholes got when they knew something other people didn't. In this case, he

definitely knew something I didn't.

"I'm sorry. What are you talking about?" I asked.

He slid a photocopied flyer across his desk to me. I picked it up and scanned over the words. Essentially, the flyer announced everything he said about trying to get properties registered and protected based on their original date of construction. The flyer also mentioned help with grants specifically for rehabilitating older buildings.

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“Interesting,” I said. I leaned forward to put the flier back on his desk. But I stopped as I noticed the names of the co-chairs of the little committee trying to coordinate all of this. I recognized the librarian’s name. I knew she was working on this type of thing, but I was shocked to see Lydia’s name.

The paper crumpled up as I clenched my fist. How dare she? What the hell did that woman think she was doing? She had no idea how much this would interfere with my project, and here I thought I was going to be doing her a favor when I revealed that I was the person going to buy up her inn from her. She had no idea the problems she was causing.

“I take it you hadn’t been aware of their little committee?” Donald White asked.

“Oh, I knew about that committee,” I said. “I’ve even met with them. I didn’t expect that they would have been savvy enough to seek historical registry grants. I was kind of relying on their naïveté regarding their choices.”

“What does this mean for your project?”

“It certainly is a bump in the road, but I don’t foresee that it will do anything more than delay the inevitable. The properties in question are held together by determination and denial. The second they realize how badly they’re riddled with termites and other pests, I’m sure gravity will pitch in and start pulling the buildings down naturally. I was actually in one of them during a snowstorm,” I casually admitted. “And parts of the structure were failing simply from old age. It was so full of gaps and holes in the structure that it howled every time the wind blew.

“If Brookdale had managed to maintain what it has, that would maybe be a different story. But it’s clear they are struggling as an entire town. My proposed resort would bring in jobs and revitalize the local economy in ways they are stubbornly unwilling to accept at this point in time.”

“You plan to go through with your plan on pursuing this?”

I stood up, accepting that Donald White had his doubts and therefore would not be investing.

“Brookdale is an untapped resource. Yes, I plan on pursuing this.”

17

LYDIA

“Thank you, everyone, for joining us this evening,” Mayor Dan started.

The community room at the library was filled with rows of folding chairs facing a line of tables with a panel of speakers. Mayor Dan, Evie, myself, and Mary from the post office sat in front of half the town.

And they were all staring at me. At least it felt like it.

If I didn’t make eye contact and I kept my focus on Dan, I could at least pretend they weren’t looking at me. I could pretend I was another interested party here to listen to what the mayor had to say. More people showed up for the newly formed Historical Society meeting than I would have expected.

I squirmed under all the scrutiny. It was uncomfortable at best, and downright anxiety inducing.

Could everyone tell I was pregnant? As far as I could see, my body hadn't changed at all in the past few weeks. There was no baby bump. The only bumps on my body had been there for awhile. Maybe all this extra squish would help to hide things for a while.

My gut rumbled. I put my hand over my stomach, closed my eyes, and silently prayed that I wouldn't be sick. I must have made some noise because Evie leaned in close.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I think I understand how the animals in the zoo feel," I whispered.

"Or like a fish in a fish bowl?" She giggled.

I nudged her with my elbow. We were supposed to be serious. This meeting was serious. I bit my lip and tried to keep my mirth suppressed. The last thing I needed was more people staring at me.

"We received a rather lengthy communication from the developer who has been trying to buy up the properties. So we have confirmation as to their goals, and we have a better idea what we're up against," Dan said.

"What are we up against?" someone called out.

"What do you mean, developer? The nice young man who spoke to us didn't mention anything like that."

"Yes, he did, Martha. Hush and let the man talk."

The crowd that had gathered was a vocal one. They were there to hear what Dan had to say, but it was clear they wanted to have their say too. The volume in the room

started to grow louder as everyone tried talking over each other.

Dan held up both hands in hopes of settling everyone down. “You’ll have a chance to ask questions later. Everyone settle down.”

The voices continued to get louder.

“People, please,” Dan pleaded.

Evie shook her head at his poorly made attempts at settling everyone down. It was clear he had already lost control. She stood up and clapped her hands in a rhythmic pattern.

Everyone in the room responded with the same clapping pattern. It was a trick the teachers always did that I remembered from grade school. It was the same routine Evie did when storytime got a little rowdy.

“One, two, three...” She paused. “Eyes on me.”

She only had to wait a few more seconds before everyone quieted and were watching her.

Better her than me, at least.

Evie cleared her throat. “Friends, we are here to learn what Mayor Dan has to share. He can’t do that while everyone is talking. You will have your turn. While Mayor Dan is making his presentation, Lydia and I will be setting up two marked places you can come ask your questions from.”

Someone in the audience started to speak.

“No, no, it’s my turn to speak right now. We will have some note cards for you to write your questions on if you are too shy to talk in front of everyone, or if you can’t get up and stand in line. We will take care of you, and your concerns will be heard.

Now if you have a question, please raise your hand.”

Only a few hands went up.

Evie pointed to a person about in the middle. “How are we going to make sure what our property is worth?”

Evie shook her head. “Sorry, I mean, are there any questions about what I just said? Anything regarding property values and the developer’s plans, you need to save until later.”

The crowd was quiet and looked at each other, and then turned their attention back to the front and looked at Dan.

“Thank you, Evie,” Dan started. “As I was saying, I received a rather extensive communication from the JM Carlisle Group. We’ve had a couple of meetings with their representatives a few times, and several of you have spoken with them. They are the reason Brookdale has formed this Historical Society. We all want to preserve the clear identity of our town. We finally have a detailed prospectus regarding the impacted area and properties.” As he spoke, he stood and picked up a large poster board with a map of Brookdale. The area in question was outlined in red.

“They want to level these buildings to put up a fancy resort...”

As Dan continued to talk, Evie leaned in and whispered, “Come on.”

Quietly, I got out of my chair and followed her. We snuck out of the community room and into the library offices. Evie started going through drawers and pulling out supplies.

“Will you grab some pencils over there?” She pointed to another drawer.

By the time we were finished collecting everything, I had an armful of index cards and pencils, and Evie had two signs that had giant question marks drawn on them.

“You set up on one side of the tables, and I’ll be on the other. We can alternate side to side for taking questions. We need to get a runner, you know, someone who can go get the questions from the folks who can’t get into the line,” she said.

“Didn’t I see the Coleson kid with his grandfather in there?”

Evie’s eyes went bright. “He’s perfect, a good kid.”

By the time we returned, it sounded like Dan was getting close to the end of his presentation.

“This time, the developer generously offered to rebuild a new post office with new state of the art equipment. He even mentioned the possibility of some additional fleet vehicles.”

The developer sounded pretty eager. I was surprised I hadn’t heard directly from him since that day the Sweet Mountain Inn officially became mine. My inn was located on the leading edge of the desired property. I would have thought they would be eager to secure my property. I could totally see them using the inn as a leverage to get the other properties to sell.

I took my red sign with its giant question mark and taped it on the floor. I snuck into the crowd and whispered to Ricky Coleson’s grandfather. “Can I borrow Ricky for the rest of the meeting? We could use his help.”

Ricky’s grandfather turned to the teen. “Go, be helpful,” he said as he nudged the kid.

I excused myself out of the row, and Ricky followed me out. We met Evie at the back

of the room, where in whispered words, she told him what she needed him to do.

“If you see anyone who cannot get up, either they look trapped, or they can’t move easily, you get them a pencil and a note card. Tell them to put their question on it. Make sure you can read their writing because if you can’t, I’m not going to be able to.”

As Evie gave Ricky directions, he nodded in understanding.

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“Even though we have not agreed to anything at this point, the JM Carlisle Group has been sharing some really good ideas with us. They have suggested that we try to attract the kinds of businesses that would support the wedding industry.”

I turned my attention back to Dan. Turning Brookdale into a wedding destination was my idea. A pit started to form in my stomach. I had a very bad feeling about this.

The only person I had told about my wedding destination idea was Miles. And Miles...

Oh, crap, did Miles work for JM Carlisle? I never knew why Miles was in town. He never mentioned visiting family, or hiking, or anything. He was always just visiting. And I drove him around like his own private little tour guide.

Was he the reason I hadn't been approached again? Was he supposed to be the person trying to convince me to sell the Sweet Mountain Inn? I felt sick to my stomach. I ran from the room and dashed into the restroom.

I wasn't sick, but I couldn't breathe. I gasped for air as I tried to get my mind to settle. Thoughts raced through almost as fast as my heart pounded. Had Miles been seducing me so he could convince me to sell the inn? If that was his goal, why had he offered to help me fix things up? I didn't understand. If Miles wasn't some kind of spy for JM Carlisle, then how did they come up with the suggestion of turning Brookdale into a wedding location?

The coincidences were too closely aligned. I had been a complete target, and I had danced right into their trap. I needed to find a way to get in touch with Miles. I

needed to know how was he associated with JM Carlisle.

I really needed to know that I hadn't slept with the enemy. And as far as I was concerned, anyone who wanted to buy up the beautiful properties in this town and demolish them for some characterless hotel was the enemy.

I splashed water on my face and returned to the community room. People had lined up and were asking questions. When someone asked what they should do if they wanted to sell, if it seemed like a good opportunity, I realized I couldn't listen. I simply could not face the problem any longer.

I turned around and left. The rest of the committee could finish the meeting without me. I was too heartbroken.

18

MILES

Jackson sauntered into my office. He looked as if he was the cat that got both the cream and the canary. He was even humming.

"What's gotten into you today?" I asked. "Or should I ask who have you gotten into?"

He smirked and shook his head.

"This is satisfying, but not that satisfying." He cut a quick glance over his shoulder. "Don't let her hear you saying anything like that. You'll have an HR report up your ass for harassment."

It was my turn to shake my head. "I know better than to say shit within earshot. But

you do look very self-sure this afternoon. If it wasn't a little dirty action during lunch, what's up?"

Jackson sat in one of the low chairs in the conversation area. He propped his feet on the coffee table and crossed his ankles. "You're going to want to give me a raise."

"Unless you are delivering property title deeds, you're dreaming about that raise," I said as I crossed my office and joined him on the more comfortable chairs.

He laced his fingers together and put his hands behind his head. "I've made friends in small-town places."

"I'm intrigued," I admitted. "Are you going to tell me, or do I have to coax it from you?"

"Pour me a drink and I will spill it all," he said.

"You sound like a cheap date," I said as I pushed to my feet. I poured two bourbons on the rocks and handed Jackson one of them.

"I have an insider in Brookdale. And I didn't even have to play super spy and seduce them," he said as he took a sip.

"Impressive," I said. I rubbed my hands together eagerly. "Give me everything."

"The guy would love nothing more than to sell out and get out of there. Says the winters are too much for his old bones. But he also knows if no one else sells, then he's got no hope of selling his place. And he can't afford to relocate someplace warm on what he knows he would get if he put his home on the open market."

"Sounds like a motivated customer."

Jackson shook his head slowly from side to side. “You thought the kids wanted to get out of that town. Nope, it’s the people on the other end of the work spectrum. The retirees want out. The kids have romantic delusions of that town. They think it could become something that the older generation just doesn’t believe is possible.”

I let out a long breath. Romantic delusions that described Lydia perfectly. She had dreams of making her little hometown something straight out of the movies, perfectly picturesque, quaint, and full of eccentric characters.

They were well on their way to filling out the character list for a show. They had a waitress at the local diner who called everyone hun and served the best damned cherry pie I'd had in my life. I should not have been so impressed with a fruity dessert that didn't involve alcohol.

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The librarian wore thick glasses and dressed like she was eighty, while it was clear she was only in her mid-twenties. If she was thirty, color me surprised. Behind her thick glasses and geriatric fashion choices, she wasn't unattractive—just not my type. The librarian was already the prime candidate for the town sleuth.

Of course, the local inn was run by the town goddess. She was sweet and sexy and probably didn't realize how stunning she really was. And if Brookdale was a show, she would have a man who knew exactly how special she was. He would not take her for granted and would do everything he could to make her smile.

For some reason, I could picture myself as that man. My character would only wear jeans, those yellow Timberland boots, flannel shirts, and baseball caps. The shirts would always be red, unless there was something special happening and then they would be blue.

Of course, there was the mayor who tossed up decorations around town for any reason possible. All Brookdale needed was a soundtrack and a plot twist to get everyone together and organized. They needed a murder mystery, or to come together to fight off the... well, fuck.

They were coming together to fight off the big city corporation that wanted to swoop in and change everything. I was not thrilled to identify JM Carlisle Group as the big city bad guy in this scenario.

My mood soured immediately. I took a long pull on my drink. I much preferred myself as the love interest and not the evil corporation coming in to destroy everything.

With a quick shake of my head that rolled down into my shoulders, I shook off the daydream of Brookdale as some kind of movie or weekly television show. This was reality, not TV. And in the real world, real estate development brought good changes. Opening a resort in the town of Brookdale would not only change the economic landscape of the town, but of the region.

I wasn't the bad guy. But I also wasn't the flannel wearing handyman who got the girl.

"Miles?" Jackson called my name, pulling me out of my reverie.

I blinked a few times and let my vision return to what was in front of me. Jackson. He no longer looked so cocky and smug, but was that confusion and concern I saw?

"What did this contact tell you?" I asked, ignoring the expression I saw on his face.

"They've been holding what amounts to town meetings. Apparently, everyone has been showing up."

"You said meetings? More than one?"

Jackson nodded. "Apparently, they had one meeting where the mayor shared our plans, and he even mentioned the new post office and equipment. People had so many questions, they ended up having to roll everything into a second meeting."

"Questions?"

"Yeah. It seems like people are very interested in the benefits the resort might bring. We might actually have ground swell. Most of the homeowners are older, and they are apparently interested."

“According to your source,” I said.

“Exactly, according to my source. Also, there seemed to be serious interest in the jobs the resort would bring in. Lots of questions as to the types of jobs available. Of course, the mayor and his committee?—”

“Committee?”

“They have a newly formed historical preservation group. Apparently, that’s who hosted these meetings.”

I started to laugh. “The historical group hosted a town meeting and instead of raising pitchforks and torches to come after us, they got people asking about jobs and timetables. I love it.”

I wasn’t the bad guy, after all. No, I was the charming out of townner who would come in and save the day. My vision would bring in jobs and give an older generation a chance to enjoy their last days instead of being financially trapped in a place that no longer served their needs.

And I would take away the one thing that Lydia seemed to love above all else. The town would sing my praises, but if I were being honest with myself, Lydia was never going to forgive me for leveling her beloved Sweet Mountain Inn.

“Did you get a sense of how receptive they would be if we went up and made a more formal presentation?” I asked. “Maybe if they get the details from us directly. We are better positioned to be able to answer a lot more of their questions. Reach out to the mayor, see if he’s open to a town meeting with us.”

Jackson shrugged. He was still nursing his drink. “I’m under the impression that the mayor is still Team Save The Old Buildings. I don’t know how receptive he would be

to putting us in front of everyone,” Jackson said.

“You think he might stab us in the backs if the town starts cheering us on?” I asked.

“I don’t think the mayor has enough personal fortitude for something like that. But that little librarian, certainly. She scares me. I wouldn’t put it past her to either sabotage us or literally sink a real knife in. She’s vicious and is prepared to fight to the death for that library of hers,” Jackson pointed out.

He wasn’t wrong, and I expected Lydia would be the same, fiercely protective over her property and not welcoming if we came up to make a presentation.

I set my empty glass on the coffee table before standing. I paced around the seating area before crossing the office to stare out the window. “We can wait to see if your contact up there reports any other meetings while we can continue to move forward.”

“Forward?” Jackson asked.

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“I have a feeling we’re going to need more investors. Maybe if we flash higher buying prices at the homeowners, they’ll be willing to sell.”

“Is throwing more money at Brookdale really the answer? What if we started researching some other towns in the region?” Jackson asked.

“No,” I snapped. “Brookdale. It needs to be Brookdale.”

19

LYDIA

“Do you need anything, Tony?” I asked the handyman I had hired for the week.

I had budgeted carefully and was knocking out as many medium-size projects as could be completed during the week. I focused on smaller issues like making sure all the door locks and keys were functional, while Tony patched drywall and pressure washed the brick walls around the back half of the building. Neither of us thought the decorative shingle siding would withstand pressure washing. I painted a few closets, and he tackled bigger paint jobs like the front and back porches.

He was currently painting all the detailed woodwork with another coat of white. Someday, maybe after one of those grants came in, I could paint Sweet Mountain in all the colors and be a painted lady like the library.

Aunt Ruth had really done the inn, and me, a real disservice by not allowing me to learn how to maintain this place. She had kept the inn limping along on the bare

minimum. It broke my heart how much of my mother's efforts had come undone in the past ten years. Sweet Mountain Inn needed to be brought backup to a certain level of repair, and then regular maintenance would keep her in good shape.

Logically, I knew I wasn't going to have her back in top condition in less than a year, but in my heart, I really wanted this lovely old place in peak condition immediately. In my business plans, I was looking at five years to undo the past ten years' worth of damage, and another five after that to get her into showplace quality. If any of the grants I applied for came through, maybe I could get the Sweet Mountain Inn in top shape sooner than ten years.

I was doing as much as I possibly could. Even before I got pregnant, there were tasks I couldn't manage, and that's why Tony was here.

"I'm good," he said.

I watched for a minute as he worked the paintbrush with small taps to get the paint into the filigree areas of the gingerbread woodworking around the edges of the porch roof.

"I made myself a sandwich. Let me know if you change your mind." I sat on the porch steps and ate my sandwich. It wasn't anything fancy—bologna, a slice of cheese, mayonnaise, and white bread. It reminded me of my childhood. Once upon a time, a sandwich like this out on the front steps of the inn felt like the best lunch ever. Mom always cut the bread into giant triangles, and if we had potato chips, I would have a handful of those, and maybe a pickle spear or two.

I glanced down at my plate. I had forgotten the chips and pickles.

I pushed up to my feet.

“Hey, Tony, I’m going to go get some chips. Are you certain I can’t make you a sandwich?”

He wiped his brow, smearing a slash of white paint across it. “Yeah, I could use something to eat. What you got, PB and J?”

“Bologna,” I said.

“Can you put yellow mustard on there for me? And a big drink. You got some lemonade or something?”

“I have iced tea,” I mentioned.

“Sounds perfect.”

I returned to the kitchen and put together a few more sandwiches. I made myself a second one, since I was hungry. This time, when I carried lunch out to the porch, I remembered chips and pickles.

I returned to my spot on the stairs. Tony sat a few steps below me. At first, we ate in silence and then he got chatty.

“You know, a few coats of paint aren’t going to fix the problem. Half of this decorative molding is rotted out,” Tony said.

“I know. But it’s not something I can buy at the local hardware store. I would have to custom order it, or make it myself, and my woodworking skills are nonexistent.”

“You’re running the Historical Society. Haven’t you managed to get one of those grants you tell people to apply for?”

I let out a bitter laugh. I hated admitting it, but the entire grant process was a lot harder than I had expected. I couldn't just write an essay outlining why the Sweet Mountain Inn deserved an infusion of cash. I had to provide data about the history of the building and how many people stayed there on a regular basis. I needed to provide projections regarding the economical impact it made on the town.

“I keep applying, but the process is much more complicated than I expected.”

“Have you talked to that group, the Carlisle people, about selling?” he asked.

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I knew Tony asked in all innocence. But I had to take a moment before answering him before I did something rash and jumped down his throat. I couldn't afford to have him quit with the porch only halfway painted.

I bit into a pickle spear, giving myself the few moments I needed to regain some form of composure.

"I'm not selling. This place was my mom's," I started. "I lost her when I was young, too young. She loved this place."

"Did it come from your family? Or did she buy it?"

"A little of both. It was in my father's family."

"So, it was your parents' inn?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Just Mom. So my dad was some kind of deadbeat loser, and his own family didn't even like him. So after he left town with his girlfriend, his great uncle who owned Sweet Mountain asked if my mom wanted to run the place. I guess at some point, he had plans on my father being the one to take over, but everyone disowned him."

"So he just gave the place to your mother?"

"Technically, he sold it to her for one dollar, or maybe it was five dollars. There was something about not having to pay inheritance tax or something by doing that. And that's when we moved in."

“You have a really good memory,” Tony said.

“Hardly. I was too young when all of that happened. I remember what people told me.”

“So your great-great uncle made sure you got the family inn,” Tony said.

“I guess so. I had never really thought of it that way. Wow, I guess it has been in my family the whole time. You know, I tend to think of Mom and Aunt Ruth as family and my father as someone who just happened to me. But his family history is mine.”

This new revelation would be a great piece of information to include in all those grant applications.

“Now I really need to save the old girl. Not only do I see Mom in all the details, but I’ve got a family history to maintain.” I stood, my food finished.

Tony handed me his empty plate. I carried the dishes in one hand and bent to pick up a bucket of drywall joint compound. A new delivery had come in earlier, three five-gallon buckets, and was taking up space on the porch. It was heavy, but I could get it inside one-handed. After that, I’d have to put it down, take the dishes to the kitchen, and come back to carry it with both hands.

“Let me get that for you. You shouldn’t be lifting heavy things in your condition.”

I set the bucket down with a thunk. “My condition? That obvious, huh? I can still carry heavy things.”

He started hemming and hawing. “I mean, no, not really obvious. Well, I’ve been watching the way you move all week. Couldn’t help but notice, and well...”

I grimaced. Couldn't help but notice? Yikes.

"I've heard some folks talking," he said. "I normally don't pay that kind of chatter any attention, but then seeing you..."

I nodded. The rumor mill had me in its grasp. "People would figure it out eventually," I said. "It's not like I'm not up there parading in front of meetings every other week. Someone was bound to notice. I thought it wouldn't be noticeable for a bit."

Tony bent and lifted two of the buckets as if they didn't weigh a thing. "Where do you want these?"

I pointed to the floor. "Put those down. I'm perfectly capable of moving the buckets. What I can't do is climb up on a ladder and paint. You paint, I'll move the buckets."

He gave me a bit of side eye, but he set the buckets down.

I took the dishes to the kitchen before returning to the porch to grab the drywall joint compound. I moved the three buckets, one at a time. But I did it. It would have been easier to let Tony drag them in. He was clearly stronger than I was. But I wasn't going to let this pregnancy get in the way of pursuing my dreams of getting this inn back into shape.

This place had been Mom's pride and joy. I wanted to honor her. I wanted to think she was watching me and being proud of my choices. Okay, maybe getting knocked up hadn't been the best plan. But it wasn't planned, thus proving the wholefailing to plan is planning to failidiom. Mom raised me on her own. I liked to think she wouldn't judge me too harshly. I knew there were more than enough people in this town who would. I guess it was time to confess to Evie about this pregnancy. Of course, if Tim knew, Evie already knew.

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MILES

Several months later...

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The summer basically came and went before I had a chance to even think about Brookdale again. It had been far too long since I had seen Lydia, but my time was spent focusing on other projects, and I trusted Jackson to head up the Brookdale team to get those properties acquired.

His contact had said people in Brookdale were contemplating selling to us.

But we were completely stagnating on this project.

I pressed the intercom button and called my assistant. “Get me a flight to Albany and a rental car.”

“Sure thing. When are you planning on leaving?” Sarah asked.

“How soon is my schedule cleared so that I can have a couple of days upstate?”

“You have a meeting with Donald White in two days,” she said.

“Donald White?” I asked. “I thought he had written us off.”

