



Coffee and Christmas Kisses

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Can I get this city boy to take our relationship from decaf to full-bore espresso with whipped cream and sprinkles?

Asking the sexy stranger to be my fake boyfriend for a night is a no-brainer. He's only in town temporarily, after all. It'll be easy to convince my family we broke up as soon as he goes back to his super successful, high-powered career in the big city.

But Cole's version of being a fake boyfriend is better than any real boyfriend I've ever had. I didn't expect to fall for him, but it's too late now. And there's no way he'd be willing to stay in Silver Creek for a boring coffee shop owner.

My heart may never recover, but I can't make myself end things. I'm letting this fake relationship percolate as long as I can.

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Chapter One

Cole

The only lights still lit on the floor of the huge office building my company occupied were those in my own office space and the ones leading to the exit, the ones that stayed on all night—as usual. I'd outlasted even the night janitors, and the only people left in the building were probably a couple of security guards. I closed my laptop, tucked it into its bag, and stood, my joints protesting after a long stationary day in front of my desk. Despite the long day, I still had work I wanted to get done that evening. With one hand, I rubbed the spot on my solar plexus that had been aching all day, and with the other, I grabbed the notepad I'd used that day and stuffed it into my bag as well, before locking my office and heading toward the elevator. When I stepped inside, I punched the button to have the elevator take me down to the parking garage, where my little silver sedan waited for me.

Once I'd gotten to the garage—my car one of the last ones there—I sank into the leather seats and cranked the heater. For a few seconds after the heat kicked in, I sat there, my head against the seat, and took a few deep, even breaths to center myself and let the day's work wash away. Four counts in, hold, four counts out. Hopefully the tightness in my chest would go away and I'd be able to breathe easily again soon. When I was ready to go home, I plugged my phone in and pulled out of the garage.

Practically the moment I pulled out and into the street, my phone rang. I glanced at the display—Mom. With a reluctant smile, I tapped the screen to answer. I liked my mom, I really did, but I wasn't entirely in the mood to be chastised by her, and that was certainly what she was about to do.

“Hey Mom.”

“Cole Martin, don’t you dare ‘hey Mom’ me. I haven’t heard from you in almost a week and here it is, nearly Christmas.” I opened my mouth to speak, but she barreled on. “Have you decided what you’re doing for the holiday yet?”

“Mom, I—” I tried again.

“I don’t want to hear that you have to work.”

I sighed and shook my head, even though it was futile. It wasn’t like she could see me, after all. “You know I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice, Cole.”

I bit my tongue to keep from arguing any further. As the director of marketing at Nexus Brandworks, I really didn’t have a choice. Work had to be done, it was my job to make sure it got done, and if it didn’t, I’d lose my shot at getting a promotion to vice president in the new year. “It’s really important that I keep up the momentum, Mom. If I want to make VP anytime soon, I can’t drop the ball. Roger’s retirement is just around the corner and they still haven’t named his replacement yet. I don’t want to lose my opportunity just because it happened to fall at Christmastime.”

“Cole...” Mom’s tone was a warning.

“I’ll definitely be there Christmas day, for sure. I can’t make any promises beyond that, but I’ll do what I can.” Luckily, my commute was short, and I was turning into the parking lot for my apartment building, so I had an excuse to get off the phone. “Gotta go, Mom. I’ll call you soon.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, Mom.” I parked and wearily made my way upstairs to my apartment, on the sixth floor of the building, my legs feeling as if they were made of lead as I trudged up the stairs. I tried to avoid using the elevator at home, and had convinced myself it was adequate for my daily exercise, but it felt like a losing battle that night. Once again, I rubbed at the tightness in my chest as I opened my apartment door.

Inside, I set my laptop up in front of the couch and grabbed a protein bar to snack on while I reviewed a few designs that had been submitted to me for approval earlier that day. I worked as long as I possibly could before my eyelids grew heavy and I started to nod off. Finally, as it was nearing one in the morning, I closed my laptop for the night, realizing belatedly that I’d only eaten a protein bar for dinner and promising myself I’d get something heartier for breakfast. I made my way into my bedroom and stripped down before collapsing into bed wearing only my boxers.