“No, sir. He called directly to schedule this meeting.”

“Does he expect me to go to Long Island to see him?”

“No. He is scheduled to meet with you here.”

“Two days, huh? What is he expecting from me, a presentation?”

“He didn’t say. He requested a meeting, and you had availability. You’ve told me in the past that known investors are always welcome. And Donald White is a known investor.”

She wasn’t wrong. I did welcome any and all investors, even people seeking limited partnerships. While I could perfectly bankroll my own projects, it was always smarter to spend somebody else’s money. And Donald White had money.

“Okay, sounds good. What time?”

“Afternoon, after lunch.”

I groaned. After lunch could mean he was stopping in during the afternoon because he came into town to see a show. Or it could mean he expected to spend the entire afternoon in my office discussing whatever was on his mind.

I didn’t think I could get away with scheduling a flight out that evening. Besides, I didn’t want to take that drive in the dark. Upstate New York this time of year would be pretty with all the fall colors. And while I was a hard ass and economically driven, I did enjoy having a pleasant view while I drove. Whether that was a beautiful woman or a picturesque view, there was no view driving in the dark.

“Go ahead and book me a flight out the next morning,” I said.

“How long should I schedule the car for?” she asked.

“Why don’t you keep it open-ended for now? I’m not certain how long I plan on staying up there.”

A lot of my schedule was going to be determined by Lydia and how much she was going to be pissed off at me. She had to know that I was the developer she was

directly campaigning against with her little historical society.

I had every confidence that I would win her back, but that would take time and effort. And probably a lot of wine. I missed her, and any time it took to win her back would definitely be worth the effort.

The next day, I was rather pleased to discover that Donald White did not want to waste my time.

“I almost expected you to not agree to see me, considering how our last meeting ended,” he said with a wry chuckle as he took a seat in my office.

“Just because we did not come to an agreement last time does not mean that potential investors aren’t welcome,” I said.

“Money talks?” he asked.

I nodded. “When money talks, I know better. I should listen. So, what brings you to my office this afternoon?” I asked

This time, he laughed outright. “Well, clearly, I’m here to talk money.”

I let the corners of my mouth twitch up in a mild grin. My smile would probably be larger once I knew the scope of how many dollar signs we were talking about.

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“I’ve been keeping track of some of your projects,” Donald started. “I understand this big resort that you have been wanting to put in Upstate isn’t going so smoothly. I looked into some of your other, smaller, projects. You’ve got a few strip malls around. Those are always a good investment.”

He was right. The resort was a master plan. But until that master plan could come to fruition, I kept other, smaller projects—as he mentioned, a few strip malls here and there—on the books. I had also invested in the development of a small chain of commercial storage companies. Projects that didn’t require a large outlay of money or funds but always brought in an exponentially larger proportion of income.

“Are you looking to buy into strip malls, specifically?” I asked since some investors were very keen on specific types of investing.

“Not exactly. I’m looking at the big picture of what you have going on. I believe that if you can make this resort happen, you’ll be in a very satisfactory financial position.”

“That’s the goal,” I agreed. “So, you’ve changed your mind about investing with my group?”

Donald sat back with a smirk on his face. It was the same expression I remember from our last meeting when he tried to pull the rug out from under me by showing me the flyer to the Historical Society meetings.

“I would like to consider investing in the big picture while securing a percentage of your resort project.”

“That’s doable, very doable,” I said.

“How soon can you have the numbers sent over to my office?”

I should be able to pull a standard investment agreement together in only a few hours, but the addition of the resort, and what percentage he was looking at, was going to add a little bit of work to the overall project. I kept a very generic spreadsheet with information he wanted on my computer. I could hand him a printout, but it wouldn’t include the breakout that he wanted for the resort, and if he wanted the specific percentages allotted to our different projects, that would take additional time. I needed to know exactly what he wanted so that I could deliver to his expectations.

“I could have something on your desk first thing Monday morning without any problems.”

He looked contemplative for a moment and then stood. He glanced at his watch.

“I have an appointment with my wife that she will divorce me for large quantities of money for if I am late. I will have my secretary send over the allocation breakdown that I think would be most beneficial, and then you can provide the necessary documentation based on that. I probably won’t have anything to you as soon as Monday, but you can expect it next week,” he announced.

I stood and offered my hand out to shake.

“I’m very glad you took this opportunity to stop in today,” I said.

“I don’t like to waste my time when I come into the city. This seemed like the best use of the extra hour I had before curtain call,” he said, confirming my suspicions about his taking in a show. “Take your time getting those numbers back to me. Make sure they’re done right.”

“Absolutely,” I said. I shook his hand, and he excused himself and walked out. I watched him leave and wondered if maybe he thought I sounded entirely too eager when I said I could have numbers to him by Monday. I was, but I was used to investors wanting to know numbers immediately. I didn’t quite understand how this man conducted business. If he wanted to throw his money in my direction, I would take the effort to do things his way. Maybe with a fresh infusion of investor funds, I’d be able to push through some purchases in Brookdale.

I packed a small bag hoping that I would run into Lydia again and she wouldn’t be so angry with me that I didn’t end up staying a few extra days. It seemed that every time I saw her, I ended up staying with her, and I stayed even longer than I intended.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t get away from her. It’s that I didn’t want to get away from her. When I was with Lydia, I wanted to stay with her.

She saw something in me and brought out something in me that I didn’t recognize in myself. I only wanted to make her happy. I wanted to make her life less painful. She should have everything that she wanted, and knowing that what she wanted was the renovations on that inn of hers made me the worst kind of hypocrite.

And what was worse, I knew it, and I should stay away from her because of it.

I knew I was going to Brookdale strictly to find her under the excuse of trying to secure properties for this resort which I was seriously beginning to wonder if it would ever happen.

The next morning’s flight was uneventful. And as anticipated, the drive was made more pleasant by the surrounding bright, fiery colors of fall.

As I pulled into Brookdale, I was not surprised to find the downtown area decorated with giant sunflowers and hay bale stacks, pumpkins, and other gourds in a generally

fall, festive manner. After all, decorating the small downtown area seemed to be Mayor Dan's favorite pastime. He made sure that the downtown area looked like some kind of postcard.

I drove past several people walking down the street and didn't think anything of it. I noticed a rather familiar but very obviously pregnant woman. She looked a lot like Lydia.

I slammed on the car brakes. Fortunately, nobody was behind me to run into me and cause an accident.

That woman didn't look like Lydia. That woman was Lydia.

I maneuvered the car to turn around so that I could pull up and park along the street. I got out of the car and stood on the sidewalk ahead of her. She gave me the biggest smile.

"Miles, is that you?"

LYDIA

“Miles? Oh, my God, Miles is that you?”

I couldn't believe my eyes. I was taking my daily doctor prescribed walk when a car pulled up and he climbed out. I haven't seen him for months. I honestly never expected to see him again. It had been so long. I ran to him. I wasn't so pregnant that I waddled, but I didn't move with anything that could closely resemble grace.

He had a confused smile on his face. He looked me in the eyes, and then he looked down at my stomach, and then he looked back up at my face.

“Lydia? This is unexpected,” he said.

I wrapped my hands around my stomach and grinned. “Yeah, it certainly is. You've been gone so long and I didn't have any way to get in touch with you.”

“Get in touch with me?” he asked. “Why would you need to do that?” His tone was very cautious.

“Because, silly.” I laughed as I rubbed my hand over my belly. “You're going to be a father.”

The expression of the confusion across his face grew deeper as he tried to understand the words I said. His mouth tried to form words, but he seemed to be struggling when it came to making any sounds. His brows pinched together, relaxed, lifted up almost to his hairline before returning to being slightly pinched in the middle. And he

blinked continuously. This news was clearly a bit of a shock for him.

I may not have told anybody else who the father was. It was none of their business. However, this very much was his business.

“Oh, wow, you didn’t say anything the last time I was in town.”

I giggled nervously, questioning whether or not I had actually done the right thing by telling him like this in the middle of the street.

“I didn’t actually know the last time you were here. I didn’t figure it out until a couple of days after you left.”

“You didn’t say anything,” he repeated.

I bit my lip as nervous butterflies danced through my stomach. Or maybe that was the baby deciding it was time to flip around and make its presence known.

“I didn’t have any way of contacting you,” I told him. “I never had your phone number and had no way of contacting you. I didn’t expect you to be gone so long between visits. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have sprung this on you.” I may have taken a step back as I realized I’d messed up.

Miles reached out for me. “No, no. It’s just a bit of a shocker. This is amazing, and it’s mine?”

I nodded.

“This is amazing,” he said again as he stepped in close and pulled me into an embrace. “I never expected this.”

“Me either,” I admitted. Those nervous flutters in my stomach went into overdrive. I really didn’t want this to send him running back to the city, at least not before I got his phone number.

“I thought I was only going to be up here for a couple of days, but with this I don’t know...” It seemed more like he was muttering to himself than speaking to me.

“Are you planning on going back right away?” I asked.

“God, no, Lydia. Why would I do that?”

“Well, I mean, I did kind of drop a baby bomb on you right here in the middle of the street.”

“True, but that means I have to think on my feet. Should you be out walking around?”

“Yes, I should be out walking around. It’s very healthy for me. Where were you headed?” I asked, pointing to his car.

“I was going to the inn,” he admitted.

I couldn’t help but smile. He was coming back to me.

“Where are you going?”

“I was just taking a little walk. Miss Griffin is watching the front desk, and my doctor said I need to make sure I’m exercising every day.”

“Can I give you a ride back?”

“Since you were headed that way, I wouldn’t say no.”

When we got back to the Sweet Mountain Inn, Miles paused as soon as he climbed out of the car. He took a moment to look at all the renovations I had managed to accomplish in the past few months.

“It looks different, somehow,” he said.

“I would hope so. I put a lot of work into the old girl.”

“But I can’t quite figure out what’s different,” he admitted.

I looped my arm through his elbow, and we stood there, looking up at the Sweet Mountain Inn. “She’s had fresh paint on all the decorative woodwork that helps protect the wood and hide all the wood rot until I can afford to have everything replaced. She’s also had all the windows repaired or replaced.”

“Did you get the bathrooms done?”

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“No bathrooms, but you spent all that money on the windows?”

“Not my money,” I admitted. “I got a grant to cover the cost to make the building more energy efficient. Now when there’s a storm, the building doesn’t howl like it’s

in some kind of a horror movie. Hopefully, I'll be able to secure another grant to help cover the plumbing costs and redoing the bathrooms. Apparently, there's a lot of grant money out there to help maintain historic buildings, and Sweet Mountain more than qualifies, but the application process is a real pain in the butt," I admitted.

"Was it grant money that put in landscaping and rosebushes around the gazebo just like you wanted?" he asked.

Yeah, just like I wanted. "I think that was more of a coincidence than anything else. After all, I didn't have any say in what they did."

"But a gazebo covered in roses was your vision," he said.

"Speaking of that," I started, "You're not some kind of spy for that developer who's trying to come in here and buy up the town, are you?"

He closed his eyes in a long blink and turned to me. "What developer?"

"There's this developer who wants to come here and put in some kind of a resort in the middle of town. I've seen the plans. He wants to level some of the older buildings. I will admit some of those structures are rundown, but that's not an excuse to level them. He wants to take out the area from the inn to the library. That would include the post office, and then going back"— I gestured toward the part of town that would be impacted if JM Carlisle Group was allowed to come in— "and take out about six square blocks of some of the oldest homes in Brookdale."

"And you think I'm a spy for this company?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, but the last time you were here, I told you my idea of turning Brookdale into a wedding destination. The next time the development company sent a prospectus to the mayor, they had included ways that the resort

would help bolster the local economy, and it even mentioned how it would support turning Brookdale into a destination location for things such as family reunions, and as a honeymoon and wedding destination. Now that can't be a coincidence, can it?"

Miles chuckled. "It sounds like a coincidence to me."

"I've never mentioned the whole wedding thing to anybody," I said.

"Brookdale is a quaint little town. Anybody looking to suggest ways of bolstering the economy would think in terms of how to turn this into a destination location. I'm not a spy. What kind of changes have you made to the inside?" he asked, changing the topic as we started to walk up to the front porch.

"Nothing major, a few minor repairs here and there. I got most of the door locks oiled and running properly, so there should be no more lock failures anytime soon. And of course, the windows, which required a few rooms to be repainted, but other than that, she's still pretty much the same."

Miles paused as we started to climb the steps. "Look, Lydia I don't want to be presumptuous here, but are you gonna let me stay with you again?"

"I can't believe you're even asking me this, Miles."

"Well, considering the last time this happened..." He pointed to my baby bump.

I ran my hand over my stomach. "This didn't happen the last time you were here. This happened the first time, during the storm," I said.

"You're more pregnant than I thought."

"I am definitely way more pregnant." I laughed.

“And your friends know I am the father?” he asked.

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I shook my head. “No one knows, except for me and now you. I wasn’t exactly blabbing it around town.”

“This is gonna take some time to get used to,” he said. “Do you know if it’s a girl or a boy yet?”

“Baby wasn’t cooperating when it was time to find out. I guess you could say the birth is going to be the gender reveal party. You never told me, what are you in town for?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter now because I’m gonna be here to help you out.”

“You’re going to stay?” My heart lodged in my throat.

“I’ll stay for as long as I can,” he said. “I might have to go back to the city to make arrangements and to get more of my things. I can’t believe you’re pregnant. I’m gonna be a father.”

“Yes, we’re going to have a baby,” I said.

Miles very tentatively reached his hand out toward my stomach. “Can I touch you? The baby?”

I grabbed his hand and put it on my distended stomach, pressing his palm down.

“That should be the baby’s butt.”

“How do you know?”

“Because of how it kicks,” I said. “Sometimes, it’s turned around, but...” I pressed my hand against the other side of my abdomen. “That’s definitely the head.”

At that point, the baby bucked against Miles’s hand. His entire face lit up in astonishment.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“That’s my baby? Our baby.”

“It is,” I said.

“You are so amazing,” Miles said, his voice full of awe.

“I’m hardly amazing. People have been getting pregnant for thousands upon thousands of years.”

“Yes, but you are the first person to get pregnant with my child.”

22

MILES

Lydia was pregnant.

My pulse raced and my heart pounded so hard against my rib cage, I thought it might burst out of my chest. I couldn’t stop smiling.

I was going to be a father.

Lydia was so happy and so beautiful. She didn't glow, she radiated. She sparkled. She was the happiest I had ever seen a person be, and it was all because she was pregnant with my child.

It was hard to swallow. It was hard to fathom. It was amazing. I was confused and giddy, and I was going to be a father. The emotions were overwhelming and unexpected.

I had never planned this. I had never thought I'd be here, a parent, a father.

It wasn't one of those things that I really ever thought about. But now, looking at Lydia with her bright eyes and shiny hair and expectant belly, how could I have ever not wanted this?

This changed everything on one hand. And on the other, my gut clenched.

Since she was pregnant, everything at the inn had to be that much more difficult for her. Yet, she sounded more determined than ever to turn Sweet Mountain Inn into something outstanding.

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And she had no idea who I was. How was I going to be the man she thought I was and still push this resort through? She was going to hate me.

Even more so now that she was pregnant. How could I have the mother of my child not want me around?

And I was convinced that was definitely going to happen until I got her to see that my plan was really going to help this town, while her Historical Society and their lame attempts at getting people grants to help renovate and restore their homes and places of business was only going to cause more grief and stress.

She led me into her apartment within the inn. I set my thoughts on the resort aside. I needed to focus on her and our child.

“So, I was thinking,” she said.

I hadn’t been listening to her, too busy tripping over my own thoughts.

“If I got enough grant money, I could expand the apartment. I would like to build a kitchen on this side so that I wouldn’t have to constantly be running back and forth.”

“Moving a kitchen is not a small expense,” I said.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly thinking of moving the kitchen. The kitchen was designed to be a commercial-grade kitchen. That just never happened. Anyway, I was thinking I have three guest rooms at the end of the first floor hall on this side of the building that I could take over, and close off the entire end of the hallway, expanding the

apartment.”

As she spoke, she tried to define spaces with her hands. She pushed air and kind of boxed in spaces with her hands. It didn’t exactly make sense, but clearly, there was something in her mind that she was picturing.

“I would have the apartment and the two ADA-accessible guest rooms on this side of the first floor. Then on the other side of the first floor, get that kitchen updated and upgraded so that it can be a viable commercial kitchen, and outsource a small cafe for lunch and dinner. They could even take over breakfast service, or add after hours room service.”

“That’s going to be a hefty investment,” I said.

“I know,” she admitted. “Upgrading the kitchen and putting in a small restaurant are part of my long-term planning.”

“And building a kitchen in your apartment? Wouldn’t it be cheaper to find a small house and live off property?” I asked. “Especially now with a baby on the way.”

She cut a sharp glare in my direction. “This is my home. This has always been my home. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

“You honestly can’t imagine living in a little house with a white picket fence, and a yard with a swing set for the kid?” I asked.

I had grown up in a little house with a picket fence. The fence had been falling down, and the swing set had been tethered with rusty chains to cinder blocks so that it didn’t fall over. But I had the freedom of running around outside. I had a yard to play in.

The inn didn’t have a yard. Where was our child going to play? Where would we put

a swing set and a slide?

“I don’t know. I never really thought of it. I mean, this is how I grew up,” she said. “If I needed to play, I could go to the park.”

“How are you planning on running this place and taking our child to the park at the same time?”

She stood in the middle of her small living room. Her expression turned sad, and her lower lip started to tremble.

“Oh, Lydia.” I reached out for her and pulled her against my chest. “I didn’t mean to make you upset,” I said as I stroked her hair.

“I don’t know how I’m gonna do any of it.” She sounded so sad and a little bit scared. “But if my mom could do it, then I know I can do it. I’m not going to be the first single mother to balance having to work and raising a kid.”

“You aren’t going to be in this alone,” I said.

She tilted her head up to me and blinked. I saw tears dot her eyelashes. With a thumb, I brushed the little bit of moisture that escaped from her eyes away from her cheek.

“Are you serious?” she asked. “I mean, you’re not here more often than you’re here. And if I listen to the inner voices that tell me everything is wrong with the world, I have to wonder if I’m not just someone who fell into bed with you and that you actually have a family somewhere else.”

“Lydia,” I said, trying to keep anger out of my voice, “I do not have a family somewhere else. The only family I have is growing right here in Brookdale.” I rested my hand on her pregnant belly. “You don’t have to worry about anything like that.”

“I’m not a side piece who accidentally got pregnant?” she asked.

“Accidentally got pregnant, check. Side piece only if you consider my job my first relationship. And right about now, I’m beginning to think I’ve spent a little too much time at work and not enough time with you.”

“Are you trying to be romantic?” she asked.

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“I don’t know if I would call this romantic. Can’t say that I ever considered myself that. But I am trying to be realistic.”

“Speaking of being realistic,” she started, “how long are you staying? What brings you to town this time?”

“Does it matter?” I brushed her hair away from her face and cupped her cheek. “You and the baby are going to keep me here.”

“Are you serious?” A small smile played across her lips.

I much preferred to see her smiling than frowning. Happiness looked good on her.

“I’m very serious.” I was going to have to play the long game with Lydia. I needed to get her to trust me, to know she could rely on me. And I needed for her to trust me enough so when I revealed who I really was in regard to forcing her hand in selling the Sweet Mountain Inn to me that she would happily do so, even though she knew what my plans were.

“I know that your dream renovation is expanding your little apartment, building a kitchen, creating a home. Until you can do that, where are you putting the baby?”

“I’ve already started cleaning up the second bedroom, and I’m going to turn that into a nursery.”

“You have a second bedroom?” I asked.

“This is where I grew up. Where Mom and I lived, and after Mom died, where my Aunt Ruth lived. I tend to not go into that room, but I think turning it into a nursery will give it a renewed sense of happiness.”

“Show me,” I said.

Her little apartment had a sitting room, her bedroom, and a bathroom. The door on the other side of the bathroom, I had always assumed was a closet, but it wasn't. It opened up onto another equally sized bedroom. It was dark and gloomy, packed in with boxes, and the bed was piled high with somebody's old clothing.

“I'm still cleaning everything out from when my aunt died. It's been a while, and unfortunately, it brings up a lot of emotions and memories. So it's been going slow, and I haven't exactly been motivated. Now I'm motivated, and the emotions are still getting in the way.”

“Why don't you let me clear out this room?” I suggested. “I don't have the emotional attachment. If there are items that are sentimental to you, we can go through and pull those out first?—”

“I don't want anything from this room. Anything that had belonged to my mom, I already have. Anything that belonged to my aunt, I don't want. You can get rid of it all.”

“Are you certain?”

“I am. I mean, we can save the furniture. I'd like to pull out those old dressers and paint them in bright colors, because right now, they're dreary and old. But they're good quality, and I don't see why I couldn't freshen them up for the nursery.”

“Then it sounds like we have a plan for the next couple of days,” I said.

“Are you serious?” she asked me again.

It was as if she didn’t believe I was really here or that I really planned on helping her get this room set up for the baby.

“It’s my baby, too,” I said. “I want its mother to be happy and comfortable. It’s the least I can do for you right now.”

23

LYDIA

I could not believe my luck. Miles wasn’t mad. I dropped the news on him that he was the father of my child, and he didn’t once argue with me about it. He accepted it and genuinely seemed excited. And he was staying.

I was almost speechless, except there was so much to tell him, everything about the what was going on with the Historical Society and the resort developer, and then, of course, there were all the changes and everything I wanted to do with the Sweet Mountain Inn, and of course, everything I was going to need for the baby. My head was full of so many different things, and every little piece stressed me out.

There was only so much I could dump on Evie. She was going through the same problems, the same situation with the library. Only, as far as I knew, she wasn’t pregnant or having a secret affair with some man from out of town. But if Miles was going to stick around. He wasn’t going to be a secret much longer.

Pregnant or not, I still had my daily chores around the inn.

“Lydia,” Miles said as he carried another box out from my apartment. He dropped it on the floor with a thump. “I was thinking we should go look at furniture and see

what you want to order, as well as pick out your paint colors, the next time Mrs. Griffin is in.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” I said. “Is that another box you’re taking to the thrift store?”

“Yeah, and it’s the last box I have. I’m going to go drop this off and pick up a few more boxes. That room is almost completely empty. The furniture is all that’s going to be left by the time I’m done.”

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“Good. That’s all that I want left in there.”

“I know you want to keep the dressers, but what about the bed?”

I had to think for a minute. “Let’s get rid of the mattress. We aren’t going to need it for a couple of years, and it’s old. And the frame will fold up and can go into the basement with the other extra bed frames that are already down there.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He stepped over and kissed me on the cheek before he picked up the box and walked out the door.

He had been here for two days already and spent the entire time clearing out that bedroom for me. I didn’t know how to thank him. He had moved into my life like he belonged here. It was nice. It was something I could get used to.

I was reading a book in the lobby later that same afternoon when Miles stepped out of the apartment. He was all smiles.

“Lydia, can I steal you for a second?”

I put my book down. “Of course. What do you need?”

“I want to show you something.”

“Ooh.” I acted surprised.

I followed him down the short hall into my apartment. He took my hand and led me

to the second bedroom door.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he covered my eyes and wrapped his arm around me, his chest against my back.

He carefully walked me forward. “I want you to be surprised,” he said.

I heard the door creak open, and we took a few more steps forward before he uncovered my eyes.

“Wow.”