My alarm went off at six the next morning, as usual. With a groan, I slapped at my phone on the nightstand until the blaring stopped and quickly got ready for work. After a quick shower, I threw on a clean pair of boxers, along with fresh slacks and a pressed button-down shirt. I topped off my outfit with a dark sport coat, shoved my laptop back in its bag, and headed to work.

It was just over a week until Christmas, and I found myself thinking of what to buy my parents as I drove to the office. I stopped by my favorite chain coffee shop to get a chai latte—I was trying to cut back on coffee—for breakfast. Remembering my promise to myself about eating a better breakfast, I also ordered a slice of pumpkin loaf and a raspberry scone. Carbs and caffeine—what better breakfast was there? My chest was still tight and I found it hard to take a deep breath, so once I made it to work, settling into my desk before anyone else had made it onto our floor, I sent a quick email to my brother, a family doctor who still lived in the small town we’d grown up in.

Less than ten minutes after I’d sent the email, my brother texted me.

Andy: Cole, if your chest hurts and you can't breathe, you should go to the ER, not email your brother at obscene hours.

I chuckled and shook my head. He'd always been an alarmist. It was, I guessed, part of his nature as a doctor.

Cole: It's not that serious. It's probably just anxiety or something. Can't you just write me a prescription for something?

Andy: There are so many things wrong with that, I don't even know where to start.

Cole: You're no help. Fine, have it your way. I'll drink my chai and have my scone and get my work done with my chest hurting.

Andy: I'm serious. Chest pains are nothing to joke around with. If you don't go to the ER, I'm going to come drag you there myself.

There was absolutely zero chance of me taking myself to the emergency room for what I was certain was nothing, so I put my phone down and got to work. Ten minutes after that, Mom called.

"Your brother says you're headed to the emergency room," she said by way of greeting.

"Hi Mom. He's wrong. I'm fine. It's just a little anxiety over this promotion, that's all."

"Cole Augustus Martin!"

"Yikes. No need to use my middle name." I was still the only one in the office, and I would be for likely another hour, but I still felt my face heating with embarrassment

as if someone had heard her calling me out.

“He’s serious. He told me you could be having a heart attack.”

I sighed. “I’m not having a heart attack. Listen, tomorrow’s Saturday. I’ll go after I get some work done tomorrow, if I’m still feeling bad.”

“No. I’ll drive up from Silver Creek and drag you there myself if I have to. You’re going to the hospital. Now. ”

God, when had my mom gotten so bossy? My chest throbbed and the tension ratcheted up in my neck and shoulders. “Fine, I’ll go now. But I’m taking my laptop with me.”

“Good. I’ll be there in two hours.”

“Mom, I—” But before I could protest further, the call ended.

With a growl, I stood and grabbed my things, firing off a quick text to my boss to let him know that I needed to take care of some things and would be working remotely for the morning. A few minutes later, I was back in my car and heading toward the nearest hospital.

They saw me quickly—apparently chest pain really was nothing to joke about—and within an hour, the sexy emergency doctor was delivering my diagnosis, Andy on video call as he did.

“Well, Mr. Martin—”

“Cole, please.”

He nodded. “Cole, it looks like you’re not dealing with myocardial infarction—no heart attack.”

I let out a relieved breath, a grin spreading over my face slowly. “I knew it!”

From my phone, Andy cleared his throat. “Do you have a diagnosis then?”

“Everything looks clear. Chest X-ray, EKG, blood work—all negative for anything out of the ordinary.” Before I could gloat, the doctor continued. “Everything except the endoscopy.”

I frowned. “You found something on my endoscopy?”

He gave me a gentle smile. “Nothing life-threatening. It looks like you have an overabundance of acid in your stomach and it’s traveling into your esophagus. Heartburn, a symptom of reflux. Caused by a variety of things, but in this case, I’d wager that stress is exacerbating it.”

“What’s the best course of action, then?” Andy asked.

“I’m going to prescribe a proton pump inhibitor to help control the acid production. But I’d recommend seeing your primary care provider sooner than later. Since it’s the holidays, I’ll give you a two-month supply and we’ll release you.”

“Any other suggestions, doctor?” Andy asked, tempting me to throw the phone across the room.