The room was completely empty and full of light. I had always thought of this room as being so dingy and dark. Aunt Ruth never opened the curtains. Now the curtains were gone and the windows were open, letting in some much-needed fresh air. He had already moved the two dressers into the middle of the room.

“It’s ready for you to pick out colors. I can get started painting. We’ll buy some tarps when we’re at the paint store to protect the dressers and the carpet.”

The walls were dingy and the carpet was worn. This room just looked old.

“How are we going to make this look like a happy nursery?” I asked. I felt like crying.

“You aren’t happy,” Miles stated.

“I’m overwhelmed. It’s baby brain,” I said. “I can’t see past what’s here right now.”

The room had always been dark, and now I could see how dirty the walls were, and the faded spots where pictures had hung, and cobwebs in the corners that I hadn’t

bothered to clean out in the months since Aunt Ruth got ill and died. This room had been abandoned, and now it looked like it belonged in an old abandoned building.

I took in a shuddering breath. I really didn't want to cry about this, but how was I supposed to raise a baby in this room?

"Hey, hey," Miles said, "It'll be okay. After we get it painted, we'll put in some new carpeting. You won't recognize it as the same room. You said you wanted to paint these dressers. You will bring color and breathe new life into this room."

He ran his hand over my baby bump.

"We will make this a happy place for the baby," he said.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I should think about moving into a little house that doesn't have all of my bad memories in it, so that I'm not giving that emotional baggage directly to the next generation."

"I think buying a house isn't a bad idea, but Lydia, you said this was your home. You grew up here. You can make happier memories to replace the old ones. You don't have to let this beat you. If you want, we can go look at houses. If you want, we can go look at paint chips. You tell me what you want, and I will make it happen."

I slid my hands around his waist and held on tight. I didn't know what I wanted. I wanted things to be easier. I wanted to know what my future held. I was tired of having to fight for everything I wanted. I was just tired.

"I think I need to rest right now," I admitted. "The baby sometimes makes it so that I don't think clearly. Right now, I can't get over the past to see the potential of an empty room right now."

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Miles kissed me on the cheek. “Why don’t you go lie down?”

“I’ve gotta watch the front desk.” I felt tears burning behind my eyes. I hated this feeling, and I hated that I was feeling it more and more.

“I’ll watch the front desk,” he volunteered.

“But Miles, no.”

“If anyone tries to check in, I will let them know you’re resting. I can figure out which keys are available and get them in a room. I can have them sign that old registry of yours, and then I’ll tell you if anybody’s here. You can do the official computer check-in for them later.”

I really was about to cry. I was so tired. “Really?”

“Yes. Are you expecting any guests to try to check in or out this afternoon?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have any reservations booked, but I usually get one or two people coming through. Fall in the mountains. You know...”

He shook his head. “You go lie down. I’ll man the front desk, and I won’t let anybody get a free room. I promise. When’s the next time Mrs. Griffin is scheduled?”

“She comes in tomorrow,” I admitted.

“When she gets here, you and I are leaving. You don’t need to do any housekeeping

or cleaning or anything. Tomorrow afternoon, you and I have a date to go pick out paint colors and look at baby furniture.”

My heart swelled with emotion. I loved that he wanted to take me away from my responsibilities and do something he knew that I was looking forward to doing.

I slowly nodded my head. “Thank you.”

He took my hand and led me back to my bedroom. I sat on the edge of the bed, and he took my shoes off and helped me to get my legs on the bed before tucking a blanket around me.

“Take a nap,” he said quietly before kissing me on the top of my head and leaving me to sleep.

When I woke up hours later, I wandered out into the lobby. Miles sat on the couch reading something on his laptop, much the way I would sit and read a book while I was waiting for any last-minute check-ins.

“Hey,” I said groggily. “Did anybody check in?”

“Hey, Sleepyhead, are you feeling better?” He closed his laptop and crossed the lobby to me. “I have one couple who checked in. They’re in room twenty-five. I have their information in your handwritten ledger book, and I’ve got their credit card right here so that you can put them into the system. And once that’s done, I told them I would run their credit card back up to them.”

“You are efficient,” I said.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“A little bit.”

“I have pizza in the kitchen,” he announced. “Why don’t I go get you a couple of pieces while you finish putting your new guests into the computer system?”

“That sounds good,” I said.

I was surprised to see how late it was as I logged onto the computer. I slept for several hours.

A middle-aged couple came downstairs as I finished entering the credit card into the system.

The woman approached the desk. “Are you Lydia?” she asked.

“I am. How can I help you?”

“We were told you were taking a nap, and we wanted to see if you had managed to finish getting us checked in.” She gave me her name. It matched the one on the credit card in front of me.

“I actually just finished getting you into the system. Thank you,” I said as I handed her back her credit card. “You’re probably going to want this to go find dinner.”

“That’s exactly what we’re doing. Thank you.”

24

MILES

I woke up spooned around Lydia. I could get used to this. She was warm. She was comfortable. She was everything. And my body reacted to her, tucked up against me the way she was.

I pressed my hips with my growing erection against her backside to see if I could slowly wake her up.

She let out a soft moan and wiggled her ass against me.

The feeling of her body willing and pliant only made me want her more. I began leaving ticklish kisses against the side of her neck, under her ear.

“Miles,” she said softly.

“Yes, Lydia?” I asked.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“What does it feel like?”

With another soft moan, she rolled onto her back and looked up into my eyes. “It feels like you’re trying to seduce me.”

I placed a soft kiss against her perfect lips. She parted for me and our tongues danced together. I deepened the kiss and ran my hands over her ribs and cupped her breast.

“That is exactly what I’m doing,” I growled. Damn, she felt good.

She made soft, encouraging noises as she ran her hands up my arms and across my shoulders.

I curled against her side and ran my hands over her smooth skin. As I caressed her belly, she stiffened.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

She wrapped her fingers around my wrist to keep my hand from moving anymore.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Are you feeling all right? I asked. “Are you okay? Not feeling sick?”

“I feel fine, and you are making me feel really good. But...” She paused.

“But what?” I asked.

She let out a sigh. “Nothing, I’m being silly. Kiss me,” she demanded.

Not one to turn away one of Lydia’s kisses, I complied. She ran her leg up mine, and we continued to kiss and touch. When my hand slipped down between her legs, she tightened her thighs, preventing me from reaching my goal or moving my hand at all.

“I’m sorry, Miles,” she said. “This feels weird.”

I eased my hand away from her legs and pushed up on my elbow to look at her.

“Feels weird as in you are uncomfortable? Something’s wrong? You don’t want me?”

“I do want you, but it feels weird as in, I’m pregnant. Should we be doing this?”

I wanted to laugh. “Why shouldn’t we?” I asked.

“I’m so round. Doesn’t the baby bother you?”

I placed my hand on her baby bump.

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“I adore all of your curves. The baby does not bother me at all, but if the baby bothers you, then we’ll stop.”

She swallowed hard. Her throat worked as if her mouth was dry, or there was a giant lump stuck. I knew the feeling. She slowly nodded.

I started to roll away from her, but she grabbed my arm.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want you kissing me, though. I mean, if you want to kiss me,” she said.

I rolled back to her and began placing gentle kisses against the side of her neck and along her jaw.

“You know, if we had limited ourselves to only making out before, you wouldn’t be in this condition.”

“Stop pointing out the obvious,” she said. “Just kiss me for now and give me some time to get used to the idea.”

“I can do that,” I admitted.

“Are you sure you want to touch me while I look like this?”

“While you look like what? Gorgeous, beautiful, mine?”

“Pregnant,” she pointed out.

I shifted and kissed her belly. “This makes you even more tempting.”

With a smile, I lay back down and pulled her into my arms and began kissing her lips again. I kissed her with all the passion and all the enthusiasm as I would have put into making love to her body. She tasted sweet and perfect, and until she was ready to let me touch the rest of her, I would be content with this level of attention and affection.

We ended up cuddling until she fell back asleep.

My attention was dragged out of the dozing half-asleep state I was in by the incessant ringing of my phone. I tried to ignore it, but I didn’t want it to disrupt Lydia’s sleep. She was so tired and needed the rest.

I rolled out of bed and pulled the phone out of my pocket.

“It’s early. What do you want?” I said as I walked into her small living room.

“Miles, are you planning on ever coming back into the office?” It was Harris.

“Not if I can help it, why?”

“You have meetings this week and your admin is in a panic. You aren’t responding to your emails like you normally do. It’s one thing to take a vacation. It’s quite another to tell us you’ll be working remotely and then not work, especially when we are relying on you.”

“Fine, I’ll come back in for the rest of the week. But then I want to make proper arrangements to set up a remote office up here. It looks like I’m going to be on site in Brookdale for a while.”

I was packed and ready to leave, but I waited until Lydia woke and was dressed. I

knew my leaving would only distress her further. That was something I wanted to minimize as much as possible for her.

“You aren’t leaving because of me?” Lydia asked. “Because I wouldn’t, you know... I’m pregnant. I don’t know if I can.”

I chuckled. “No, it’s nothing you did or didn’t do. I’m leaving because of work. I’ll be back. I have to go down to the city to clear up a few things. I need to set some people straight, and then I’ll be back.”

“You promise?”

She looked so scared. I couldn’t help but fold her back into my embrace. I kissed her brow.

“I’m not leaving because of anything you did, but I am coming back because of this.” I ran my hand over her belly and our baby. “I am coming back. I promise.”

“Okay, I won’t be so sad then.” She stiffened in my embrace, and I let her go.

She clenched her jaw and gave me a weak smile, but there were tears in her eyes.

I cupped her face and ran my hand to the back of her head before I pulled her to me and placed a kiss against her lips. They were so soft, so perfect, and I never wanted to leave her. I had to leave and take care of business so that I could stay. It sounded stupid and thick with irony.

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In the car on the drive to the airport, at every exit I passed, I thought about pulling over and turning around and driving straight back to Brookdale. Straight back to Lydia and our baby. I was doing this for us. I was doing this so that I could transfer my office and work more efficiently from the inn.

She had to know that the sacrifices I was making right now were only to strengthen our relationship and so that I could be with her, so we could be together and be a family.

Those intrusive thoughts about turning around and going right back to her did not leave me even after I was on the airplane.

Once I was back in the city, my mood turned foul, and nothing seemed to go right, especially once I got to my office.

“Why is there a note on my desk from Donald White?” I yelled to Sarah.

She appeared at my office door. “He’s called several times. I emailed you,” she said.

The note indicated the investment percentages he was interested in allocating toward my different projects, and that he was ready to receive corresponding numbers from me at any time.

I crumpled the note.

“Are you sure you emailed? Why didn’t you email Harris and have him complete this? You knew I was out of town.”

Sarah crossed her arms. “Because you told me that you wanted to handle anything from Donald White yourself.”

I groaned inwardly. Damn it, she was right. I had wanted to handle his investments myself, but I had been distracted once I’d gotten up to Brookdale. Lydia was a beautiful distraction. I was going to be a father. I was definitely distracted.

“You’re right, damn it.” I waved off Sarah and sat in my chair. Fortunately, cranking out the spreadsheet for Donald White was fairly straightforward, and with a few clicks on the keyboard, I had his desired percentages poured into an existing template. The numbers rolled out into columns with projections and balances. I typed up a quick email message and attached the spreadsheet, and then hit Send.

We were definitely going to have to develop a better workflow process if I was going to be working remotely from Brookdale for the foreseeable future. Notes couldn’t sit on my desk that I would never see. And Sarah was going to need a clear chain of command if she couldn’t get ahold of me to meet certain deadlines.

This was all more complex than I had originally anticipated. After all, with a laptop and an internet connection, I should have been able to work from anywhere.

25

LYDIA

I was back in the plumbing section of the library trying to find the book I had checked out a few months earlier. I managed to get myself into a little trouble thinking I could go in and disassemble a drain to clean out the P-trap without having step by step instructions by my side. It couldn’t be that hard. I had convinced myself it couldn’t be that hard. And yet, when I had a sopping wet towel under a sink and desperately in need of a bucket, I realized maybe I had forgotten a step or two.

I passed by the wiring books in the DIY home repair section. I wasn't ready to tackle that. And to be honest with myself, I didn't think I would ever be ready to tackle electricity. It simply scared me too much.

"There you are, stranger. What are you working on now?" she asked as she found me among the rows of shelves.

"I'm back to struggling with the bathrooms up on the third floor," I admitted.

I had a block of rooms that for some reason, I couldn't manage to get guest-ready on my own. The problems didn't seem so complex that I shouldn't have been able to handle them on my own.

"Lydia, I have a question for you," Evie said.

"Shoot," I said. My stomach twisted with apprehension.

"Please don't tell me that the man I saw you with is the baby's father."

If anybody was going to figure it out before they were told, it was going to be Evie.

"Busted," I said with a grimace and a blush.

"Lydia, no," she pleaded. She looked really upset.

"What do you mean, no, Evie?"

"How could you, Lydia?"

"How could I what? It's not like Brad Pitt came knocking on my door," I replied.

“But him, Lydia?”

I was confused. “What do you know about him that I don’t? What’s wrong with him?”

“Lydia!” Evie exclaimed. She was really upset, and I was getting even more confused.

“How could you? You’ve been sleeping with the man who wants to buy up Brookdale.”

I blinked a couple of times. “What? No. Evie, you must be confused. The man who wants to buy up Brookdale is middle-aged and shaves his head bald so that we don’t notice that he’s balding.” I described the snake who had ambushed me that day the previous winter.

“No. Lydia, JM Carlisle, that’s who I’m talking about,” Evie said.

“Right, Jackson Carlisle. The guy you saw me with, his name is Miles, James Miles.”

“No. Lydia, the man I saw you with is JM Carlisle. You said his name was James Miles. I bet if we look him up, we’ll find out that JM stands for James Miles,” she said.

“Then who the hell is Jackson?” I practically cried. “I remember a bald man named Jackson who wanted to buy the Sweet Mountain Inn.”

“But we met with him, remember?” Evie asked.

I shook my head, more confused and very uncertain of what she was talking about. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I wanted to throw up, but I hadn’t had morning sickness for a couple of months. I put a hand protectively against my baby bump.

“I don’t remember meeting him,” I admitted.

“Oh,” Evie said suddenly. “You weren’t at that meeting.”

“What meeting?” I asked.

Evie pushed her glasses up and ran her hands over her face. “It was a meeting with the Historical Society and the mayor and the JM Carlisle people. He was there and so was that bald man, Jackson, who you seem to think is Carlisle. But no, it was him, the man I saw you with, tall with dark hair.”

Suddenly, I was very shaky. I reached out and grabbed hold of the shelves.

“That can’t be right,” I said. “The developer wants to tear down the Sweet Mountain Inn. Miles has been helping me every time he’s in town. He fixes stuff and helps with painting or cleaning up. He moved everything out of Aunt Ruth’s old room for the baby.”

I started crying. Earth shattering, devouring me whole tears streamed down my face. This couldn’t be happening. Miles? My Miles?

“You honestly didn’t know?” Evie asked.

I shook my head. I didn’t know. How didn’t I know? “I thought he might have worked with them after Mayor Dan mentioned that the developer suggested that

Brookdale focus on an industry to bring into town.” I gasped for air. The lump forming in my throat made it hard to speak. “The last time I saw Miles, I had shown him the gazebo and talked—oh, my God, I talked like some kind of romantic fool about how the gazebo, if surrounded with roses, and the trellises on the library were perfect for wedding pictures, and how Brookdale was so pretty, and how I thought other people would see it that way if we could just get them here. And so when Dan mentioned that the developers suggested becoming a wedding destination, I stupidly thought Miles could possibly... Oh, my God, he lied to me.”

My mind jumped from one place to another, barely letting me finish the thought, let alone finish the sentence.

“He lied to me. He told me he wasn’t a spy for the JM Carlisle Group. And you’re telling me he is JM Carlisle. He’s the ultimate spy. He had me convinced that he was somebody else. Evie, what am I supposed to do now?”

“What do you want to do now?”

I curled over my stomach, wrapping my arms around the growing baby bump. This was his baby. JM Carlisle, that lying scum. But Miles was not that man. Miles was sweet and helpful and caring.

“Maybe they’re twins?” I asked in a desperate attempt to not be as stupid As I had been. I had let that man seduce me multiple times. He asked me about the inn as if he cared about it because I did. He was only trying to get information he could leverage against me, leverage against the town.

I reached out and grabbed onto Evie’s arms.

“Please tell me you haven’t let some handsome stranger from out of town seduce you.”

She laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“If he could do this to me, would he have sent someone else to try the same thing with you, to get the library?”

Evie patted the backs of my hands. “Nobody’s trying to seduce the library out from under me.”

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“Well, he’s trying to seduce the Sweet Mountain Inn out from under me,” I practically wailed. “And he tells everybody that the pie at the diner is so good.” I continued crying.

“The pie at the diner is good,” Evie said. “I’m surprised he didn’t try to compare it to some Michelin five-star dessert experience in New York City.”

“He said it reminded him of where he grew up, and it was the only good memory he had of that place.”

How could a man who liked cherry pie that much lie to my face the way he had?

“Are you telling me JM Carlisle is from a small town?”

I nodded. “I got the impression it wasn’t a good experience for him,” I said. “But he always seemed so interested in how I saw Brookdale. You know, he asked me to show him the town from my point of view and to show him all the good places.”

“As opposed to the bad places?” she asked. “It would be nice to have a few more amenities, like a movie theater or some more restaurants. I love Brookdale and I know you do too. So he got to see the town from your eyes. Maybe that will convince him not to build here.”

“Or maybe it convinced him how great Brookdale is and that he should build here. I never would have let him seduce me if I’d known who he really was,” I admitted.

She pulled the hanky out of her cardigan pocket and handed it to me. I dabbed in my

eyes and blew my nose and tried to hand it back, but she told me to keep it, and then she stepped in close and wrapped her arms around me in a hug.

“Oh, Evie, what am I supposed to do? I can’t have the enemy’s baby.”

“JM Carlisle is definitely the enemy around here, isn’t he?” She half chuckled.

“But I think I was in love with him,” I admitted. “And I think Miles was in love with me. He went back to the city to get stuff so he could be here more. He was going to move here to be with me and the baby.”

“That doesn’t sound like some land grabbing developer,” she admitted. “Your Miles sounds like a completely different person from the JM Carlisle I met.”

“Are you sure it was him?” I asked. I felt tiny and small and like I wanted to disappear in a puff of misery.

“I’m sure it was him—tall, thick, dark hair. And if I weren’t so mad at him, I’d have to admit, he’s probably attractive.”

“What do you mean? Probably attractive? Miles is ridiculously handsome.” I was instantly defensive on his behalf, which I didn’t understand. He had been lying to me. Why was I defending the man?

“Yes, well, you’re the one in love with him, and I’m the one who wants to string them up by his toenails for even thinking about coming into this town and conning the older generation out of their homes.”

She wasn’t wrong. If Miles really was JM Carlisle, he had been nothing but a lying, manipulative jerk who was trying to seduce my history, my memories, my life away from me. Well, he couldn’t have them. He couldn’t have the inn. He couldn’t have

me. He couldn't have this baby. And he sure as hell wasn't going to get his claws into Brookdale.

26

MILES

"Where the hell have you been?" Diego asked as he strode into my office.

"Out," was all I said. He didn't need to know my personal business.

"No, seriously, where have you been? You told Sarah you were going to be gone for a couple of days, and then you disappeared for almost an entire week."

"I wanted to confirm a few things about Brookdale."

"There's nothing to confirm," he said. "It's a small town. They're organizing to resist any kind of a buyout option we present to them. How was your presence up there for a full week going to change any of that?"

I shrugged. I wasn't exactly going to tell him anything about Lydia, and if I could change her mind, then I suspected everyone in Brookdale would follow her lead. But that was the story I was trying to tell myself.

I was up there because Lydia was up there. And I stayed up there because she was going to have my baby.

Crap.

I was going to be a father.

“Hey, Diego,” I started. “Your brother went through a whole paternity suit thing, didn’t he?”

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“Oh, man, he did. That was a wild ride. Some chick he hooked up with found out what his bank balance was, turned around, and showed up on his doorstep, claiming she was pregnant and that he was the baby daddy. So he took her in, and thinking since she was already pregnant, she couldn’t get pregnant again, he went and did the deed unprotected. That’s when she really got pregnant.”

“How would he know that? How did he find out?”

“Cheaters and liars always get caught in the end,” Diego said. “He said it was during some deposition or something over custody. He wanted a paternity test. She didn’t. He told her he wanted assurances that the child was his, and how would he know that she was telling the truth? And she made some offhand comment about when she actually got pregnant. He figured it out.”

“What did he end up doing?”

He ran his hand through his hair and sat in one of the low chairs in the conversation area of my office.

“Bro moved her into an apartment, said he would only take care of her until the baby was born and the paternity test proved he was or wasn’t the father. After that, if the kid was his, he’d sue her for full custody and she wouldn’t get a penny of his money. He set it all up through a lawyer, since it was a form of entrapment. Baby trap. She thought he was going to do right by her and marry her and give her a life of luxury. And instead, what did he do? He sued her for custody.”

“He’s got full custody, right? What happened to the mother?” I asked.

Diego shrugged. "Since he's the full custodial parent, he doesn't have to pay her a dime of child support."

"Her plan didn't quite go the way she thought it was going to," I said.

"Hell no, it gets worse. She's had a string of kids. Every single one of them's got a different baby daddy. Pretty sure she's pulled the same trick that she did on my brother on every single last one of them. The last guy married her. Every now and then, she hits my brother up for money. He sends her on her way. And she never sees her own kid. It's kind of fucked up, if you ask me."

"How did he get that paternity test?" I asked.

"Why? Did you get yourself into a little situation there, bud?" Diego asked.

"No, but if I were to, I guess I would need to figure out what my resources were."

"Yeah, sure," Diego said under his breath. He obviously didn't believe me.

I still wasn't going to admit I was in a situation to him.

"Unfortunately, you can't do a DNA test on the baby until it's born, in which case you do cheek swabs. If you need it through an authenticating agency for litigation purposes, it's more complicated. There's a chain of custody of samples, and it's not a cheap process. But if you're idly curious, you can buy paternity tests at the drugstore."

"And you know that how?" I asked.

"Cause I see them when I'm buying stuff at the drugstore. But you probably don't do your own shopping, so you wouldn't know that."

“Interesting,” I said. “You’re right, I don’t do my own shopping.”

“Look, since you’ve been gone, Harris and I have been looking at some other real estate options. We know you’ve got your heart set on Brookdale for some reason, but we’re not seeing the numbers coming in the way we need to.”

“Harris hasn’t seduced his grandmotherly lady in the county records office?”

Diego laughed. “He’s not about to either. If you’ve been up there, then you know that their Historical Society has been making some really serious claims. Which means, if they get some of those properties declared onto a national registry, then there’s no way we can go in and tear them down. It’s an uphill battle that I’m pretty sure we’ve already lost.”

“You’re giving up too easily,” I said.

“Giving up too easily, or making the smart financial decision? Our investors are relying on us to put money in their pockets.”

“Don’t lecture me on what our investors are expecting,” I said. “I’m well aware that they give us their money expecting us to make them more.”

“Then maybe you need to take another hard look at the quarterly statements, because the longer we wait on Brookdale, the more money we lose.”

“Fine. If you really think Brookdale isn’t worth the effort, where else? What are your ideas?” I asked.

I personally wasn’t ready to let go of Brookdale, but maybe my involvement with Lydia was clouding proper judgment. I knew this whole father business was muddling my head.