“I’d recommend cutting back on foods that trigger it, but also cutting way back on stress, which likely contributed to this serious episode you’re having. Stress can make reflux worse, and reflux can, in some cases, lead to esophageal cancer.”

I swallowed hard at the thought of that. “Sure thing, doc.”

He left then to go get my prescription and discharge papers ready, Andy still on the call.

“What’s your plan?”

I sighed deeply. “Nothing. I’m going to take the pills and get back to work. I don’t have time to take a break.”

I didn’t, either. I had way too much work to do. I hung up with Andy and opened my laptop back up to get back to work. The second I did, my boss video called me.

“Hi Tim. What’s going on?”

“Cole, I need you to—wait. Where are you?”

“County General,” I said sheepishly.

“You’re in the hospital ?”

“Well... I mean, only for a few more minutes, I think. They’re about to discharge me.”

“Why in heaven’s name are you working if you’re in the hospital?”

I tried to explain that I was fine, just a little heartburn, and that I’d be back on my feet in no time, literally, that I was coming back to the office as soon as I was discharged, but my boss was having none of it.

“Absolutely not. I don’t want to see your face back in the office until after the

holidays.”

“Tim, come on.”

“You have the vacation days. Use them. We’re not in the business of running people into their graves.”

“Can I work remotely, at least?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Only if you promise to work no more than eight hours in a day.”

I considered it. I could probably make that work. I just wouldn’t take breaks or stop for lunch. Everything would be fine. “Deal,” I said finally.

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Chapter Two

West

The bell above the door to my coffee shop had been ringing practically nonstop for the past hour and a half as customers came and went. It was a week before Christmas in Silver Creek and that meant people were everywhere—especially at Brewed Awakening, the coffee shop I'd owned for the past two years. That morning the shop had been a zoo for a longer than usual morning rush. Despite the fact that it was a weekday and there was still time before Christmas, people in Silver Creek took their holidays seriously. Finally, though, the rush had died down and I had a little time to breathe. I brushed the sales counter off before grabbing a small bucket and a clean dishrag to go wash down tables.

“Hey West,” called a woman's voice in a thick southern drawl the minute my back was turned to the door.

I knew the owner of the voice well. It was April Holt, the mayor's daughter, and one of my biggest admirers in town—much to my chagrin. “Hi April,” I said, plastering on a smile as I turned to face her.

April swooped in and wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug, pressing her chest to me and wiggling as she did, as if she was going to be able to convince me that I wanted to sleep with her using sheer willpower. She smelled of mint and something warm, and I grunted as she crushed herself against me. “How are you?”

I gave her a quick nod, distancing myself from her a bit. “Great, I—” The bell jingled

again, signaling a new customer. Saved. “Sorry, I need to take this.”

She sighed, putting on a heavy air of disappointment. “Fine, have it your way. I’ll be over there if you need me.” She gestured toward an armchair in the corner of the room before leaving me to do my job.

I hurried back to my place behind the sales counter to greet the newcomer, tucking the dishrag into the waistband of my apron as I walked. “How can I—” I glanced up from where I’d been focused on my waist and stuttered to a stop when my gaze met his. He was stunning—tall, soft-looking chestnut hair, hazel eyes with a sparkle in them, and a leather laptop bag slung over his shoulder. I cleared my throat, blinking a few times. “Sorry. What can I get you?”

He let out a soft breath before shaking his head slightly as if he were shaking something off and then peering into the bakery case. “What do you recommend?”

Me. I managed to swallow the thought without speaking it aloud, which was a Herculean feat in itself. “The cheddar bacon scones are good today, if you’re looking for something savory. If it’s sweets you’re after, the snickerdoodles are amazing.”

“They both sound great. I’ll take a scone and two cookies.”

“Coming right up.” As I grabbed his goodies from the case, my mind reeled, eager to keep him talking. My brain worked on autopilot as I kept going. “Anything else?”

April chimed in from the corner. “He makes a mean cup of coffee. My mama always said ‘A man who can make coffee is worth keeping around.’ I couldn’t agree more.”

The stranger smiled in a way that looked more regretful than amused. “No coffee. Not allowed. Doctor’s orders and all.” He knocked on the counter once. “Just the baked goods. And maybe a bottle of water.”