“There are other little towns right in the same area, and some of these so-called towns are barely more than a crossroads with a post office. So, buying up the land shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“We want there to be more than just a crossroads and a post office,” I said. “We want there to be a reason for them to go to that location.”

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“The mountains, hiking, skiing, it’s all right there. That’s the reason the resort becomes the destination,” Diego said.

“I think it would be better if there were a little additional impetus to get people into the area,” I said. “Come up with a prospectus, and I’ll think about it.”

“You hired me because I’m smart.”

“Then make good suggestions,” I snarled.

“My suggestion is that we cut our losses with Brookdale.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said as I waved him out of my office.

I couldn’t think about Brookdale because I was too busy thinking about Lydia. I was eager to get back to her, but after what Diego had said, it had me thinking about paternity issues. She was already sneaking around behind my back, running HistoricalSociety meetings. Who was to say she wasn’t trying to entrap me by having gotten pregnant?

The more I thought about it, the more I couldn’t help but wonder if she had seemed entirely too happy to see me. She hadn’t been mad. She hadn’t been worried. She was really happy.

Was that because she knew she had me in her grasp at that point? Was this pregnancy of hers really just a way to secure a man into wanting to help her?

She needed a lot of help. Every time I was there, she had me working on the inn and I thought it had been my idea. She was a smart woman. Was she smart enough to manipulate me this way?

When I was with her, I couldn't think straight. I only wanted to be near her, make her happy. And every time I returned to the city, it was as if a fog had cleared from my brain. I was out of Lydia's control, able to think logically and clearly.

"Sarah," I called out into the speakerphone on my desk.

"Yes?" my admin replied.

"Put a call through to Wilson and Priest, my lawyer."

"I'll ring them through when I have them on the line," she said before disconnecting.

I paced around my office as I waited for the call. I ended up staring out at the view of the city.

On a clear day, the glass towers only reflected other glass towers. There were not acres of trees turning fiery reds, oranges, and yellows for miles off into the distance. What the hell was I doing? Missing Brookdale? Missing Lydia?

The phone rang.

"I've got Briggs Priest on the phone for you," Sarah said through the speakerphone.

I hit the button to connect the call.

"Briggs," I said.

“Nice to hear from you, Miles. How can I help you today?”

“I have a not quite hypothetical question for you.”

“Sounds intriguing. What is this not quite hypothetical situation you have going on?”
he asked

“It would seem that I may or may not have gotten a woman Upstate pregnant.”

“Ah,” said Briggs. “I see how it’s not exactly hypothetical, but based on the outcome, it could be.”

“Exactly. How can I be certain that it’s mine? Do I really have to wait until the child is born to determine paternity?”

“You have two choices,” Bring started. “You either trust her word, or you wait until the baby’s born and have a paternity test done.”

“And my responsibility?”

“That is between you and the mother. If she is demanding prenatal assistance, we can help you work out an agreement that if paternity proves you are not the father, she is responsible for all financial contributions you’ve made.”

“And if she’s not asking for prenatal assistance?” I asked.

“You’ll definitely want paternity established for child support. Let me draft something up for you.”

“Yes, I’d appreciate that,” I said.

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LYDIA

As much as I didn’t want to admit Evie was right, she was. Miles didn’t come back. Because Miles was a liar.

I didn’t know how to proceed. I had been deluding myself for months. I almost wished that instead of his lying about who he was and really being the jackass who wanted to come in and destroy Brookdale, that I really was some accidental side piece who got knocked up. That almost seemed like it would have been easier to deal with.

Then again, a lie is a lie. I really didn’t know anything about the man at this point. I no longer cared to find out. There was always the possibility, since he lied about who he was, that he also lied about there not being a family he was being disloyal to. It was best if he stayed away.

What could he say to change my mind if he did come back? Nothing. He wanted to destroy everything about my life. He wanted to take the Sweet Mountain Inn away

from me, and I wasn't going to let that happen.

"How are you doing today, pregnant lady?" Evie asked as she stepped into the lobby. She had a handful of mail with her. "I intercepted Mary on her delivery today."

"You're playing post matron?" I teased.

Evie dropped the stack of bills and junk mail on the counter.

"Practicing for my next career," she announced.

I picked up the stack and began sorting the mail into the piles. Stuff I didn't want to read—bills. And stuff I didn't have to read—junk. My hand started shaking as I stared down at the envelope I held. It looked like it was from a law firm in New York City. My name and address were handwritten.

"Lydia, you okay?" Evie asked.

I let out a shallow gasp and struggled to take in another breath. "I... I... I..." I stammered. "I don't think I can open this."

She reached out and took the envelope from my hands. "What is it? Looks official. A summons for jury duty?" She looked at the front of the envelope. "Wilson and Priest. I don't recognize that name. Maybe it's something to do with your aunt's estate."

I shook my head. "They're in New York City."

"Everybody's in New York City," she corrected me.

It certainly did feel like it sometimes.

“Greg Blake handled all of Ruth’s estate. Do you think it’s... it’s JM?” I struggled to say his name. I could not call him Miles anymore, not now that I knew that wasn’t really his name. Or was it?

He had told so many lies to so many people, I had no idea what was the truth.

“Do you want me to open it for you? Her eyebrows raised above the heavy frames of her glasses.

I nodded.

She slid a fingernail in under the flap, ripped the envelope open, and pulled out a folded, printed sheet. I stared at her face, watching as her eyes darted back and forth. I didn’t breathe the entire time.

“That asshole!” she declared.

“What?” I snatched the letter from her hands and began reading for myself.

Miles was being a complete and utter dickhead. I was furious. The paper crinkled as I tightened my fists.

“He wants me to do what?” I handed the letter back to Evie, rage clouding my comprehension. “What am I reading? This makes no sense.”

Evie took the letter from me. “Have you even asked him for any of this stuff?” After glancing over it again, she set it down on the counter.

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My jaw worked open and closed several times. I could not form words.

“I had no way of contacting him before, so I couldn’t have asked him for... what did they call it? Prenatal support? No. And when he got here, I didn’t have to ask for anything. He volunteered to clean up my aunt’s room. He volunteered to take me paint shopping. He wanted to pick out baby furniture.

“He said he was going to be here to help. I didn’t have to ask. This is ridiculous!” I ranted.

The first line in the letter that had me so mad stated that the party of the first part, James Miles Carlisle, would only provide prenatal support If I guaranteed repayment upon the completion of a negative paternal DNA test.

“Does this mean he wants me to pay him back for everything he’s already done? I don’t have the receipts. I have no idea how much money he spent on the paint for the baby’s room.”

I was really glad I couldn’t decide on any of the cribs we had looked at, and that they didn’t have things that I liked. They were all so ridiculously expensive.

I gasped, trying not to panic over what I would have done if I had allowed him to buy one of those twelve hundred dollar cribs that he had been so drawn to.

They were beautiful monstrosities of furniture. I couldn’t imagine spending that much money on a crib that would only be used for a couple of years, five tops, if we had another kid. But clearly, that wasn’t going to be happening now.

“That’s what it reads like to me,” Evie said.

“And this other part?” I shoved my finger at the paper. “Does that really say I can’t pursue child support or custodial arrangements?”

Evie picked up the letter and scanned over it again. “Okay, the first part of this definitely identifies your Miles as JM Carlisle.”

“Thanks for that,” I said with heavy sarcasm.

Ignoring me, she continued. “The second part says—it’s all in legalese— but the second part definitely says he wants you to pay him back if this isn’t his kid.”

I grabbed a notepad and a pen and started making a list of everything I could remember he bought while he was here last. I wrote down moving boxes, and because he cleaned out the room, labor. I put a question mark next to that. Was he going to expect me to pay him to work? He had bought at least one hundred dollars’ worth of paint. I had some crazy idea of painting the boring old dressers in a blend of bright hues. And I wanted to paint the walls blue like the sky and fill them with fluffy clouds. I wrote down two hundred for paint.

He had manned the desk for at least three hours on occasion while I napped and rested, so I wrote down another three hours times the hourly rate I was paying Mrs. Griffin to run the desk. I couldn’t think of anything else he had spent money on.

I pushed the list across the counter to Evie.

“As far as I know, that’s everything,” I said.

She looked at it. “Okay, so you’re only going to be out maybe three hundred. That’s not so bad. Keep track of anything he sends you.”

“I’m sending anything he sends me right back. There is no way I’m going to let this man have some kind of financial hold over me.”

“That’s going to be tricky,” Evie said. “From the sounds of it, this lawyer is going to countersue you for anything you try to claim against Miles.”

I let out a weary sigh. “If I want child support…”

“He’ll sue you for custody,” Evie answered.

“He can’t have the baby. I don’t want anything from him. Who does he think he is? Rumpelstiltskin or something? He’s not some fairy who did me a favor. I don’t need to repay him with my firstborn.”

“Then you won’t get child support,” Evie said.

“I don’t want child support,” I responded. “I don’t want anything from that man but for him to leave me alone.”

“This last part is ridiculous,” Evie said as she continued to read over the letter.

I leaned over the counter trying to see what she was reading.

“This part, they want you to sign this letter in acknowledgement and return it.”

“That’s bullshit.” I snatched the letter out of her hands and crumpled it up into a ball before aggressively throwing it at the trash can on the floor. I missed.

“Fuck you,” I yelled at the wadded up piece of paper before stomping on it with my foot and grinding it into the floor. I felt mildly better picturing Miles’s face wadded up in the paper under my foot. I bent over with a groan and picked the paper up

before tossing it in the trash.

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“I have better things to do with my time and energy than acknowledge this bullshit. Miles, I mean JM, can take a very long walk off a very short pier.”

“What are you going to do if he shows up here again?”

“What I should have done the first time he walked in that door. Tell him there are no rooms at the inn and send him right back to Quality Suites out by the freeway.”

Evie narrowed her eyes and looked at me. I could tell that behind her glasses, her mind was turning something over in that big brain of hers.

“What are you going to do, Lydia?”

“I’m too busy growing a baby to care about anything he does.”

“Yeah, but it’s his baby, though.”

I shook my head. “Nope, not anymore. As far as anybody is concerned, I got into this state from immaculate conception. There is no father. I will not acknowledge him. I never want to hear that man’s name again, and I never want to see his face back in this town.”

28

MILES

“Briggs Priest to see you, sir,” Sarah announced over the intercom.

“What’s he doing here?” I muttered. “Sure, send him in.”

A moment later, the lawyer stepped into my office.

“Briggs, what brings you in today?” I got up from my desk and gestured for him to take a seat in the conversation area in the center of my office.

“I had another meeting in this building, and I thought I would stop by and check up on your little situation Upstate.”

“I thought I was paying you to deal with that,” I said.

“We sent out the initial communication a while ago, but the woman we contacted hasn’t responded.”

“Is that good or bad?” I asked.

“Depends on what her intent is,” Briggs responded. He tugged up the front of his slacks and took a seat. “If she has any kind of plans for coming after you for any financial support, it could be bad.”

“How so? Drink?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I can only speculate, which isn’t going to do you any good at this point.”

“What’s your best guess?” I asked. I sat across the small coffee table from him.

“Worst case scenario, if she can prove that you were in that little town on business, she could come after this whole thing.” He circled his finger in the air, indicating the company.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I laughed. “She didn’t seem to care who I was or why I was there.”

“If she didn’t care, then she would have signed acknowledgement and sent the letter back as requested.”

“What do I do at this point? Recommendations?”

“There’s nothing you really can do until she makes some kind of financial demand. When that happens, we can jump into action,” he said.

“You’re telling me I have to sit here twiddling my thumbs, waiting for her to come after me and my company for an undisclosed amount of child support?” I asked.

“Basically, yes,” he said. “I know that’s not the answer you were looking for. But you can’t force her hand. There is no child yet, and even after the baby is born, you need to get a positive paternal DNA test.”

“I was really hoping to get this settled and behind me sooner rather than later,” I admitted.

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“How soon before the child is due? The initial letter was a courtesy. You can serve her with a court order, but again, that’s not going to do any good until the baby is here.”

I shrugged. I had no clue when Lydia was due. “She was pretty big,” I said. I held my hands in front of my torso, indicating how big her belly was.

“Sorry. I can’t be more helpful at this point in time. Maybe she isn’t coming after you because you are not the cause of the situation,” Briggs suggested.

“You mean she no longer blames me for knocking her up? I seriously doubt that. She made it very clear that she thought I was the father.”

“Maybe that’s her game plan. Convince the last few men she slept with that they are the father until one of them bites and accepts responsibility.”

I laced my fingers together and rested my hands on top of my head as I thought. Lydia had been fairly straightforward, telling me that I was the father.

And I had gleefully stepped into that role. I had been that sucker for her.

How many other guys was she playing this game with?

“Thanks for stopping by,” I said. “I appreciate the update.”

“No worries,” Briggs said as he stood up. “I won’t even bill you for the time.”

He smirked and chuckled at his own joke as he stepped out of the office. I sat there for some time, contemplating my situation.

“Sarah, what’s my calendar look like?” I yelled.

Moments later, she appeared in the open door to my office. “You called?”

“How’s my meeting schedule? Is it clear?”

“You don’t have anything for another week,” she said.

“Book me a flight to Albany. First thing in the morning, and get a rental car. I’m headed back to Brookdale.”

“For how long?” she asked.

“Make sure you get me a return flight for the same day. I’m not packing a bag. I don’t plan on staying.”

This time, as I made the drive from Albany farther north toward Brookdale, I didn’t pay attention to the fall colored leaves on the trees. I didn’t care. I wanted to get to town and find out what Lydia thought she was doing. I drove straight to the inn and took the front stairs two at a time before I barged into the lobby. Just as expected, I found Lydia cleaning up after the morning’s breakfast setup.

“Welcome to the…” she started, a fake smile on her face until she realized who she was talking to. Her expression darkened as her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed together. “What the hell do you think you’re doing here?”

There was a quaver of anger, or was it fear, in her voice.

“Lydia, I need to talk to you.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk to you. You can turn around and go back to the city,” she snapped.

“I’ll leave” —I pulled a copy of the lawyer’s letter from my pocket and held it out to her— “as soon as you sign this.”

She took a few stomping steps toward me, snatched the letter out of my hand, crumpled it up, and threw it directly in my face.

“No. Fuck you, and fuck your letter,” she said.

I hadn’t thought Lydia was capable of such vehemence.

“Then don’t expect to get a penny of child support out of me,” I said.

“I never asked you for any kind of child support,” she yelled. But tears streamed down her face. “All I wanted was for us to be happy. But that’s not going to be possible because you lied about who you are, Miles, or should I call you JM?”

“You’re never going to be happy, Lydia, because you have a silly notion that you can restore old buildings that are already falling down on their own. You are too obsessed and blind to see what’s going on all around you.” I brought my arms out wide, gesturing at the dilapidated old inn. “This place is never going to be restored enough to be the kind of place you dream it can be. It was probably never that nice to begin with. All you’re doing is polishing a turd, Lydia. All that gets you is shiny shit.”

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“Don’t call my inn shit. Now get out. Go away already.” She turned and started to walk away from me. I wrapped my hand around her upper arm, stopping her, turning her so she would face me.

“Who’s the father of the baby, Lydia?” I demanded.

She twisted, yanking her arm out of my grasp.

“What does it matter to you? You’ve already proven that you don’t care about anything other than trying to destroy my town, my home, my life. So why do you even care?” she spat out.

“Sign the paper, Lydia,” I growled.

“I don’t have to sign that stupid letter. It’s only applicable if I want something from you. Read the room, Miles. I don’t want anything from you. I don’t want you. I just want you to go away,” she snarled. “Leave me alone. Leave Brookdale alone.”

“You and your little historical society are not going to get rid of me that easily.” I chuckled. “Be prepared for a fight.”

“There’s nothing to fight for, Miles. No one is willing to sell to you, and you can’t force us. Take your resort development somewhere where they want you. Nobody wants you here in Brookdale. I don’t want you here in Brookdale.” She was crying in earnest now, real tears, and not just those anger tears women get.

“I’m sure you’ll be singing a different story the second that child is born and you

realize you can't do it on your own."

"I can do anything I want, and if that means I'm raising this baby without a father, then that's exactly what I'll do."

"You're no longer claiming I'm the father?" I asked.

"I will never admit it. It was a mistake to have told you. Forget I ever told you. Forget you ever met me. Forget about Brookdale. Just leave already."

Her desperate sadness and tears seemed to trigger a tightening in my chest. There was still something in me that hated to see her in so much pain. If she let me and accepted my terms, I could take away all of her troubles and grief. I could make sure she never had to struggle again. But she would not listen to sense. She held on to this ridiculous idea that she could restore this inn, this town.

The urge to reach out to her started in my gut and grew more intense.

I shoved that weak emotion down.

"Fine. I'll leave, but this isn't the last you, Brookdale, or your little Historical Society have seen or heard from me."

"Go already." She sounded tired and defeated and unwilling to fight anymore. Her shoulders rounded as if it took too much effort to stand upright.

I had won this round. Lydia didn't know who she was dealing with. By the time I was done with her and this place, I would own Brookdale, the whole town.

LYDIA

I didn't need Miles. I didn't need a man. I could do this all by myself. I knew I could. Mom did it. Why couldn't I? Except I hated myself right now.

I was alone, and every time I tried to look at my feet, I couldn't see them because there was a baby in the way.

Miles's baby. And no matter how hard I tried, I could not seem to let go of that fact. I hated him and I was having his baby.

I was such a screwup. How was I supposed to get anything done when I couldn't even do this right?

Leaning on the counter, I stared at the lobby and the empty fireplace that desperately needed to be cleaned out before I started using it for the season, and it was chilly enough that I could start using it any day now. Only bending over anymore was a bit more complicated with the baby in the way. Maybe I should call Tony and see if I could hire him to clean it out.

People loved fireplaces in the late fall. They were cozy and took the chill away. There was nothing that was going to take the chill that had settled on my heart away. I was doomed to be alone, me and this old building.

Maybe I was too harsh and quick to judge when it came to selling this place, but there was no way I could let it go. No way.

The door opened and a smiling, laughing couple came in.

I pressed my hands down on my sweatshirt, as if I could smooth away the dreary, worn feeling of my existence by smoothing out the wrinkles on the front of my shirt.

They were happy and smiling and laughing, and so distracted by each other that I almost burst into tears while checking them in. It didn't seem fair that they could be so happy while I was so miserable.

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I held out the key to the man. “I can show you to your room and how the heater works.”

“Radiators?” he asked.

I nodded.

“We live in an old walk-up. We know how radiators work, but thanks.” He took the key.

I watched them head up the stairs and as they disappeared from view, I had one thought that moved into my mind and took up residence.

I picked up my phone and immediately called Evie.

“Answer the phone,” I said as it continued to ring. “Answer the...”

“Hi, you’ve reached Evie,” her voicemail started.

“No,” I complained as I listened to the rest of the message.

Beep.

“Evie, I’m desperate. Tell me not to call Miles.”

I disconnected the call, not sure what else to tell her, not sure there was anything else to tell her. As soon as she got the message, she would know I needed an intervention.

Maybe she would have an idea about what would distract me, keep me focused on my goal. I practically didn't even know what my goal was anymore.

Most of the time, I simply thought about what I needed to get through the day so that I could finally put my feet up and rest. This kid was sucking all the extra energy out of my very soul. I ran a hand over the baby bump. The baby was asleep now, which meant by the time I was ready to curl up in bed, it would wake up and start doing its gymnastics routine.

It would have been fun to share that with Miles. He would have pressed his ear against my stomach and listened, and then he would have kissed my stomach, as if the gesture could travel through my skin and he could kiss the baby. But that was a different Miles, and that was a beautiful daydream. It was not my reality. In my reality, the Miles I thought I knew didn't exist.

"What do you mean? You're going to call him?" Evie burst through the front door and into the lobby.

I knew she would come as soon as she heard the message.

"I'm thinking crazy thoughts," I admitted. "I need you to tell me that I don't need him."

"You do not need that man," she said.

"Yeah, but—" I started.

"You do not need him. You do not want him. He lied to you, Lydia."

"I was so mean the last time he was here," I whined.

“Telling a trespasser to get out of your building is not mean, Lydia.”

“Maybe I should have?—”

“Lydia, stop it.” She crossed the lobby and stepped behind the counter to where I was. She took my hand and led me back out to the couch and made me sit down.

“You don’t need to be nice to him. He lied. He pretended to be somebody he wasn’t.” She reminded me. “He tried to threaten you with a lawyer because he’s scared. He knows he messed up, and he knows you have the power over him because that’s his baby.”

I pressed my palms against the sides of my stomach and looked down.

“What am I gonna do?”

“What we’re going to do,” Evie announced as she stood up, “is eat pizza and watch movies.”

“I’ve got to be here,” I said, gesturing at the front desk over my shoulder.

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“There’s no reason you can’t set up your television in the lobby. And I’ll order pizza.”

“But my guests,” I started.

“Your guests have televisions in their own rooms. They don’t need to join our pity party. They can order their own pizza if it seems like a good idea to them.”

“Maybe we should wait until Mrs. Griffin?—”

“We are not waiting a couple of days when you clearly need carbs, and ice cream, and action romance movies where the hero kicks butt and the girl gets the guy.”

She was right. I needed something to change my outlook now, and not when it would fit better into my work schedule.

“Can we have chocolate ice cream?” I asked.

“We can get whatever flavor they have down at the IGA,” she claimed.

“Then I definitely want chocolate with chocolate sauce and whipped cream and maybe some maraschino cherries.”

“Why don’t we have banana splits while we’re at it?” Evie suggested.

Banana splits and pizza sounded like a very good idea to me.

“Why don’t you get the pizza and get your TV and set it up in here while I go to the grocery store and get everything we need for banana splits? That way, you can stay here in case any of your guests need you.”

I agreed with her plan, and we both jumped into action almost immediately. I ordered two pizzas, one with her favorite toppings and one with mine. While we both loved pizza, I never could quite get behind having pineapple on it. Evie thought adding pineapple and banana peppers made the pizza even better.

I stood in front of the TV pointing the remote at it, trying to find what would be a good movie for us to start with, when Evie walked in the door, carrying a couple of bags of groceries.

“I have a question for you,” she said.

“Shoot,” I responded.

“Dessert first or pizza first?”

“That is a very good question,” I said.

My stomach started to gurgle with anticipation of having a fancy banana split, and the thought was more appealing to my tongue at the moment than the thought of pizza actually was.

“I don’t see why we can’t start with a small banana split before having pizza. And we can end the evening with a second banana split if that’s what we really want to do.”

“Go wild with those thoughts,” Evie said.

“There are no rules when it comes to eating pizza and ice cream,” I said. “If we want

to have an ice cream appetizer, followed by a multi-course pizza meal, and wrap the evening up with more ice cream and then some potato chips, I don't see why we can't."

"Are you planning on having any of that with a side of pickles?" Evie teased.

I crinkled up my face in a grimace. "Ew, no."

I didn't like pickles, and it seemed to be everyone's favorite joke to ask me if I was suddenly having weird cravings for anything with pickles. Were pregnant women supposed to like pickles? I didn't understand it, and I wasn't having any weird cravings. I didn't consider having a banana split as being particularly strange and unusual. It seemed more like the kind of thing one would eat for a celebration. And in this case, as a distraction.

Evie was trying to keep my mind away from thinking anything about Miles, which was hard. I thought about him entirely too often, only I didn't admit that to her. Evie knew about the harder days when I didn't know if my resolve would hold firm. I needed her to help to keep my mind occupied and not think self-destructive thoughts of calling him.

I still couldn't get that image of the last time I saw Miles out of my mind. He had been so angry with me, and I absolutely hated that I thought I hated him at that moment.

I didn't know if I hated Miles. I didn't know if I could. I just knew that I couldn't be with someone like him. He had lied so effectively. He had hidden who he really was and was planning on cheating me out of my home. Even knowing all of that, I missed him.

MILES

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Walking away from Lydia was harder than I had ever imagined. I had to accept that it might also mean walking away from the project in Brookdale.

I did not like accepting defeat, and this felt entirely too much like that was what was about to happen.

I hit the intercom on my phone. “Get Diego,” I told my assistant.

She confirmed my request, and about ten minutes later, Diego stepped into my office.

“What took you so long?” I asked.

“I assumed you were going to ask questions about our property research. I wanted to get that information for you.” He held up his phone and shook it at me. “I also emailed it to you, so it’s already on your computer.”

“Well?” I asked, gesturing at him, or more specifically, at his phone, where I assumed he kept the information.

With a few taps and swipe motions, he began review the information out loud for my benefit.

“As you know, Jackson is making zero progress in Brookdale.”

I grumbled deep in my throat. Jackson and Brookdale were both turning out to be such disappointments.

“Harris and I have split up the region, and I’ve actually started looking a little further afield into Vermont, even.

“I don’t want to build in Vermont,” I snapped.

“We want to be an easy day’s drive out of the city so that we can take advantage of people looking to get away for the weekend. Going into Vermont means changing freeways, longer drive time...”

“I get that you don’t go to Vermont, but there are trains that go up through the area. It’s not going to change our demographic to move over a state.”

“No, I want to keep it in New York,” I said.

Diego shrugged. “Fine. We can do that.”

“Tell me what Harris has found.”

“There’s a little town about another forty minutes north,” Diego started.

“That’s too far,” I complained.

“What do you want?”

I stared at him long and hard.

“What do you want? So far, everything either Harris or I have suggested, you’ve shot down. What do you want?”

I stared at him long and hard. What I wanted was Brookdale. Brookdale was perfect. Brookdale looked like a postcard from another time. Brookdale had Lydia.

“I don’t know, but this isn’t it. Keep looking,” I demanded.

What I really wanted was a reason to go back to Brookdale. I wanted to see Lydia, make her listen to me. If she would only listen to me, she would see reason. I could make her understand.

I also needed to know about the baby. Had she had the child yet? I couldn’t find any information on the Brookdale social media pages. There were updates for the Historical Society. There were pumpkin pie baking contests. There were apple pie eating contests. There was a front porch Christmas decorating contest.

Mayor Dan shared so many random details about Brookdale. Pictures from people happily walking down the street to pictures of the librarian holding up new books in her collection. But there was nothing that was helpful to me. No news, no birth announcements. No pictures with Lydia or the baby or the inn, nothing.

I pressed the intercom again. “Call my lawyer,” I demanded.

“I’ll ring him through.”

I paced like a caged tiger in my office, waiting for the phone to ring.

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“I have Briggs Priest on the line,” she announced.

“Miles,” Briggs’s voice boomed through the speaker on my desk phone. “How can I help you today?”

“You haven’t received anything back from the woman Upstate?” I asked.

“No, nothing. Why? Have you heard anything?”

I let out a long breath. “No, I was hoping you had. She should be close to her due date by now, and I’m eager to get this impending paternity suit behind me.”

“Are you sure there’s even going to be a paternity suit?” Briggs asked. “We haven’t heard anything from her for a couple of months. At this point, she may have decided to go no-contact with you.”

That wasn’t going to be acceptable. I needed to know about my child. I needed to have a way to speak with her so that I could convince her that selling me the Sweet Mountain Inn would be the best thing for her, for our child, and for the town of Brookdale.

“Maybe I should head up and see if I can have a conversation with her,” I suggested.

“Miles, help keep your ass out of trouble,” Briggs said.

“Your point?” I asked.

“Going to Brookdale and harassing this woman is going to get you into trouble. She has not come forward with a request for any kind of financial support or emotional support. She has also not come forward to sue you for any kind of damages. My best recommendation is to leave her alone.”

“Three years of Harvard Law, and your best recommendation is to tell me to drop it?”

“I didn’t need to go to law school to see that she doesn’t want to be bothered,” he said. “And yes, three years of law school. My professional, well-educated opinion is to tell you to let it go until she comes forward. You can’t rush the birth of the child, and we cannot pursue any kind of custody or counter litigation until we can access a DNA test.”

“I don’t like this,” I admitted.

“It’s a waiting game at best,” Briggs said. “And you could be making this into something when nothing will develop from it. We can’t force her to interact, and if we continue to hound her, she could easily get a restraining order against both the firm and you.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “A restraining order? What’s that going to do?”

“For one, it will keep you from bothering her. Secondly, what you said about this town. It’s tiny, right?”

“Not much more than a couple of blocks. A diner and two traffic lights,” I said.

“Well, a restraining order could keep you out of town. It could keep your entire business out of town. I was under the impression you were trying to develop some property up there. So if you need to have access to this town, leave that woman alone. She could make it so that you legally could not enter town limits.”

“How is she going to do that?” I scoffed. Lydia couldn’t keep me out of Brookdale.

“If she gets an order that says you can’t come within one hundred yards of her, and the town is as small as you say, that effectively keeps you out of that town. You would be in violation of the law if you showed up.”

That was not the kind of news I wanted to hear from him.

“I’m not going to say thanks because you really haven’t done anything,” I grumbled.

“There’s nothing to be done but wait at this point in time. As soon as you get news that the child has been born, if you want to pursue custody and parental rights, we can request a court order demanding a paternity test. That’s as good as it’s going to get if you want to be proactive in this situation. Otherwise, we sit, we wait, we react when she takes action.”

I wasn’t a sit around and react kind of guy. I didn’t like defensive strategies. Power and action spoke the loudest. Sitting and waiting was nothing more than a weak whimper. I wasn’t going to sit around and whimper like some kind of loser or kicked puppy.

Waiting for something to change was what I would expect Lydia to do. She certainly wasn’t sitting around on her backside waiting for somebody to come along and save the town. She was the one running the Historical Society committee. She was the one pursuing grants so she could have funding to fix the Sweet Mountain Inn.

She was the one bravely going forward with all odds against her, and she was the one not responding to any of my requests regarding paternity.

Maybe Briggs was right and I should leave her be. I needed to forget about her, forget about Brookdale, and find another town to develop.

“I’ll keep you posted if I learn anything,” I said before ending the call with Briggs.

I punched the intercom button to Sarah again. “Tell Diego and Harris to get their asses back in here and to bring a map.”

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If I was going to forget about Brookdale, I was going to actually have to pay attention to what these two had found.

An hour later, Harris was hunched over a large paper map of New York State spread out over the coffee table in the conversation area of my office. He used a red Sharpie marker to indicate what towns and areas we had eliminated with large X's over the names. Brookdale had not been crossed out. Despite information to the contrary, I still wasn't willing to admit defeat.

The other towns that he and Diego had identified as potential locations were circled.

"Which of these places have you been to?" I asked.

Diego shrugged. "I've been to a few before I started focusing on Vermont."

"I told you to drop Vermont," I said.

"Yes, you have. I was acknowledging that prior to that decision, I was visiting those locations and not New York locations."

I grunted. He answered me and anticipated the next question I would have asked, why hadn't he been checking out sites in New York?

"I'll put a dot next to the locations I've been to. Most of the eliminated sites are where I've been," Harris said.

"So, most places don't work?" I confirmed.

“Yeah, we have a checklist. If a location doesn’t meet fifty percent or better of the items on our list, it’s a no-go.”

From the look of the map, most of Upstate New York was not acceptable.

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LYDIA

My monthly appointments to check on the baby got upgraded to having to be in the office twice a month. I was so close to having this child, I could hardly wait. I was big and round and so uncomfortable. With each appointment, I not so secretly hoped they would want me to go directly to the birthing center in Ines. Brookdale was almost the same size as Ines, so it didn’t make sense that we didn’t have one here.

The physician’s assistant at my obstetrician office sat next to me. I lay back on the exam table with my shirt tucked up and my distended stomach covered in goop. She ran the ultrasound wand over my huge stomach, pausing occasionally to click something on the monitor and measure the baby.

“Can you tell what the baby is today?” I asked.

She moved the wand around some more. “Nope. This kid is going to keep us guessing until they make an appearance.”

“And how soon is that going to be?” I asked. I was convinced that I should have given birth at least a month ago. I was tired and felt like an overstuffed Christmas turkey.

“I’m done with being pregnant,” I announced.

“You may be done, but this baby isn’t going anywhere just yet.”

“Oh, you’re kidding me,” I whined. “But it’s cooked, right? It could be born at any time? I was really hoping you would tell me that you had the due dates all wrong and that it was time for the baby to come out.”

“The baby is fully developed, but it’s not coming until it’s ready. And there is no reason to rush things. You are very healthy. You didn’t expect us to induce you, did you?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I thought maybe if the doctor officially announced I was past my due date, the baby would figure things out.”

“Nope. Dates are definitely on target. You probably should start experiencing some Braxton Hicks and maybe even some false labor pains, but I don’t think this kid’s gonna budge until the end of the month.”

I groaned. I was gonna have to waddle my way through the Christmas festival.

“Are you sure the baby isn’t going to come in two weeks? A week and a half?” I asked as if I could bargain when I would go into labor.

“What’s in a week and a half, other than Christmas?”

“I’m trying to get out of my civic duties. I volunteered to help with the Christmas festival, and I am not feeling particularly festive this year,” I admitted.

I wasn’t feeling festive at all. I didn’t even have a Christmas tree up at the inn. The only reason there were decorative lights around the outside was because in a moment of what I now looked back on as weakness—but at the time I considered it to be strategic planning—I had hired Tony to come in the weekend after Thanksgiving and

string Christmas lights around the large front windows and the porch.

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But inside, I hadn't put out any decorations. There was no hint of holiday cheer in the lobby. I didn't even place candy cane-scented candles around like I had in previous years.

"The baby isn't head down, and they are sealed up tight inside. You're in fine shape for the festival."

"Not fair." I pouted.

It's not that I didn't want to help with the Christmas festival. It's that I didn't want to do anything.

Instead of going home to the inn after my appointment, I headed over to the library to find Evie. I needed her company and distractions more and more as my due date grew closer.

The distractions were the whole reason I volunteered to help out with the festival as it was. If I could keep my mind and hands occupied, then maybe I wouldn't think about Miles. At least that was the plan.

Unfortunately, I thought about Miles every day. Some days, I thought of ways that I could strangle him, or travel back in time and prevent myself from falling for his charms. Other times, I just missed him so bad my heart hurt and my whole body ached.

The community room at the library had been turned into a giant crafting center where people could come in and volunteer to create the decorations we would use during the

festival. Tables were placed around the room as craft stations. Each craft station was stocked with various art supplies for specific projects. Next to each table was a large box where people could place their completed items.

I found that I was spending a lot of my free time here. I was surprised to find that the hands-on aspect of crafting helped to clear my mind. I found a moment of peace while I glued and cut and sprinkled glitter on my creations. The crafts kept my hands and my mind busy, and while I was creating decorations, I didn't think about Miles at all.

And Miles was all that I seemed to be thinking about. Him and the impending birth of our child.

Getting through the holidays was harder than I had anticipated. I couldn't help but wonder what this Christmas would have been like if I hadn't found out he was JM Carlisle and he was just the Miles I had fallen for? Handsome, kind, and capable.

What would the inn look like? Would he have helped me to decorate it? Would he have gone out and cut down the Christmas tree himself to help me decorate the lobby? Would he mind the front desk while I baked cookies?

What would a cozy Christmas with him look like? How would it feel? I wanted what I couldn't have.

I sat at one of the craft stations I hadn't tried out before. I needed to get Miles out of my head. I needed the crafting to help. I picked up a giant Styrofoam ball. It was easily the size of my head. There was a spool of fat, green ribbon. Using straight pins, I secured the ribbon onto the ball and began wrapping the ribbon around using push pins as needed to secure it in place.

I wrapped and pinned and followed the instructions. Maybe I needed to find a hand

craft to take up. How hard was knitting? Or that other one, crochet? That looked more complicated. At least knitting made sense to me with two needles. I couldn't exactly figure out on my own how a single hook could do anything. Or maybe I should take up sewing? I brushed that thought aside. Sewing machines were expensive and I would need lessons. I wanted something I could either figure out on my own or find some online videos to teach me.

I admired my handiwork. I wasn't half bad at this handmade ornament making. When it was finished, it would look like a giant tree ornament that would be strung up with various paper chain garlands and other handmade decorations.

Our theme for the festival was 'A Home-Grown Christmas.' Since the Historical Society was the main sponsor, we wanted to keep everything old-fashioned with homemade decorations. Partially driven by a need to be cost effective and low-budget, the handmade decorations were chosen to also increase community involvement.

The decorations didn't need to be sturdy. They only needed to last an afternoon. But we still wanted people to have fun and enjoy themselves.

"I see you are making more decorations. How was the appointment?" Evie asked as she wandered into the community room, a couple of books in her hands.

"Baby still has its legs crossed. And the physician's assistant said I'm still on target for an early January due date."

"That's good then, right? That gives you more time to be prepared."

"I'm as prepared as I'll ever be," I admitted. "I have baby clothes. I have more than enough diapers. I've been making extra meals and freezing them so that I have food prepped and ready. All I need now is to have this kid."

“Hush or the baby will hear you.” Evie leaned over my stomach. “Don’t listen to your mom. Stay right there. I need her to help get me through this festival. As soon as the festival is over, then you can come out. In the meantime, just hang out there.”

“Do you really think the baby is going to listen to you?”

“Of course, the baby is going to listen to me. I’m the cool auntie,” she said. “The baby isn’t going to listen to you. You’re Mom.”

I was more than ready to have her be the really cool auntie to my kid. She saw me smile and laugh with her. She didn’t see when I couldn’t hold a happy expression and it was too much work to even frown. I stopped letting her see my real feelings about this pregnancy and about Miles a couple of months ago, when she started to get too worried about me.

She didn’t need to be worried about me. I was tough. I could do this, but it didn’t mean that I wasn’t going to be sad about it or that I wasn’t going to wish that Miles were here with me, making everything easier.

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MILES

“Donald White is on the line for you,” my assistant called through the intercom.

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I glanced away from the spreadsheet I currently was in the middle of analyzing.

“What the hell does he want?” I muttered to myself. My curiosity would be answered the second I picked up the phone. Donald White was turning out to be a very needy investor. I preferred investors to write a check and only ask questions after they received their quarterly or annual financial statements. My company was not some kind of growth stock company. We were long-term value. Investing in the JM Carlisle group was not a get rich quick scheme. We were an investment that paid out over time. Donald White was treating his investment with us like some kind of hedge fund short selling scheme.

“Donald, how are you?” I asked as I picked up the phone.

“Cut the chit chat, Carlisle,” he said immediately. It sounded like he had a grievance that needed airing.

“Of course. How can I help you?”

“When I agreed to invest with your group, I thought I had expressed my concern regarding the allocation of certain percentages of my investments to your different divisions.”

“Yes, you did,” I confirmed.

“Then why haven’t you reported progress on that resort development I know you were working on?”

“A progress report on all outstanding projects was included with our quarterly financial statements,” I told him. “The next report will go out with the end of year financial statements.”

“I don’t have time to wait for that. I need to know what’s going on now,” he said like a petulant child.

It was a good thing that this was a phone call and not a face to face conversation. He would not have appreciated the expressions that crossed my face. Donald White had not invested so much money with us that he warranted personal reports and hand holding. But he was an investor, and I wanted to keep them all happy. One unhappy investor could spread dissonance in the ranks, and then I’d have multiple unhappy investors. Unhappy investors pulled their funding.

“We ran into a hiccup,” I admitted. “But we are still going forward with the project. It just looks like some of the parameters that we had originally intended are being redefined.”

“Redefined? There is no resort being built,” he said gruffly.

“At the moment, there is not. However, that doesn’t mean?—”

“I thought you had that little town under control.” He cut me off.

“That little town...” I started.

That little town was a pain in my ass. Unfortunately, I couldn’t seem to get away from it. Diego and Harris had several potential areas lined up for us to look at. Even Jackson finally admitted that Brookdale was probably going to be a total loss.

I wasn’t convinced. I still wanted to build there. I also knew that my motivation for

being in Brookdale was no longer strictly business driven. I wasn't fully honest with myself, and I still told myself that it was because Brookdale was strategically placed, not too high up in the mountains, close to scenic trails that were accessible year round for hiking and cross-country skiing, and not too far from the freeway.

"We had hoped to have more cooperation from the locals. That doesn't seem to be happening. So we're reaching out to other towns to see if we can get a warmer welcome. And to broker a deal with them," I said.

"And my money?" Donald White asked.

"And your money is making you money," I said. "I don't have the year-end reports, as we are still a couple of weeks from wrapping up the fiscal year, but everything looks good. You should expect to see a return on your investment once we provide the year-end financials."

"I had better see a decent return. Don't make me regret having changed my mind. I can still change my mind."

"You've already invested with us," I reminded him.

"I can always withdraw my funding," he exclaimed.

It sounded like a threat, 'make me money or I'll pull all of my funding from you.' That was always his prerogative. And while I said the words that made him think I cared about his investment, I didn't. If he chose to withdraw funding, it needed to be because he felt it was a bad fit and not because of how he was treated by me. He could leave, he could take his money, but my reputation would remain intact.

"I certainly hope you choose not to do that, Donald. After all, I expect we will see satisfactory progress on the resort next year."

“I certainly hope so,” he said. And then he hung up.

I stared at the phone.

“What was that all about?” Harris asked as he waited by my office door for my attention to shift and notice him.

“I’m not exactly sure,” I admitted.

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“One of our investors seems a little overly concerned that one of our projects isn’t underway.”

“The vacation resort you have planned for Upstate?” he asked.

I nodded. “Have you updated that search map?” I asked.

“I recently added a couple more potential sites and crossed off one town that we thought had looked very hopeful.”

“Email that over to me,” I said.

“I will do it as soon as I get back into my office,” he said.

“Was there anything else you needed?” I asked.

“No, I wanted to say, have a good holiday before I take off. I’m not back until after the New Year.”

“Oh, that’s right. Enjoy your time off,” I said before he left. I had practically forgotten it was Christmas. I had been focused on work and ignoring the world around me in an attempt to keep from thinking about Lydia and the baby.

A few moments later, I opened the email and took a look at the map Harris sent over. With nothing better to do since no one would be at the office because of the holiday, I decided that taking a drive Upstate and checking out the towns marked on Diego and Harris’s map would be a good idea.

I rented a car and began touring the region. The weather was cold, and the days were short. Looking at small towns in the dark wasn't doing me any good. I got a room in one of those characterless motels by the freeway. The building and the clerk both lacked the charm that Lydia and the Sweet Mountain Inn possessed.

What the hell was it with snowstorms and Brookdale? The weather was only getting worse as I drove toward my destination. I laughed to myself. Maybe Lydia would be feeling nostalgic when I showed up in the middle of another snowstorm. Or maybe she would curse my lack of common sense, being out in this weather. Because here I was, against my own better judgment and my lawyer's advice, and I was driving to Brookdale.

That hadn't exactly been my intention. I told myself that I was just going to take a drive out of the city, away from all the crazed shoppers and tourists, get out on my own, and drive around the small towns of Upstate New York.

But at some point during the morning, I made the unconscious decision to go to Brookdale. A couple of hours later, I had to admit to myself that I knew exactly what I was doing. And by then, the weather had rolled in.

I was closer to Brookdale than I was to going back. It would take less time to get to Brookdale and Lydia than it would have to turn around and try to go back. It would have been the smart thing to turn around and go back. But I needed to know, had Lydia had the child yet?

I no longer cared about the paternity. I knew it was mine. She had no reason to lie to me. I had every reason to project my guilt and distrust onto her. And that's exactly what I was doing.

She deserved something better than my being an asshole. Maybe now, I could see Brookdale from her point of view, much clearer than she would ever see it from my

point of view. And if I accepted that, I could accept that she was having my child too.

I needed to make amends. That wasn't going to happen with a letter from my lawyer. She needed to hear that straight from my own mouth. If I was lucky, she'd be willing to listen.

The snow started to fall thicker. It wasn't nearly as bad as that surprise spring snowstorm that had forced me to find refuge at her inn and thrown us together. It was still unseasonably early and was making this drive more treacherous than it needed to be.

It was a good thing I decided to rent an SUV instead of taking my own little sports car out. As much as I loved driving my McLaren 720S, there was no way I would drive it when there was the threat of snow or excessive rain. I liked that car entirely too much to risk it to hazardous road conditions and other unreliable drivers.

The snow was constant, blanketing all surfaces and covering the road. If it kept falling at this rate, I needed to be concerned with getting stuck on the road. At least the wind wasn't blowing drifts of snow around. I needed to get to Brookdale before I got myself stuck out here.

33

LYDIA

"It is not supposed to be this cold," I said through chattering teeth. I reached up and yanked down a festive garland.

"I blame everyone who ever sang that song, wanting snow at Christmas," Evie complained.

“Snow at Christmas is pretty,” I said.

“Pretty, yes, but this is inconvenient and cold,” Evie said as she yanked and pulled on the decorations. A long paper garland unfurled and fell to the ground. “We’re almost done. Hurry up.”

I began gathering all the paper decorations into a mass of nothing more than garbage.

A car door slammed shut somewhere behind me, and then an all too familiar voice called out, “Lydia, what do you think you’re doing?”

I turned and stared. “Miles?”

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He stormed through the snow up to the front of the library.

“I think it’s fairly obvious what I’m doing,” I said. “The real question here is, what the hell are you doing in Brookdale?”

He reached out and took the once festive Christmas decorations from me.

“I’m here for you,” he said. “It’s entirely too cold. You should be inside.”

“For once, I have to agree with that man,” Evie said.

“Since you’re here, you might as well make yourself useful,” I said as I pointed up to a row of oversized Christmas ornaments that were just beyond reach.

I was too cold to acknowledge the twisting in my insides. I brushed it off as the baby was being annoyed with me. Miles was here, and I needed his help. I would worry about the rest of it later—like when I was inside and could feel my toes.

Miles set down the sodden mass he had taken from my arms and used his considerable height and arm length to pull down the last three decorative elements.

Evie grabbed everything from him and headed inside. I followed her and picked up everything I could from the ground.

“We had to cancel the festival at the last minute because of the stupid storm that’s coming in,” I told Miles as I brushed past him and stepped into the foyer.

“Is that what you were doing?”

“Yes, that’s what we were doing. That doesn’t explain what you are doing.” I pointed at him. “Why are you out driving around in another snowstorm? I thought you were supposed to be smarter than this,” I sneered.

“It seems that fate wants me in Brookdale every time there’s a snowstorm.”

“Well, fate has a very sick sense of humor,” I said. “I suppose you need a place to stay?”

“Look, Lydia, I came back for you.”

“No, Miles. You came back so that you could make yourself feel better about something. The last time, you wanted me to say that the baby wasn’t yours. What do you want me to say this time?”

“I know the baby’s mine,” he said.

I paused and slowly turned to look at him. “What did you say?”

“I know the baby is mine. I was being stupid before,” he admitted.