“Sure thing.” I served the customer and as he paid, I realized I didn’t know his name, where he was from, how long he was going to be in town... and I wanted to know it all. He was way too hot to let slip by without my clumsy attempt at flirting aimed at him at least once. “You just passing through or are you new in town?”

“Both, sorta. I’m Cole Martin.”

“As in Doctor Andy?” April called from the corner. She leaned forward as if she were ready to get the latest gossip. “Does that mean your mom’s Lenore Martin?”

“One and the same.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Cole.” April stood and approached us. “I’m so glad to meet you. I bet West here is, too.”

All I knew was that Doctor Andy had a gay brother and Lenore, a frequent flier at Brewed Awakening, mentioned her handsome marketing executive son to me with great frequency, knowing I was one of the only out gay men in town. I guess April figured if she wasn’t going to get her hands on me, she’d find someone else who would. Then again, if this was who April wanted me to hook up with... well, I wouldn’t mind, that’s all I was saying.

“I’m West.” I reached across the counter to shake his hand and knocked over a display of chocolates as I did, my face heating immediately. “Shit, sorry.”

Cole shook his head, reaching to help me retrieve some of the chocolates. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

I scooped the chocolates into a small pile and offered Cole my hand again. “It’s really nice to meet you, Cole.”

He took my hand and gripped it firmly, giving me a soft smile as he did. “Same.” We stood there for several long moments, hands clasped, not speaking, our gazes locked onto one another.

After a few seconds, April cleared her throat from the corner. “What are you doing in town, Cole? Visiting your family for the holidays?”

His hand slipped out of mine and he looked toward April. “Yeah, something like that.” He turned back to me, and when he spoke, his tone was soft and sincere. Something about it made me shiver. “Thanks again. I’ll just...” He gestured to a table on the opposite side of the room from where April sat.

“That’s probably for the best,” I murmured with a little grin, and went back to re-stacking the chocolate display.

The rest of the day was relatively uneventful. April eventually left to go about her business, and Cole visited the counter a couple more times to buy a sandwich and another pair of cookies. As expected, people were coming and going steadily, so I didn’t get the opportunity to chat with Cole again until it was time to close up shop. The day turned to evening and eventually I flipped the sign on the door to Closed.

“Oh, man,” Cole said, scrambling to stand up. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize it had gotten so late. Let me get out of your way.”

“It’s fine. I’ve got a ton of cleaning up to do anyway. Stay as long as you’d like.”

He settled back into his seat with a long, relieved exhale. “Thanks. I’ve got a little more work to finish up and I really will get going.”

“Take your time.” I made my way around the shop, wiping down tables and putting chairs up so that I could sweep and mop.

By the time I'd finished the sweeping up, Cole was packing his bag. "Everything was so delicious, by the way. Do you make it all here?"

I put the mop bucket down near where he was standing and let out a little regretful laugh. "No, not everything. I wish I had the time. I need an extra set of hands if I'm going to be baking all day. No, for now it's just me, so I make some things—like the cookies—and the rest I buy from a bakery outside of town."

He leaned forward and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Those were my favorites anyway."

The sound made my stomach squirm and heat flooded through my body, warming me to my core. I couldn't stop the small smile on my face. "Thank you." He's just being polite, I chastised myself. No need to get your hopes up that he's interested. Just because you're both gay doesn't mean anything.

"Well, thank you again, West. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"If that's okay, I mean. I'm here for the holidays, but I've still got work to get done—much to my mother's disappointment—and I think this is the perfect location to set up shop." I must have hesitated too long, because he spoke before I could get a word out. "If not, it's okay. I don't want to take up a table if I'm a nuisance. I just thought..." He shrugged and grinned. "The company is nice here."

I laughed self-consciously. "April's definitely an interesting one."

"I meant you."

"Oh! Well, in that case... come by anytime and stay as long as you'd like." I heard

the words coming out of my mouth but I couldn't believe them. Since when did I sound so calm and collected in the presence of a hot guy?

He nodded once more before hauling his laptop bag to his shoulder. "I think I'll take you up on that," he said, and stepped out of the shop and into the night.