“You can say that again,” Evie announced as she came to take the rest of the garbage from me.

Miles closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. “I admit it. I’ve made mistakes, but I don’t want you to be one of them.”

My insides flipped. I pressed the heel of my palm into my side.

“You might be a little too late for that one, Carlisle,” Evie said.

“Look, I know we got off on the wrong foot...” Miles lifted his hand toward Evie.

“You came into this town and acted like it was some kind of good idea that you were saving us from ourselves. I don’t think so.” She turned on her heel and went into the library to get rid of the rest of the trash.

Evie had never liked him, and I didn’t think she was about to change her mind now.

I reached out and grabbed his forearm. I tugged on him. “Fine, come on, let’s go back to the inn. We can discuss things there. I want to get home before I have to wade through too much snow.”

“I can drive,” he said.

I laughed. “No, thank you. I’m not going to let you drive me on slippery, icy roads, endangering everybody.”

“Fine, I’ll walk you back to the inn, and then I’ll come back for the car.”

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“Bye, Evie. We’re leaving!” I called out after her.

“You keep warm. Okay? Hey, Lydia, do you need me to come with you?” Evie asked.

“We’ll be fine. There is a long conversation I need to have with this man,” I said.

“Make yourself some hot chocolate as soon as you get in. You’re going to be chilled to the bone.”

“I’m already chilled to the bone,” I admitted. We had spent the morning putting up the decorations for the festival as the temperature dropped around us. And when the snow started falling and the temperatures grew even colder, we had to take down the decorations.

I began wading through the ankle-deep snow back toward the inn.

“Lydia, get in the car,” Miles demanded.

“I thought we talked about this. I’m walking.”

He fell in step right behind me.

I gasped as a sharp pain skittered across my abdomen. I flinched and curled in on myself.

Miles caught my elbow. “What’s the matter?”

I let out a long breath. “Nothing. Just the kid letting me know that they weren’t too pleased with all the work I did today. Maybe that car ride wouldn’t be such a bad idea.”

I felt out of breath. I hadn’t exerted myself putting up or taking down the decorations. The hardest part about all of that had been the cold. Maybe the baby was complaining about being too cold. But the baby had the best insulation in town. The baby had me keeping it warm.

I followed Miles back to the large SUV and climbed in after he opened the door for me. He was behind the wheel and helping me with the seat belt before I could finish getting buckled.

“I’ve got this,” I said.

“I know you do. I just want to help.”

“It’s kind of too late for that, don’t you think?”

His eyes locked with mine, and it felt like he was looking deep into my soul.

“Please don’t say that. It’s never too late.”

A shiver danced down my spine, followed by another tightening in my gut. I let out a loud moan.

“Are you okay?”

“Maybe this is really bad gas,” I said as I pressed into the side of my stomach and leaned over. “It’ll pass in a minute, I’m sure.”

Except I couldn't remember having gas so bad it made me double over in pain. The drive to the inn was short. And even though I could have walked it, I was glad that Miles was available to drive. The cramping in my stomach seemed to get worse.

He parked the SUV and started to get out. I didn't want to move.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, give me a minute," I said.

And then whatever it was that had caused my discomfort simply eased away. I let out a tentative breath, and everything seemed okay. I unlatched my seat belt and led him up into the lobby.

"I don't feel like checking you into a room. Just take a key. Okay?" I said as I waved at the front desk.

"Lydia," he said.

I stopped and turned around. "Look, Mile." I pressed my hand in the side of my abdomen as I began to feel that pressure again. "I don't want to fight with you, and you are not staying with me. Not after everything we've been through. I can't."

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“I don’t expect you to,” he said. “I needed to let you know how sorry I am that I let things get out of control.”

“Then why did you? You could have stopped it at any time. Instead, you didn’t tell me who you were, and you didn’t stop your lawyer from sending me those horrible letters. I never asked you for anything.”

I felt the tears burn behind my eyes. I didn’t want to cry right now. I was tired. I was cold, and everything was aching. Crying would only make me feel worse.

“Ah,” I cried out as a cramp took over my entire abdomen.

“That didn’t sound good, Lydia.”

“That didn’t feel good,” I admitted.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Feels like cramps or bad gas,” I said.

“Is it the baby?”

“I’m not due for another couple of weeks, and the doctor said I was probably gonna go to full term.”

I let out another agonizing groan.

“That definitely sounds like you are not going to last another couple of weeks.” Miles was by my side and guiding me to the couch. “Let’s get your jacket off. Get you comfortable.”

“Maybe it’s Braxton Hicks. The doctor said I could expect them.”

“What’s a Braxton Hicks?” Miles asked.

“From what I understand,” I started, “it’s kind of like practicing labor. The body’s just getting ready for what to do when it’s time to actually have contractions.”

“You’re having contractions?”

“I don’t think I am,” I admitted. “I don’t know. Could you get me a glass of cold water? Maybe that’ll help.”

“I’ll be right back.” Miles disappeared down the hall into the kitchen. Moments later, he was back, carrying a glass of water.

“You didn’t overdo it by setting up your festival?”

I accepted the glass and drank. The water felt good, soothing. I sat back and closed my eyes. I hoped that these false labor pains would fade away like a bad case of hiccups I wanted to be gone. I waited, and when there wasn’t another one when I expected it, I tentatively opened my eyes as if my vision was somehow connected to the entire process.

“I think I’m okay,” I said.

MILES

“Why were you out there working, anyway? Shouldn’t you be resting?” My voice was tight in my throat. Seeing Lydia doubled over in pain caused me pain. What I thought was a weakness of emotion was really a deep concern and caring. I had never cared for another person the way I cared for her and the baby.

“The doctor said I was fine and that I could do manual work within reason.”

“Tearing down decorations in a snowstorm is within reason?”

“It’s what was necessary,” she said.

“Couldn’t someone else have done it?” I asked. I should have come here earlier. I could have helped.

“There was no one else to do it. It was just Evie and me as it was our project. Everyone else had gone home as soon as the festival was canceled.”

“Couldn’t it have waited until after the storm?”

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She shrugged. “Maybe, but at that point, it would have been globs of wet paper. At least this way, there was something to grab onto without it dissolving under our fingertips. That would have been a real mess. Did you pack a bag this time? How long do you think you’re staying?”

I shrugged. “Well, with the storm, I’m staying as long as you’ll let me.”

She wasn’t yelling at me. She seemed too tired to even care. I didn’t know if I could handle the thought of her giving up on us.

“You might as well go out and get your things.”

I didn’t want to leave her side. What if she had another one of those pains while I was gone?

“I’m not going to lock you out. Go get your things,” she said.

I ran out to my car to grab my bag. I swear the temperature was even colder than it had been five minutes earlier. I stomped the snow off my boots as I made my way across the porch, and before I stepped back inside, Lydia started yelling.

I dropped my things and ran inside.

She was bent double, holding on to the back of the couch, panting as if she were in a great deal of pain.

“I don’t think,” she managed to say between pants, “that these are false labor pains.”

Her eyes met mine, and they were full of panic. I brushed the hair out of her face.

“You’re going to be fine. You’ve got this.”

“I kind of don’t want this right now,” she said before she grimaced and shut her eyes again. Okay.

“Aren’t you supposed to breathe through the pain? That’s what they do in the movies, right?” I asked.

She pursed her lips and began huffing.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” she cried.

“You’re fine, you’ve got this.”

“I’m not fine! Stop saying that,” she groaned loudly.

“What do I need to do?” Her pain had become my panic. I was a smart man, and I didn’t know what I was doing, and I was very well aware that movies were not adequate medical training. Half the time, they weren’t even accurately portraying childbirth.

“I should call your doctor,” I said. “Where’s their phone number?”

She pointed toward the inn’s front desk. “Birthing center in Ines, number is on a sticky note.” She sounded completely out of breath before she grimaced again.

“Birthing Center in Ines,” I repeated several times as I looked around the various notes on the front desk. “Got it!” I said, as I found a sticky note stuck to the computer monitor.

I picked up the phone and punched in the numbers. The phone just rang.

“Nobody’s answering,” I complained.

“They probably all went home because of the storm,” Lydia said.

“That’s stupid. This is New York. We have snowstorms all the time.”

“Maybe they’re closed because it’s Christmas Eve,” she said.

I hung up the phone and then tried calling them again.

“Answer the phone,” I pleaded.

This time there, was a click and a voice at the other end of the line.

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“Medical Center. How can I help you?”

“Lydia is in labor. What am I supposed to do?”

“Can I get your name?”

“Miles Carlisle,” I said.

“And your location?”

The lady’s voice on the other end of the line was entirely too calm. Did she not understand that we had a situation going on here? Lydia was in pain, and the baby was coming.

“Brookdale,” I replied.

“They’re part of my birth and delivery plan,” Lydia called out.

“She said you are part of her birth and delivery plan,” I repeated.

“Who is her physician?”

I was getting fed up with the twenty questions. I needed some advice.

“Who’s your doctor?” I asked as I conveyed the information back and forth.

“Dr. Rose.”

I repeated the name for the lady.

“Dr. Rose is located in Brookdale, not at the medical center,” she said as if I were stupid.

“Dr. Rose is located in Brookdale, and you’re the Birthing Center in Ines, and her labor and delivery plan is to have the baby there. Look, ma’am,” I said, trying to calm my own voice. “Dr. Rose and his patient?—”

“Her patient,” Lydia corrected me in the background.

“Her patient live in Brookdale. The labor and delivery plan is to go to Ines to deliver the baby at your medical center.” Maybe if I repeated myself she would understand the enormity of the situation.

“Well, that’s not a very good idea right now, not with the storm. We really don’t want people driving unless it’s an absolute emergency.”

“She’s having a baby!” I shouted.

“People have home births all the time. Did she not plan for this contingency?”

I didn’t bother to ask Lydia. She was too busy screaming her way through another contraction.

“Look, lady, is there anyone at the birthing center or not?”

“I assume not. I’m just an answering service, and their phones got forwarded to me because of the holidays.”

“This isn’t helpful,” I said and I hung up on her. “What’s Dr. Rose’s phone number?”

“You’ll have to look it up. I don’t have it memorized,” Lydia said. “Hurry, I don’t want to have the baby on the side of the road halfway between here and Ines.”

“You’re not going to have the baby halfway between here and the birthing center,” I promised.

I had that SUV. I’d be able to drive through the snow without any problems. I looked out the window. Then again, maybe not. The snow looked like nothing but a solid sheet of white.

Lydia didn’t seem to be in pain at the moment, but she was braced for it and panting hard. She had one knee on the seat of the couch, and her hands were gripping the back.

“Do you want to sit down? Get more comfortable?” I asked.

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“No. This position is actually the most comfortable right now. I didn’t think my back would hurt so much.”

I crossed the lobby to her and placed my hand against her lower back. She arched into my touch.

“That feels so good. Your hand feels so nice and warm.”

I began rubbing my hand back and forth across her lower back, anything to ease her pain.

After a few minutes, her grip seemed to ease on the couch, and she lifted her head.

“I think I can sit down now.”

I helped her stand on both feet until she could turn and lower back to the couch.

“Do you want your legs up?” I asked.

“That might be good,” she said.

I got her settled and as comfortable as she could be before I returned to the front desk and began my search for her doctor’s phone number. There were so many sticky notes scattered around.

“Why isn’t everything written on the same note?” I asked.

“That would require organization that I seem to be lacking at the moment,” Lydia said. “Look at the giant desk calendar. I may have written in Dr. Rose’s phone number there.”

I scanned the dates of the calendar to see if she had noted any appointments. I saw Dr Rose’s name written in, but no phone number. I noticed some scratch marks along the edge. It looked like a phone number. I called out the numbers to Lydia.

“Does that sound like Dr. Rose’s number?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s it.”

I immediately dialed. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said as the call went to voicemail.

I left a message and the inn’s callback number. Not satisfied, I immediately dialed the number again.

This time, it was answered.

“This is Dr. Rose. Can I help you?”

“I have Lydia Walsh here. She is in labor,” I said.

“Are you certain?” The doctor seemed very calm. “Is she having contractions?”

“She’s definitely having contractions, and she seems to be in a lot of pain.”

“How far apart are the contractions? Have you timed them?” she asked.

“They seem constant.” I put my hand over the mouthpiece. “Lydia, she wants to

know how far apart your contractions are.”

“They seem to be coming in clusters,” Lydia said. “One on top of the other, and then I get a break for maybe ten or fifteen minutes before they’re doing it again.”

I repeated the information to the doctor.

“Have you contacted the birthing center?” was her next question.

“I have. They said that nobody is there because of the storm and Christmas,” I grumbled.

“Oh, you’re having a storm?” Dr. Rose asked.

“Aren’t you in town?”

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“No, I’m out of town. The on-call doctor at the birthing center will be handling Lydia’s delivery if she is in labor. I suggest you give them a call back. The birthing center will follow up with my office, so Lydia will be in good hands with them. You have a good Christmas.” And then she hung up on me.

I hated to say it, but I was pretty certain we were going to be on our own. And I was not impressed with her doctor.

“What did she say?” Lydia asked.

“Your doctor is out of town,” I told her.

“What are we supposed to do?” I could hear the panic rising in her voice.

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LYDIA

Miles was frantically calling the birthing center and Dr. Rose. I could tell he was trying to be calm, but his voice was sharp and cutting. He wasn’t getting the answers he wanted. And if he wasn’t satisfied with the situation, I was afraid of what that meant.

He set the receiver down very slowly before lifting his gaze to meet mine.

“None of the calls are making it through. I think the phone lines are down. We were going to be on our own.”

I closed my eyes and tried to breathe. Nothing hurt for the moment, but how long was that going to last?

“We have maybe five more minutes before your next cluster of contractions?” he asked.

I nodded. He came and sat next to me. “I’m not going until we get through this next round, okay?”

“What do you mean, going? You aren’t leaving me?” I clutched his arm.

“I’m—”

I squeezed my eyes shut and gripped his arm hard as the next wave of contractions hit.

He made soothing noises and tried to brush my hair back, but there really wasn’t anything he could do that would make the pain ease. I wanted to talk to him. We had things to discuss, but the pain took over and I no longer cared about anything he might have said or done. I needed him right now, and that’s what mattered the most. I was sweaty and panting when the contractions finally faded.

Miles stood and picked up his coat. “I’ll be back soon.”

“You’re going out into the storm?” I reached out for him. I didn’t want to be alone.

“You’re going to be fine,” he said. “You shouldn’t have contractions for another ten minutes. I should be back by then. I need to go and get some help.”

“You can’t leave me here alone,” I cried. “What if the baby comes?”

“It’ll only be for a few minutes, I promise. The baby isn’t going to come between the time I leave and go get Evie.”

“You’re getting Evie? Why don’t you just call her?”

“I can’t call. The phones are down. If there’s anyone in this town who should know how to help you, I would think it would be the librarian. She’s supposed to be this font of esoteric knowledge, right?”

“Evie does know a lot about... well, everything,” I admitted. Evie would know what to do, who to call. “Promise me you’ll come back.”

Miles placed his hands on either side of my face. “I promise you, I will come back. I’m only leaving long enough to go get Evie. I know I’ve made promises to you before, and you have very little reason to trust me, but I swear I will return. You are not having this baby without me right by your side. Let’s get you comfortable.”

Miles helped me into a more comfortable position on the couch. He put one of the throw blankets over my legs. He leaned over and gently pressed a kiss against my forehead. It felt natural and not like we had been fighting and not speaking to each other for months.

I reached out and grabbed his arm. “Hurry.”

“I’ll be back.”

I stared at the door the entire time he was gone. It seemed to take him forever. I felt the panic well up like bile in the back of my throat. I didn’t want to be alone. I wanted Miles to come back and make everything better.

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The snowstorm was getting worse, and as the late afternoon progressed, it was starting to get dark. I worried he and Evie would somehow get snow blind and lost, even though the library was really only a block and a half away. Or maybe he would change his mind and drive off without me. Horrible scenarios raced through my head. I was scared. Thinking the worst wasn't helping.

A new wave of contractions hit, and my moans turned into hard, panting breaths and cries of pain. This was not in my labor and birth plan at all. I had wanted to be medicated. Screw having a natural birth.

It had never sounded comfortable, and it really wasn't. I didn't have anything I could take that would help. I wanted to be at the birthing center where they could stick a needle in my back and take this pain away.

I curled up and managed to hold on to the couch as another set of harsh contractions assaulted my body. These were so intense and so hard that I don't think I could have pushed if I had wanted to. I didn't even know if I should be pushing.

There was something inside me, and it felt like it was trying to claw its way out with razor sharp talons. The nature of the pain changed from constricting, dull, and achy. The pain almost had a shape. It was something with hard, rounded edges to something sharp and pointed.

My perception of reality began to twist. There was no part of my body that did not hurt. My hair hurt. I was delusional and barely registered when Evie and Miles came bursting back into the lobby.

I thought it must have been a dream. Evie hated Miles, but there they were together. She began barking orders to him, and he ran around, gathering everything. There was a frantic urgency to their actions.

“Hey, Lydia.” A cool washcloth brushed over my brow. “I guess the baby decided it wanted to show up for Christmas.”

“Evie?” Was that my voice? It was all slurred and raspy.

“Are you sure you want all these sheets out here? Don’t we want to move her into her bed?”

Miles was there. Miles had come back and we were going to be a family. This had to be a dream because Miles wanted to sue me for paternity. Why would he be here if he hated me?

“No, let’s get everything set up out here. It’s warm and there’s more room for us. This way, her bed is nice and clean for after the baby’s born. We won’t have to try to move her out of the bed to make it,” Evie was telling somebody.

“Smart call,” Miles said. Oh, right, he was here.

“Okay, Lydia, I know we’re best friends, but I’m about to see parts of you neither of us ever expected me to see, and I need you to be okay with that,” Evie said. “I’m going to have to be okay with that too.”

I think I whimpered something. I tried to focus, but the pain made everything hazy. Evie was in front of me with her hand on my knee.

I don’t know what Evie had planned. I knew that she seemed to have everything under control. Miles was listening to her. I was listening to her.

“Lydia.” She was talking to me again. She said something about taking off my clothes. “Miles, can you crank up the heat in here? I don’t want her to get cold.”

No, it was cold outside, and I needed to put on a coat so we could go. I was supposed to be having a baby at the birthing center, but instead, here I was, having a delusional dream while sitting in the lobby at the Sweet Mountain Inn.

“We should go to Ines,” I managed to say. I sounded drunk to my own ears.

Excessive amounts of pain tore through me. I screamed.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Suddenly, Miles was wrapped around me. His arms supported me, and he guided my head to rest back on his shoulder. “You’re doing really well. Lydia, keep going, darling.”

I don’t know how long he had been holding me. It felt good to have him supporting my body. Somehow, the comfort of his arms took away some of the pain, and there was so much pain.

I heard Evie somewhere off in the distance. “You’re gonna need to push now.”

Push. Push. Push. I don’t know what she meant. I lifted my arms and tried to push against the air, and then a contraction grabbed hold of my body and I curled in on myself. That’s what she meant by push. I screamed as I bore down.

“That’s it, Lydia, you got it. Push, honey.” Miles, still against my back supporting me, grabbed my leg and pulled my knee up.

Evie’s hands were suddenly on my stomach. “Stop pushing, Lydia. Just breathe. Just breathe.”

I followed every single one of her instructions.

She rested her hand against my stomach. “Time to push, Lydia,” she directed.

And then I was pushing again. With another scream that was more a primal roar, the tension and pain in my body seemed to literally slip away.

“I’ve got him. Oh, my God, Lydia, it’s a boy! It’s a boy!” Evie was crying.

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Suddenly, a squirmy, freshly born baby was placed on my stomach. I blinked, and clarity returned to my world as all the pain almost completely vanished. I could still feel it blurring the edges of my consciousness.

“It’s a boy, Lydia. He’s beautiful.” Miles’s voice crooned in my ear. “We have a son.”

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MILES

“What do you think you’re going to name him?” Evie asked.

Lydia held the baby, bundled up tight. She couldn’t stop staring at him.

I couldn’t stop staring at him. I had a son. I was a father.

She looked up at me and lifted her brows. “I really hadn’t thought about a boy’s name. But it’s Christmas. Maybe we should name him something like Chris or Noel?”

“We could always name him Yul,” I suggested.

Lydia squinted her eyes at me. “Yule, like Yuletide?”

“Not Y-U-L-E, but Y-U-L. Like Yul Brenner,” I said. “Leading man material.”

She laughed before returning her gaze to the tiny bundle with his little face exposed. She ran a finger gently down his cheek.

“Are you a Chris, or a Yul, or a Noel?” she asked him tenderly. “I guess we’ll have to think about it. We don’t have to name him immediately, do we?” She looked questioningly from me to Evie and back to me.

I sat next to her on the couch and wrapped my arm around her, using my finger to pull the blanket back ever so slightly so I could take a look at the boy. “We don’t have to name him immediately,” I agreed. “We can give it a couple of days and try out each name and see which one fits him the best.”

“You’re gonna let me name him?” she asked.

“You did all the work. He’s your son.”

She blinked, and I could see tears in her eyes.

“Why don’t you help Lydia get into her bed? She’ll be more comfortable there,” Evie said. “I have your Christmas present, which I should probably go get, because you need it now.”

Lydia looked up at her friend.

“What did you get?” she asked.

“I got a bassinet. I haven’t even finished wrapping it.” Evie chuckled. “Let me go get it. I’ll be right back. If you think you could stand putting him down for a minute to let him sleep on his own.”

Lydia gently twisted back and forth as she sat, rocking the baby. “I don’t know if I

can put him down at all,” she admitted.

“You don’t have to go anywhere just yet. Once you’re feeling more stable, we can get you back into your room,” I said.

“Are you sure you need to leave?” she asked.

Evie was already putting on her coat. She paused and looked at Lydia. I didn’t miss the furtive glance she sent my way. “Do you need me to stay?” Evie asked Lydia very pointedly.

Lydia also glanced over at me. “I’ll be fine if you go. But it’s cold and dark, and I don’t want you out in the storm.”

“It’s really not that bad,” Evie said.

I didn’t know if she was lying to herself or lying to keep Lydia from being too concerned. We had both been out in the weather earlier, and it was bad.

“Do you need me to go with you?” I asked.

Lydia sucked in a small gasp of air and looked at me with a panicked expression all over her face. I thought she was about to burst into tears.

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“I’ll be fine. Don’t leave Lydia and the baby alone,” Evie told me.

I walked her to the door. “Are you sure? You don’t have to leave.” I shared Lydia’s concern.

“Don’t be silly. I’m going to the library to grab the bassinet. I’ll be right back.”

“You could stay. Tell me where in the library to go, and I will fetch it.”

Evie put her hand on my shoulder. “Stay with Lydia and your new son. I’ll be back shortly.”

She closed the door after herself.

“I’m under the impression that no one can tell that woman what to do,” I said.

“You aren’t wrong,” Lydia replied. “She’s very strong-willed.”

“You two are very much alike, aren’t you?” I sat back down on the couch next to her.

“What do you mean?” Lydia asked.

“Once you have your mind set on something, no one can get in your way. I get the feeling that Evie is a bit of a juggernaut. Once she has her eye set on a target, there is no stopping her.”

Lydia nodded. “That sounds about right. We’re both very stubborn.”

“Lydia...” I started.

“You’re going to say we need to talk,” she said softly, but her eyes were on the baby in her arms.

“We should talk,” I agreed. “We can talk about anything you want or nothing at all. Or we can talk about why I’m here.”

She looked up at me, then back down at the baby. “I know why you’re here. What I really need to know is, why haven’t you been here? You’ve missed so much.”

“I have,” I agreed. “But I didn’t miss this.”

“No, you didn’t.”

I reached up and gently brushed the tear that ran down her cheek away with my thumb.

“I didn’t grow up in a town like Brookdale,” I said. “I spent my entire youth trying to escape from the place where I grew up. I didn’t have a place like this one, one that fulfilled your dreams. I came from a town of nightmares, so I couldn’t imagine why anybody would want to stay in a small town. To me, small towns were places you left. Brookdale is the kind of town where you have dreams and make plans.”

“Is that why you wanted to build your resort here?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Not originally. Brookdale is strategically placed. There are mountains, lakes, and trails all within a short drive. But after I came and visited, after you showed me what Brookdale could be, I wanted my project to be here so that I could be here.”

“That’s nice and all. But Miles, you lied to me. You didn’t tell me who you were.”

“That first snowstorm I was here, I didn’t give you my full name on purpose. I didn’t want it to cause any problems. I didn’t give you my full name because if you knew who I was, I was genuinely concerned whether or not you would let me stay.”

I felt her eyes on me, but I kept my attention on the baby in her arms.

“I had no way of knowing that I would encounter you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

I lifted my gaze and met her eyes. I gently stroked her hair back from her face and ran the backs of my knuckles down her cheek. “You are why Brookdale is so magical. You are why we have a son. You made me feel things for a place I didn’t know I could be invested in. You made me feel things for you.”

I stared into her eyes for a long moment.

“Miles, what are you saying?” she asked softly.

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“I’m saying I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life. I’ve made a lot of mistakes about Brookdale, especially wanting to tear it down so I could build something new. But you were never a mistake. The mistake was letting other people’s bad situations get inside my head until I thought that had to be what was going to happen between us.”

“But I didn’t want anything from you, Miles. I just wanted you.” She sniffled as more tears ran down her cheeks.

Each one of her tears was a stab in my heart.

“I know that now, and I need you to know that I’ll be here for you if you let me. I want to take care of you and the baby.”

“I’d like that, but...” Her face split with a wide yawn. “I’m so tired. Maybe going to bed would be a good idea. Can we continue this conversation later? I like the direction it’s going in. I really do. I don’t understand why I’m so exhausted.”

“Give me the boy,” I said as I gently took my son into my arms. “This is why you were so exhausted. Lydia, darling, you have just birthed a baby.”

“That’s right.” She sounded like she was already half asleep.

“Come on, and let’s get you both into bed.”

I helped her to her feet as best I could. I held our son carefully tucked up into one arm. He was so tiny. I could probably hold him in one hand, not that I would. He was precious, and I had to protect him.

“You’ll let me know when Evie gets back, right?”

“Of course I will.”

“Maybe you should go out and look for her.” Lydia’s words were starting to slur. She was so tired.

“I’m not going to leave you alone. I’ve left you far too many times when it was important. This time, it is important that I stay here. I’ll make sure your friend is okay. Let’s get you into bed.”

She walked very slowly. Her room was comfortably warm, and I was going to have to let Evie know that she was a genius. Keeping the bedroom clean made getting Lydia tucked into bed easy.

I made sure Lydia was comfortable in the middle of the bed and created a barricade out of pillows before I nestled our son next to her.

There was a strange buzzing sound.

“What’s that?” I asked, looking around.

“The inn phone is ringing,” Lydia said, waving her arm around. Her voice had that sing-song, half asleep quality to it.

I brushed her hair back and kissed her brow and then placed a very gentle kiss on the forehead of our sleeping boy.

“Hello,” I said, as I picked up the receiver.

“Miles,” Evie said.

“The phones are working,” I announced as if that wasn’t blatantly obvious.

“Of course, they are. That’s why I’m calling you.”

“Yeah, but they weren’t working earlier when I came to get you,” I pointed out.

“Oh, that makes perfect sense, then,” she said. “I wanted to let you know I’m not going back out in that storm tonight. That’s why I’m calling. I should have stayed. It’s miserable out there. Will you be all right without a bassinet for the night?”

“I already have Lydia and the baby in bed with all the pillows surrounding them so they’re blocked in.”

“Keep an eye on them for me,” she said. “And Miles, if you break my friend’s heart again, I’m gonna have to come after you with blunt instruments.”

I chuckled at her threat. I had seen this woman in action. I knew that she was capable of doing anything she claimed to be able to do. I took her at her word.

“I have no plans on doing that,” I confessed.

“What are your plans?” she asked.

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“To grovel and beg her forgiveness every day for the next fifty or sixty years,” I admitted.

“That’s a good plan. I approve,” she said.

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LYDIA

I don’t know how long I slept, but when I woke up it was still dark out, and there was a tiny little baby next to me. He was awake and his eyes were wide open. I don’t know if he could see anything yet, but that tiny little face peered out into the world. His little mouth moved as if he were experimenting with the new muscles in his face.

“Hi, baby,” I said quietly. “Where’s your daddy?”

Miles wasn’t anywhere. He wasn’t in bed, and he wasn’t sitting in the side chair.

I carefully and slowly climbed out of bed before picking the baby up. “What are we going to name you, little man?” I asked. I ran through our short list of names—Chris, Yul, Noel. They all felt a little bit foreign to my tongue.

I had publicly announced I didn’t care if I had a boy or a girl, and I wasn’t disappointed. I had a beautiful baby. But I had a list of girl names ready to go. I certainly hadn’t thought of what I would name a baby born on Christmas or Christmas Eve. Maybe giving him a seasonal name wasn’t the smart move. But I did like the sound of those names, Chris, Yul, Noel. One of them would stick.

My stomach gurgled.

“Let’s go see if we can find something to eat,” I said as I carefully picked him up.

His food was easy enough, at least so far as we hadn’t run into any latching problems. It would take some time to get used to it for both of us, but so far, he was a pro at breastfeeding. My food, however, was in the kitchen on the other side of the inn.

I was stunned. I let out a little gasp when I stepped into the lobby. Opposite the fireplace, between two of the sitting chairs, a modest sized Christmas tree had been put up. The decorations weren’t anything fancy. They reminded me of the handmade ornaments and garlands that we had prepared for our little festival that never happened.

A Christmas tree. The lobby had been slightly rearranged to accommodate it. I looked down at the bundle in my arms.

“It’s our own little Christmas miracle,” I said to the baby.

Instead of making my way into the kitchen as planned, I headed over to the coffee setup. I stood there staring at the coffee maker. It took me a while to realize it wasn’t working because we didn’t have any power. It was just as well. I couldn’t imagine how I was going to carry the baby and a hot cup of coffee at the same time, something I knew I shouldn’t even think about doing. With a shrug, I grabbed one of the Danishes and ripped open the package so that I could at least have something to eat.

I carried my newborn son over to the couch and curled up in the corner so that I could hold him comfortably and gaze at the tiny little tree. It wasn’t a real tree. I had several artificial ones in storage in the basement. The thought of Miles venturing down there in the dark made my heart swell. He was here and he was going to take care of us.

I really hoped that I could trust him this time because I wanted nothing more.

I sat staring at the tree and eventually, the sky out beyond the large front window began to lighten. It was a while after that before Miles came downstairs.

“You’re awake,” he said.

“Did you do this?” I nodded toward the tree.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t find any ornaments.”

“You must have been up all night making the decorations.”

“I was. It’s a good thing you like sticky notes and have them in different colors. Those made the paper chains go together easily,” Miles said. “When I was little, we would make paper chains. Sometimes, we would even have popcorn and cranberry garlands. I thought about it, but I didn’t know how I was going to make popcorn, and I have no clue where to find a needle and thread in this place, or if you even have any. I did see some strings of lights downstairs, but with no way of testing them, it seemed pointless.”

“I don’t think the lights matter,” I said. “It’s not like we have power. It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do,” he said. “After what you went through yesterday, I wanted to make today special for you. It didn’t seem right that for our baby’s first Christmas, he wouldn’t have a tree.”

“I wasn’t feeling very Christmassy,” I admitted.

“I’m afraid that’s probably my fault,” he said.

“I don’t have a present for you,” I admitted. “I don’t have any presents for him. He wasn’t supposed to be here for another two weeks.”

“I’m pretty sure this year, he’s the present. May I?” Miles reached out for the baby.

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I hope he didn't notice that I hesitated. It wasn't that I didn't trust him with our son. I simply loved holding the baby. He was so soft and warm and precious looking. I didn't want to put him down.

"Have you settled on a name yet?"

"Not yet. I keep trying the names out, Chris, Yul, Noel." I repeated the names yet again just to hear the sound of them.

"Chris Carlisle," Miles said. "I don't know. It sounds kind of rhymey."

"That's alliteration. Rhyming is when the end of the words sound alike. And, um, Carlisle? Really? What about the paternity test? Aren't you going to make me wait until that happens?"

Miles shook his head. "That doesn't need to happen. I was a fool to have ever considered it. I'm sorry about that, Lydia. I'm sorry I caused you pain."

I put my fingers over his lips. "Carlisle is a nice last name, thank you. What do you think of Yul Carlisle?"

He shrugged.

"Noel Carlisle?"

"Noel Carlisle," he repeated. "Sounds rather distinguished."

“Did Evie come back last night?”

“No, but the phone lines started working again, and she managed to call. She did say she would try to come over this morning as long as the storm has settled down,” he told me.

“Where did you sleep? You weren’t in my room.”

“I took a room upstairs. I didn’t want to presume I would be welcome.”

“I guess that’s more of that conversation we need to keep having,” I said with a heavy sigh.

“Lydia.” He looked down at me. “We can keep having that conversation as long as you need.”

His entire body swayed gently as he held the baby, as if some natural instinct told him that the constant motion would soothe his son. “I will never stop apologizing for my part of the past few months.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but the words got stuck in my throat. I wasn’t sure what I needed to say to him. Did I tell him that I was madly in love with him and that his being back in time for the birth of our son was almost as good of a present as our son himself? Did I tell him I thought he was a rat bastard for how he had treated me?

“Can we just go forward from here?” I asked. “There’s a lot to process, and it will take me time. I’m glad you’re here. I want you here, and I want to just go forward.”

“I’d like that. I’d like that a lot,” Miles said.

Suddenly, I was very tired, and I yawned.

“I think I’m ready for my first nap of Christmas Day,” I announced.

I climbed off the couch and headed back toward my bedroom. Miles walked with me, carrying the baby.

“You’ve already been up for a while, haven’t you?” he asked.

“I woke up and the little guy was looking around.”

“You must have heard him subconsciously. You take all the naps you need. I’ll be here,” he said.

I climbed into bed and adjusted my pillows. Miles held the baby until I reached out my arms for him.

“Would you mind staying with us for a bit?” I asked.

He sat on the edge of the bed. “Of course, I’ll stay with you,” he said.

When I woke up a little while later, the baby was missing. I started awake and scampered from the bed, running out to the lobby. I found Miles gently walking with the baby, back and forth.

I let out the breath I had been holding in my immediate panic.

“Oh, you’re awake. He was fussy, and I didn’t want to disturb you,” Miles said.

“I slept through his being fussy?” I asked, panic still surging through my body. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours yet and I was already failing as a mother. I should have woken up as soon as the baby began making noises.

“Not exactly. The baby was restless. I picked him up before he could disturb you. It’s been less than five minutes. It appears that your natural motherly instincts have kicked in and you knew something was up with the baby,” he said.

Miles didn’t protest as I took our son from him. I held the baby close, terrified to take my eyes from him as if he would vanish on me again.

38

MILES

Lydia was fiercely protective of our son, as she should be. She didn’t want to put him down and only allowed me to hold him when she needed her hands for other things. I was almost jealous of the connection she had with him.

But I knew my job now, as a father, was to protect her so that she could protect him.

I made her food when she told me she was hungry and got her something to drink when she told me she was thirsty. I convinced her to let me hold the baby so that she

could eat.

I could tell she was still tired, and I was convincing her to go back to bed to rest when Evie came through the front door.

“Merry Christmas, everybody,” she said.

And by everybody, she meant Lydia and the new baby. I was completely ignored. She carried a large, wrapped present. This is for you,” she said as she held out the giant box to Lydia. “Well, actually, it’s for him, but you get to open it.”

She turned and pushed the large box into my arms. I had no choice but to hold the box or let it fall to the floor.

“Let me hold the baby.”

“Sit down first,” Lydia commanded.

Evie sat, and Lydia gently handed over the baby.

“Okay, give her the box,” Evie directed me as she cooed and gazed lovingly down at the infant in her arms.

“I should get your present,” Lydia said as I handed her the large box.

“Nonsense,” Evie said. “You can give me my presents later. Right now, this is the only gift I want. Hi, Baby,” she cooed at my son. “I see that Santa delivered a tree. Did you stay up all night making paper chains and cutting out snowflakes?”

“Miles did that,” Lydia said.

“Really? I didn’t think you’d be that coordinated,” Evie quipped.

“There are some skills that one maintains from their elementary school days,” I said, not skipping a beat.

I was pretty sure that after Lydia’s intense delivery, Evie and I had come to an unspoken agreement. We didn’t have to like each other, but we were going to tolerate and get along with each other because we both loved Lydia so much. Maybe at some point, I would come to appreciate her scathing sense of humor, and maybe at some point, she would put up with me.

“Have you been outside at all?” Evie asked.

Lydia tore into the wrapping paper around her gift.

“No, we’ve been occupied,” I said.

“The entire town is absolutely snowed in,” she said. “So many people had their Christmas ruined by the storm, and the mayor called and asked me if I could help him with some kind of relief effort. I hope it’s okay. I let him know that you had your baby. He might come by to check in on you.”

“Oh, this is so lovely,” Lydia announced as she got the bassinet unwrapped and began opening the box. “Thank you, Evie, it’s perfect.”

There was a knock on the door, and then it opened. Mayor Dan stepped in. He stomped his feet a couple of times.

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“I’m never sure if I should knock or just come in. It’s an inn, but it’s your house, but it’s... Oh, Carlisle, what are you doing here?” He stopped in his tracks and looked up at me.

“Miles is the father of my son,” Lydia said.

The mayor narrowed his gaze at her, and then at me.

I held up my hands, palms out. “She didn’t know who I was. I failed to disclose that piece of information.”

“That sounds like a long story,” Dan said.

“A long story for another day,” I admitted.

“Once I heard from Evie that you had your baby, I thought I’d come and check on you.”

“We’re doing just fine. How’s everybody else holding up this morning?” Lydia asked.

“We’re trying to get the roads cleared,” Dan said. “I could use some more volunteers.” He looked at me.

I opened my mouth, about to explain I was needed for the baby, but then Evie cut me off before I managed to say anything.

“Why don’t you go help, Miles? I’m here, and I can help Lydia with the baby. It’ll be good for you to get to know some of the people of Brookdale.”

I didn’t miss the sharpness in her tone or her point.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay, Lydia?” I asked.

There was a tightness around her eyes that looked like worry. Or maybe that was her being very tired. “What do you think?” she asked.

“I think I should go help,” I said.

She nodded.

As soon as I was properly dressed for the weather, I followed Mayor Dan out and into a large pickup truck with a snow plow attachment to the front.

“Is this the city snowplow?” I asked.

“We have an official plow. This is one of our backup vehicles,” he said.

“It looks like a handy thing to have on a day like today,” I said as I climbed into the truck.

“I’m surprised you’re willing to come with me,” Dan said.

“Because of the whole buyout situation?” I asked.

He gave me a curt nod.

“I like Brookdale,” I admitted. “I’ve come to really appreciate the town, its historical

value, and the integrity of its people. I'd still like to put a resort in here, but the way I was going forward with that project isn't going to work out. If there were a way I could help to bolster this town's economy, I would, but I'm not sure what that looks like right now."

"What are your feelings on restoring old properties?" the mayor asked.

"Are you talking about the inn?" I asked. "Lydia has plans, and crazy as it might sound, I'm here to support those plans. I think she's right. In five to ten years, she could really turn Sweet Mountain Inn into a showpiece of a place. If she lets me invest in her property, maybe I can help her do that a little sooner than the timeline she's worked out."

"I was thinking of something not quite so old and potentially much more rundown."

I lifted my brows and glanced at him out of the side of my eye.

"Oh, yeah? What do you have in mind?"

"You've heard of those old resorts, all-inclusive family resorts from the fifties and the sixties? They're scattered throughout these mountains," Dan said. "Well, there is an abandoned one of those facilities not too far from here that you might consider taking a look at."

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No one on my team had ever mentioned purchasing an abandoned or a rundown property for restoration. But then again, that hadn't been their task. They had been told to find a location where we could build something new.

"How far out of town is this place?" I asked.

"Seems like it would be the prime location for teens to go get themselves into trouble, but it's far enough out of town that it's inconvenient for a local hangout. Kids do go up there, usually in the summers, mostly."

"And you say it's a mountainside family resort?" I asked. "Lake houses, outbuildings, that sort of thing?"

"Lake houses, it probably has a swimming pool, and one of those fancy ballrooms or even a dining room with a stage for dinner shows. I haven't been up there in a while."

"How do you know what's still available?" I asked.

He gave me a sheepish grin. "I might have run it past county records after one of our historical society town meetings."

"So you thought you could lure me away from downtown Brookdale if you could find another attractive piece of real estate for me to develop?"

Dan's head bobbed up and down as he nodded. "That sounds about right. Here we are."

He pulled the truck slowly to the side of the road and climbed out.

“Come on, shovels are in the back.”

I followed him out of the pickup, and he handed me a shovel.

“We’re clearing walkways all down this block. I’ll take this side of the street. You get that side.”

It was one of the blocks of houses that I had intended on taking over and leveling for my construction project.

I don’t know if Dan had plotted this, but having me shovel and clear off the walkways from the homes I had targeted seemed very shrewd and manipulative.

I spent a good portion of the day shoveling walkway after walkway.

“You look a little too big to be one of Santa’s elves,” the elderly resident of the home I was currently working on said as she pushed open her front door.

“Merry Christmas,” I said. “Not an elf. Conscripted into service.”

“Would you like a nice cup of hot cocoa for your troubles?” she asked.

“That sounds delightful.”

A few minutes later, she opened the door again. “I have some hot cocoa and some of the cookies that I left out for Santa Claus that didn’t get eaten last night.”

“Thank you.” I took the offered mug of hot chocolate and a cookie.

“What has you out doing such neighborly good deeds today?” she asked.

I gestured across the street to where Dan was shoveling her neighbor’s walkway.

“Oh, Danny Breaker. He’s always been such a good young man. It doesn’t surprise me that he would get one of his friends to come out on Christmas day to help dig us out.”

“He probably has teams all across town doing the same kind of work,” I said.

“Of course he does.”

“He really likes to take care of everyone here, doesn’t he?” I asked.

“We all like to take care of everyone here in town. It’s what makes this town home and like a family,” she said.

I thanked her for the drink and the cookie before continuing to dig her out.

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Maybe that was what made Brookdale special. People took care of each other. I knew it was Lydia's kindness that drew me to her. Maybe it was something she got from her environment, something she got from this town. Brookdale was special.

39

LYDIA

Evie stopped making cooing noises at the baby. She tilted her head to the side, and I could tell she was listening to Dan and Miles. It wasn't until the deep rumble of Dan's truck started that Evie turned to me. "Are you okay?"

"I've been asked that a lot in the last twenty-four hours," I said with a chuckle.

"I'm serious, Lydia, are you? Are you okay? Are you and the baby safe?"

I let out a heavy sigh. "If you didn't think we were safe with Miles, why did you leave last night?"

"I know that was a mistake," she said. "I honestly thought I'd be able to get back in time, but it was so much worse out there than it had been when Miles came and got me."

"Is it really any better today?" I asked.

The snow stopped falling, so there is that," she said.

“We’re fine,” I told her. “Miles has been nothing but wonderful and supportive. He even stayed up all night to decorate a tree.”

I pointed at the meager attempt at our festive Christmas tree. It may not have been the biggest or the shiniest, but it was decorated with love and that’s all that really mattered to me. In a few years, we’d look back on pictures of the tree and laugh about it.

I covered my face with my hands. “Yesterday was just really hard,” I admitted.

Evie laughed. “Of course it was. You had a baby, and he is so precious.” She turned her attention back to the bundle in her arms.

“I love him,” I said, completely unprompted.

“Of course you do,” Evie replied. “Look at how beautiful and wonderful he is. How could you not love him?”

“I mean Miles,” I said. “I love him.”

Tears leaked from my eyes. I didn’t realize I was crying until my face was wet.

“I don’t know what I would do without him. How am I supposed to do this by myself, Evie?”

“You know you’re not going to be by yourself. I’ll always be here for you.”

“I know you will, but I want him,” I said. “I’ve wanted him from the moment I met him, and as much as I should have hated him these past few months, I never could.”

“Is that what you’ve been hiding from me this whole time?” she asked.

I nodded. "I'm sorry about that." Guilt gnawed at me. I shouldn't have hidden anything from her. She was my best friend.

"It's not as if I hadn't made my opinion of the man known. You've been fighting an uphill battle. I can see how you feel. You've had to do it all by yourself. You didn't think I'd support you. You didn't think he cared. He loves you, you know."

My jaw dropped and I stared at her. I wasn't eloquent with words on a good day, and this wasn't a good day. I was so worn out and overwhelmed.

"What do you mean, he loves me? What did he say to you?"

"He didn't say anything. He didn't have to," Evie responded. "Look what he's done. Your tree. He's voluntarily went out with Mayor Dan trying to show you that he cares about you and this place."

"Do you really think so?" I asked.

"I know so. Has he not said anything to you?"

"Oh, he said many things to me, and I think we're at an agreement that we will go forward with whatever this is between us," I tried to explain. We were going forward, but I didn't know exactly with what.

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Evie adjusted the blanket around my son's face. "I think you would call this thing between you a family. The two of you have a son together. You're in love with him, even if you haven't told him yet. And clearly, he's in love with you. To be honest, I don't know if he even knows how to say those words, but his actions..."

"How can I trust him?" I was asking myself more than asking Evie.

"The easiest way to trust him is to simply have faith in him. Make sure his actions are matching his words. What has he been saying to you? What are his words?"

I had to think for a minute. "He keeps apologizing, and he says he wants to be here for us."

"Let's start there. He says he wants to be here for you. He has to prove that. How does he prove that to your satisfaction?"

I shrugged. "He has told me he's wanted to be here with us before, but when he left Brookdale, he didn't come back."

"That's when the lawyer's letters started," she reminded me. "Then that's how you know if he's changed or not. If he tells you he's going to be here and he stays here, then you know."

"He's going to have to go back to the city at some point. That's where his business is. That's where his home and belongings are."

"He can always make arrangements for somebody else to pack his stuff and ship it up

to him,” she suggested.

“What if he tells me he has to leave?”

“Then he also has to tell you exactly when he’ll be back. Lydia, you have to know in your heart whether or not he’s going to be good to his word. You have to decide whether you’re going to forgive him for his past actions. You have to decide if he’s worth fighting for.”

“What does that even mean?” I asked.

“Are you willing to argue with him to fight for your relationship and your family? Or do you just let him get away with actions that hurt you?”

“But my fam...” I stopped before I could finish saying, ‘but my family is gone.’ My family was in her arms at this very moment. My family was out digging in the snow with Mayor Dan.

“I think I understand what you’re saying. If I’m going to trust him to come back, then I need to be able to pitch a fit and insist that he come back.”

“Exactly. Now you’re getting it,” she said. “If you want this little guy’s father to stay in the picture, you make sure you let him know that you expect him to make sacrifices for this child and for you. You deserve all the happiness you want, and if that means you want that from Miles, then don’t be afraid to tell him. We’re the same age, so I’m no wiser than you are, but you’ve got to have noticed by now that men are kind of dumb.”

I laughed. “You have no idea.”

“And you would think someone as old as Miles would know better by now. I suspect

he hasn't been married or had kids by now because he hasn't figured it out yet. You have to be the one to help him figure it out. At the same time, you have to be willing to listen so that you can meet his needs too. Communication is key."

"Communication, talking, so I don't do things like not tell my best friend for four months that I'm pregnant?"

"Yeah, don't do that to me again. Please. I wouldn't have been mad at you. I was so excited when you finally let me know."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what I was doing." I rested my head on her shoulder. I think we were both crying a little at this point. "How did you get to be so smart?"

"I read a lot. We're all just making it up as we go, anyway. You don't have to go it alone. You have people who love you and this little baby."

"Do you really think Miles loves me?"

She nodded slowly. "As much as that man aggravates me, I think he adores you. And I think you need to be together."

"What about the whole thing with his company and taking over the town?"

"I'm pretty sure that's what Dan is taking care of right now. He's a lot smarter than he lets people think he is. On the surface, he's just a friendly guy, the town dad. He'll help you change the oil in your car, but also make sure you know how to do it for next time."

I groaned. "And his bad jokes. Those are Dad jokes, right?" I didn't remember having a dad, so I wasn't certain.

“The cornier, the better,” Evie admitted.

“Do you know what his plan is?” I asked.

“Whose plan? Dan’s? Not a clue. Half the time, I don’t even think Mayor Dan knows what his plan is. He somehow makes it all work.”

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“Or that’s what he wants us to think.” Would Miles even be aware that Dan was manipulating him?

I understood what Evie was saying. This was one of those times I had to trust that everything would work out—Dan getting Miles to do something, Miles being here like he kept saying he would.

Even though Miles and I had a contentious start to this family we suddenly found ourselves in, if I trusted that we would make it, maybe that’s all I needed to keep going.

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MILES

It was almost dark by the time Dan finished with me and dropped me at home. I paused before I climbed the stairs to the inn and realized I did think of it as home. Lydia and my child were inside. Wherever they were, that would be my home, whether it was living in an apartment within this building or buying her a house somewhere.

I knew I was never going to get her out of this town and into New York City. Maybe my city days were over. Maybe I had to give a small town a second chance? Besides, after today, I realized Brookdale was a fabulous place, and I wanted my kids to grow up here. I wanted them to have memories of a town like this and Christmases where we helped each other out.

I shivered. Even though my heart was full of nostalgia and happiness, my toes were going numb. I had stopped feeling my ears hours ago. The fire crackled in the fireplace as I opened the door. The lobby was empty, but it somehow felt different. Maybe because it was so familiar to me now and so cared for.

I toed off my boots and left them by the front door so that I didn't track snow in through the lobby and down the hallways. I checked the kitchen first, just in case, but it was empty. And then I made my way down the hall and into Lydia's little apartment. Our apartment, if she let me stay with her. And if she didn't, I'd rent one of the rooms on the second floor.

I thought her idea of expanding so that she would take over this entire hallway for her living quarters was a good idea. With the extra room, we could put in a kitchen, an office space for me, and a large master suite bedroom. Her room was the same size as the nursery, and while that was a good-sized bedroom for a kid to grow up in, she needed something grander, more in line with being the innkeeper of a glorious old building.

The Sweet Mountain Inn could be glorious. It definitely was old. The door to her bedroom squeaked as I tried to quietly open it and check in on her. She was curled up in the middle of the bed, the baby tucked into her arms. They both were sound asleep, and they were both perfect.

I began to close the door and back out when I heard her whispering.

"You came back. What time is it?"

"Go back to sleep. I didn't mean to disturb you," I said quietly.

"No, it's okay. Baby's probably going to wake up in a few minutes. We seem to have fallen into a pattern, about three hours on, three hours off."

“That’s good that you figured it out already.”

“Evie told me to write everything down. She’s the one who figured it out. We’ll see if it’s accurate.”

“It’s about five thirty,” I said, checking my smartwatch.

“I should get up and make dinner,” she said.

“Don’t even think about it,” I responded. “You take care of the baby. I’ll go make dinner. I’ll bring it in. If you get up before then, come find me in the kitchen.”

“You’re going to cook Christmas dinner?” she asked.

“I’m going to cook dinner, and it’s Christmas. I think that’s a very different concept from the big Christmas dinner. I’ll see what you’ve got in the kitchen. I don’t promise anything fancy. Maybe scrambled eggs.”

“Scrambled eggs would be good,” she said. “I don’t do anything fancy.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” I began to close the door.

“You can leave it open, it’s okay.”

I began to step away when I heard her call my name.

I stepped back into the room. “Did you need anything?”

I could hardly see her eyes in the dark room. But they were turned toward me.

“Thank you.” Her voice was so quiet.

I crossed the room over to her and carefully leaned over the baby so that I could get to her.

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“You don’t have to thank me for taking care of you. It’s my privilege.” I kissed her on the brow before stepping out.

The kitchen was not as fully stocked with food as I had hoped. The pantry was full of pre-packaged Danishes for the guests and the coffee bar. I did find a loaf of frozen bread in the freezer, some eggs, and a cupboard full of spices.

When I escaped the town I grew up in, I was barely a young adult. I may have made my way in the world of property development, but I had never learned how to cook much more than boiling a hot dog and frying up eggs. I had all the ingredients for French toast, and that was one of the things I knew how to make.

I was in the process of cooking my first batch when Lydia came into the kitchen carrying the baby.

“It smells good, like cinnamon and syrup. What are you making?”

“You had bread and eggs, and coffee creamer actually works really great when making French toast.”

“French toast? I haven’t had that in ages. How was your day out with Dan?”

She moved one of the kitchen table chairs out so she could sit as she held the baby.

“Exhausting,” I admitted. “Good for the mind. Bad for the back. I am going to be sore tomorrow.” I stretched and rolled my shoulders. If my hands hadn’t been full of cooking implements, I probably would have tried to rub my neck. “I met a few folks

in town. One nice lady gave me hot chocolate and cookies. Told me Dan has been taking care of Brookdale for years.”

“Evie and I were talking about that. Did he tell you any of his stupid jokes?”

“He did. He’s got a lot of them. I have the feeling he didn’t even break the surface to the well of jokes he’s sitting on.”

“Probably not. I don’t know if you know people like this, but they always tell the same stories and same jokes over and over again. Well, I don’t think I’ve ever heard Mayor Dan repeat a story or a joke. Not even at a town-hall meeting or one of the Historical Society meetings. And every story he has always seems to fit the situation.”

“He’s been paying attention to the people and this place for years. It’s different from what I grew up with,” I said.

“How so?”

“Economically depressed town with one factory as most residents’ source of work. Rampant alcoholism, drugs. It wasn’t a nice place. But Brookdale has people making sure this town stays a nice place. People like Dan. He actually suggested a property. As soon as the roads clear, I want to drive out and take a look.”

“What kind of property?” she asked.

“Apparently, there’s an abandoned lakeside resort not too far from Brookdale. If the infrastructure is already in place, I could go in, get it properly cleaned up and reestablished. I wouldn’t have to start from scratch or destroy buildings people want to keep.”

“Is that something you would consider? Renovating an abandoned site like that?” I shrugged.

“It sounds like a great opportunity to me. I haven’t found a location that I’ve liked half as much as I like Brookdale, and I have to be here for you. As long as it’s not swampland, I’ll consider it a win-win. I get a resort, your historical society saves the town.”

“What if the structures are in such bad shape and you have to build from the ground up?”

“I don’t see how it would be any different. I was already planning on building from the ground up here.”

“I think I know the place he’s talking about. It would be close enough that people could drive into town for restaurants, but we only have the diner,” she said.

“Attracting restaurants into Brookdale wouldn’t be as hard if there were a reason. Having a tourist resort not far away would be a very attractive reason.”

“Even if it was one of those all-inclusive places?” she asked. “Isn’t that what your lakeside resort would be?”

“Have you ever been to an all-inclusive resort?”

She shook her head.

“Some people go to those and never leave the property. Other people simply take the all-inclusive aspect as a suggestion. Besides, all-inclusive was not part of the original concept. Maybe once the snow is cleared, you can take a ride out there with me, and we’ll take a look at it.”

Lydia's eyes went wide and her mouth made the shape of an O. The muscles in my back managed to get even tighter as I went into alert mode.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“I don't have a car seat for the baby yet.”

I relaxed.

“I’ll take care of that,” I said. “One infant car seat as soon as I can get to a store. Then we’ll take the baby for his first car ride and go see if we can find this place.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” I liked the smile she got on her face. It was the first smile I had seen on her lately that wasn’t from looking at the baby.

I slid the plate with the first piece of French toast onto the table next to the chair where she sat.

“You want me to hold him while you eat?”

“Only if you promise not to cook while you’re holding him.”

“I promise. No multitasking while I’m holding the baby.”

41

LYDIA

The cold went away, and so did the snow, almost as quickly as it arrived. And after a few days, we were left with only a few piles of dirty snow along the edges of the streets. There were no other remnants of the big snowstorm that somehow triggered my early labor with the baby.

He still didn’t have a name. He had spent two days as Chris. Part of the second

‘Chris’ day, we tried using the full name of Christopher and the nickname of Topher. Topher didn’t last for more than ten minutes.

Today, I couldn’t decide if he was going to be Yul or Noel for the rest of the day. Evie had informed me that I had a few more days left before I needed to file the birth certificate.

“Are you sure he’s okay?” I twisted in my seat and looked in the back, where all I could see was the bulk of the car seat that protected him.

“Noel will be fine,” Miles said. “Noel. Noel.” He said the name a couple more times. “It feels awkward in the mouth.”

“Noel,” I repeated. “Noel Carlisle does sound pretty nice together.”

“It does, but on a day to day basis, how often do you walk around being called Lydia Walsh?”

“What about you?” I threw the question back at him.

“I’m either referred to as Carlisle or Miles. In business, nobody really says Miles Carlisle.” He deepened his voice as he said his name.

“You’re right. Nobody walks around calling me Lydia Walsh, at least not since I was in school and the teacher was calling my name.”

We were headed out to the resort he was considering purchasing for development. Miles had gotten the information he needed from county records, including directions and maps. He had spent at least a full day on the phone with somebody in his office in New York, barking orders to them. And now we were going to actually look at the place.

If we could find it.

There was a wide pull off on the road. I glanced down at the printed out directions in my hands. The instructions weren't very clear. This was the second attempt to find the private road leading to the property.

"I think this might be it," I said.

Miles pulled over. About ten yards farther into the woods, I could see a chain draped across what at first didn't even look like a footpath.

"It's chained up."

Miles jumped out of the car and examined the posts and the chain. He did something, and then the chain fell to the ground. He brushed his hands together as he walked back to the car. "It was just for show. There are no 'No Trespassing' signs posted anywhere, and based on the information we've been given, this should be the spot on the map. We'll be fine. I do this all the time."

He got in the SUV and began driving slowly as we had to rediscover the roadway covered in years of fallen leaves and branches.

After a quarter of a mile or so, the woods opened up onto a compound of dilapidated buildings and covered walkways. In the not too far distance was a lake with half fallen down boathouses.

"Oh, Miles. This place is..."

"Perfect," he said.

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I wasn't going to say perfect. I was thinking more along the lines of the stuff of horror films. But he was smiling, and I could see his mind working as his eyes darted around.

"Stay here. I'll be right back." He got out of the car and took a few steps forward.

He put his hands on his hips and simply looked out at everything. He looked like a man overseeing his kingdom. At that moment, I somehow understood what this project meant to him.

The baby began fussing. I climbed out of the passenger seat and into the back and began making shushing noises. That didn't stop him from waking up.

I carefully removed him from the buckles and held him so that I could breastfeed. As I looked down at the baby and then out at Miles, suddenly, I knew what his name was.

He wasn't Chris, and he definitely wasn't Noel.

He was Nick. Nicholas, the bringer of presents. Nick Carlisle. That was his name. When he finished feeding, I changed him and secured him back in the car seat, all before Miles returned to us.

"I'm going to have to go back to the city," Miles announced.

"For how long?"

“I have to?—”

“No,” I interrupted him. “For how long? You can go, but I have to know exactly when you’re coming back.”

“I’m coming back to you, Lydia.”

“You’ve said that before, Miles. I can’t do that again. I have to know.”

“I understand, darling. I won’t leave until after the new year. I’ll be gone for four days.”

“Four days,” I repeated.

“I’ll call you every day,” he said.

“You promise?” I asked.

“Yes, Lydia, I promise, and I know that you need something more than empty promises to know that you can trust me.”

I gave Miles a sharp smile. “I do, but I’m going to trust you to come back, okay?”

“I will not break that trust. I promise,” he said.

I felt tears stinging my eyes. I didn’t expect this to be this hard. I didn’t want him to go. I didn’t want him to go, even if it was only for four days. I swallowed around a lump in my throat.

“You have to come back, Miles, because I love you.”

“I love you,” he said. His voice was so low, I almost didn’t hear him. “And I love the boy.”

“Nicholas,” I said. “His name is Nicholas, Nick.”

And then I lost it. I couldn’t stop crying.

Miles climbed out, walked around, and pulled me out of my seat and into his arms. It was the first time in a very long time that he had held me like this.

“Nicholas.” He smiled as he said the name. “That’s a wonderful name. I thought you were going for something with a Christmas theme.”

“Old Saint Nick,” I said. “Santa Claus himself. After all, you said he was a present.”

“Santa Claus brings presents to all the good little boys and girls. And you’ve been a very good girl this year, haven’t you?”

“I tried,” I admitted.

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“And I sucked,” he said as he brushed my hair away from my face and down my back.

“Yeah, you kind of did,” I admitted.

“Yet, you still love me,” he said.

“I can’t help it.”

He caught my chin with his finger and tipped my face up to meet his.

“I can’t help but be in love with you, either.” And then he kissed me, and that kiss was so soft and so warm and so perfect.

I wondered, oh, so briefly in that split second before my brain turned off, why it had taken him five days since his arrival to kiss me properly?

“Maybe I’ll only be gone for three days,” he said with a chuckle.

“Three days is definitely better than four,” I admitted.

“I’m going to have a lot of work to do getting this property up and running, getting the renovations done on the Sweet Mountain Inn, and learning how to be a local.”

“You, a local?” I almost laughed.

“Hey, I was a small town kid once. I’ll figure it out. I’ll have you to help me. You can

be my Brookdale coach.”

“I think you and Mayor Dan need to become friends,” I said. “That man will be a better Brookdale coach for you than I will.”

“Dan’s a good guy. I know he is. I could actually see that happening.”

Before the moment got too terribly serious, Miles gave an exaggerated shudder. “I can’t believe I’m moving back to a small town. Get back in the car and let’s go home before I change my mind.”

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him.

He kissed me on the tip of my nose. “I’m joking. I’m not going to change my mind. I love you.”

We got into the car. Miles drove in a large, bumpy circle before heading back down the private road.

“Nick, huh?” he asked. “Nick Carlisle. That’s easy to say, doesn’t sound awkward the way Chris or Noel did. I knew you would figure it out.”

“I guess we need to file his birth certificate now that he has a name,” I said.

Miles’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he continued to say Nick’s name. “Are you planning on a middle name?”

“Does he need a middle name? Coming up with one name was hard enough,” I complained.

“Is there anyone you would want to name him after?” Miles asked.

“What about your name?”

Miles shook his head. He kept his eye on the road as he turned out from the private lane and back onto the local road.

“He gets his own name. I have my father’s name, and I refuse to use it other than the initial.”

“James?” I asked.

He grimaced. “Yeah. I was an ego trip for that man, not a child. I don’t want that for Nick. I say skip the middle name or give him the name of someone he could look up to.”

“Dan?” I asked.

“Nicholas Daniel Carlisle. Now that’s an impressive name.”

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EPILOGUE: MILES

One year later...

I stood back and admired the Christmas tree. This year, it was tall and properly proportioned to fill the lobby. Unlike last year's scrawny, meager little tree, this one was grand and covered in shining glass ornaments and twinkling lights.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Lydia cooed as she stepped into the lobby.

She had Nick on her hip, and he was chewing on his fist. He gazed up at the lights.

If I could tell what he was thinking, I would have said he wanted to eat it. That child explored the world by putting everything in his mouth. It was a challenge to keep ahead of him and baby proof for his safety. Especially when we lived in a practical construction zone.

Large areas of the inn had been stripped down to the lathe and plaster sub walls so that we could remodel and reconfigure our living quarters, just as Lydia had wanted. She was getting a modern kitchen and a full ensuite bathroom with a walk-in closet for her new master bedroom.

As soon as our home within the Sweet Mountain Inn was completed, I'd have a crew out and start working on upgrading the commercial kitchen and start looking for someone to outsource running a cafe for the inn.

“How was the site today?” Lydia asked as she stepped up to me and leaned in against my shoulder.

“Everything’s going well.” I wrapped my arm around her and tickled Nick on the chin. He was a little drooly. I ended up wiping my fingers on the back of his pajamas.

“They should finish the roof on the main building before it gets too cold, and then we can start all the interior work. Lake Lodge is on target for having a soft open in the late spring. And all the investors are happy.”

“Good news for Christmas,” she said. “Still planning the big grand opening for the Fourth of July?”

“Absolutely.”

Nick let out a big yawn.

I slid my hands around his tiny little ribs and lifted him from his mother’s arms.

“Let me go put this guy down for bed. He’s got a big day tomorrow.” I kissed him on top of his head. “He had a big day today,” Lydia said as she grabbed his little feet and moved them back and forth. “He had his first birthday. Merry Christmas Eve, baby.” She talked baby talk at him.

“And tomorrow, he gets his second Christmas,” I pointed out.

“You did a wonderful job of making sure he had another beautiful Christmas tree,” she said wistfully. She followed me back to our rooms and watched as I wiped up our son’s little face and rocked him until he cracked another big yawn.

I didn’t set him down in his crib until I was certain he was almost fully asleep. He

made some snuffling noises and settled in as soon as I put him down. I stood there and watched him sleep for a bit.

That was my boy. He had changed everything about my life. I lived in a small town, and I loved it here.

I looked up at Lydia. She was the other reason I loved it here.

“Hey,” she said.

She reached her hand out to me, and I took it, allowing her to drag me away and into our room.

“I have something for you,” she said with a smirk on her face.

“Oh, really?” I knew what that smirk meant, and I was looking forward to the presents she was willing to give me. “I have something for you too.”

I reached deep into my pocket and pulled out a small silk drawstring bag.

“What’s this?” Lydia asked.

I held her hand and sank down onto one knee.

“Miles?” she asked. Her eyes filled with tears as she realized what I was doing.

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I opened the bag, and a two-carat diamond solitaire engagement ring fell into my palm. I held the ring up to her.

“This has been far too long overdue,” I admitted. “Would you?—”

“Yes!”

“You’re supposed to let me finish,” I teased.

“Sorry, finish,” she directed.

“Will you marry me?”

“Can I say yes now?” she asked.

I took her hand and slid the ring onto her finger. It was a perfect fit. With a muffled squeal, she threw her arms around me. I had to brace or I would have fallen over onto the floor. She peppered my face with kisses.

“I thought about waiting until tomorrow morning. I realized, with everybody coming over, I wouldn’t have a moment alone with you to do this properly. I hope you don’t mind that I didn’t propose with a full audience.”

“I don’t mind at all,” she said. “Besides, if you had waited until tomorrow, then I wouldn’t have been able to thank you properly and show you how wonderful I think you are. I thought I would surprise you with... this.”

She unbuttoned the front of her blouse and let it fall away. Under her clothes she wore a sheer red lace thing. It had a bra that did amazing things to her breasts and switched my brain completely off. There was a filmy drape that covered her soft middle, and when she kicked out of her lounge pants, there was a tiny matching pair of panties that really exposed more of her glorious ass than it covered. Then again, that was the point of a garment like this one.

I made a noise in the back of my throat. It didn't come out as planned, and I sounded more desperate than I had meant to. This woman knew exactly how to remove all logical thought and command from me. And she was going to be my wife.

With a proper growl, I lifted her and placed her on the center of the bed. I pulled my shirt off, ignoring buttons or that I wore layers against the chill. I needed her skin pressed against mine.

"You like?" She giggled.

"Damn, woman, you have outdone yourself. Have I told you today how amazing and beautiful you are?"

"I think so, but I could stand hearing it again."

"I love you, Lydia. Last year, you gave me a son. This year, I get to unwrap you."

"I thought you might want to give me a present," she said as she reached low and cupped my cock.

I may have been a little rough as I pulled the lace of the push up bra aside, exposing her dusky nipple to my view. I closed my eyes and took that beautiful peak into my mouth. Her nipples were a delicate treat. I would not have full access until she stopped breastfeeding, but I could not resist sneaking in a quick taste.

She gasped and clutched my head against her.

With reluctance, I released her nipple and began tasting and kissing the rest of the soft skin of her breasts.

She was panting and making small mewling noises. God, the sounds she made drove me mad. She dragged her nails over the backs of my arms and over my shoulders. She could mark me all she wanted. I was hers, completely.

I slipped my hand between us, finding that sweet spot between her legs. Her fancy lace panties were wet, and in my way. I hooked my fingers into the thin straps over her hip and dragged them down her legs.

In the moments that our bodies were apart I shed my pants. When I returned to her, I skimmed up the length of her. I brushed the flimsy red veil part of her outfit away from her middle so that I could place small love bites and kiss against her skin.

I let out a disappointed groan as I took in her fancy bra covered breasts, but I understood her reasoning so I didn't force my preference on her.

She reached up and threaded her fingers through my hair. "What are you looking at? I thought you were going to give me a present," she teased in a low, sexy voice.

She skimmed her leg up mine. Her skin was like the softest silk.

I rolled us so that she perched over my hips.

"Take what you want," I said.

I ran my hands over her skin and watched as she slid down my length. She closed her eyes. We both sucked in breaths as she took me into her. She braced against my chest

and began rocking her hips.

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She was a goddess the way her hair spread out around her. I couldn't help but wrap my hands over her breasts. They were too tempting as they bounced above me.

She grabbed her hands over mine and pressed my palms against her. She was lost to her actions as she rocked and pulsed against me.

I thrust into her to match her pace. She needed to go soon, or I would explode. I was so close to spilling everything into her when she began moving frantically. She released my hands as she fell forward and braced against my chest.

I grabbed her hips and continued to drive into her as she was lost to an orgasm. I followed close behind. Her inner walls grabbed my cock and milked the orgasm out of me. She was everything in my world, and I could have stayed in this brief moment of perfect, extreme bliss indefinitely.

Lydia let out a whimper and shuddered as she collapsed against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and held her close. I never wanted to let her go.

"I love you, Lydia Walsh," I said as I traced my fingers over her soft skin.

"Lydia Carlisle," she corrected me.

"I really like the sound of that," I admitted.

"I also think I'm gonna like the sound of Mrs. Carlisle."

"How do you feel about Wife?" I asked.

“As long as I get to call youHusband,” she replied.

“I couldn’t imagine your calling me anything else.”