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Chapter Three

Cole

“ You were told to take it easy!” I’d managed to avoid my mom most of the morning and into the afternoon, but the minute I’d picked up my laptop bag and tried to sneak out, she’d caught me, fixed me with one of her patented Mom looks, and pounced.

I sighed and tried to force myself not to roll my eyes. “Mom, I told you—”

“I don’t care what you told me. You need to take it easy or you’re going to work yourself into an early grave.”

She was right. I knew she was right. But I was taking it easy. Well... easi er , anyway. “I know,” I conceded. “But I just need to make sure these last few accounts get wrapped up. If I don’t and things fall through the cracks, the company stands to lose clients. And if the company loses clients, my job is at risk.”

“Do you honestly think your boss is going to fire you for doing what he told you to do? Taking a rest?”

“It’s not only up to him. If his boss says to cut their losses and let me go, what choice does he have?”

She sniffed indignantly. “Well, I say that if your company is that unreasonable, you don’t need them anyway. You’ll find another job.”

I closed my eyes and touched my fingertips to my temples. A headache was threatening to form and I was trying to fight it off. I took a few slow breaths before speaking again. “Okay, Mom. It’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. I’m just going to Brewed Awakening for a few hours this afternoon.”

She hesitated for just a second. “Brewed Awakening? So you met West, then?”

I chuckled. “Yes, Mom, I met West Davies.”

“And?”

“And nothing. He’s nice. He told me to try the cookies. I did. Then I got a ton of work done. That’s all.”

“Well,” she said, disappointment coloring her tone. “If you’re headed back to Brewed Awakening, I guess I don’t see the problem. If you promise to take it easy. No stressful meetings or anything.”

“Whatever you say, Mom.” I kissed her cheek fondly and ducked into the cold winter afternoon. There was snow falling as I walked the few blocks to the coffee shop, little, soft, fluffy flakes that drifted on the breeze and gave the town the feeling of being in a snow globe. The sidewalk was covered in a dusty layer of snow that swirled when the wind blew. When I made it to the shop, the seating area was empty and West was nowhere to be seen. The bell above the door jangled to announce my arrival and I put my things down at the same table I’d taken the day before.

“Coming,” West’s voice called from the back room, growing nearer. “Just a se—oh. It’s you.” His tone was bright, a shy smile on his face.

I looked up and grinned at him. “It’s me.”

“I didn’t think you’d actually come back.”

Furrowing my brow and frowning, I tilted my head to the side slightly. “No? Why not?”

“I guess I thought you were just being polite.”

“Nope. I meant every word of it.” His cheeks turned pink in a blush that I found endearing. Part of me wanted to see more of it, wanted to see where the blush spread to as it traveled down his neck and into the collar of his T-shirt. Well, most of me, if I was being honest. I cleared my throat. “What’s good today?”

He blinked and looked around for a second before seeming to realize what I was talking about. “Oatmeal cookies. No scones, but we’ve got zucchini muffins.”

I wrinkled my nose at the zucchini. “Pass. I will take a couple of cookies, though.”

“Raisins or no?”

A grin spread over my face. “That’s a very important question, isn’t it? I think yes to raisins.”

“Correct answer,” he said, reaching into the bakery case. The smile he gave me made my heart flutter, leaving me wanting more.

I took my cookies back to my table and watched as West went about his business. His strawberry blond hair became progressively more tousled as the afternoon went on, but his greenish eyes never lost their sparkle and his smile never wavered. When the rush died down, close to the end of the day, he stopped by my table.

“Hey,” he said with an easy smile. “How are those cookies treating you?”

“They were great. Did you make them too?”

“I did. The cookies are always made by me, right here in house.”

“Where did you learn to bake?”

He shrugged and looked at the floor shyly. “Cookies are easy. My grandma taught me when I was a kid. I went to pastry school after I finished high school, but grandma taught me the basics when I was seven or eight.”

I nodded appreciatively. “That’s awesome. My college experience was significantly less delicious, I can assure you.”

“Oh? They don’t let you bake in—wait, what is it that you do?”

I grimaced and rubbed the back of my neck. “Nothing as interesting as pastry, I can assure you. I’m a marketing guy.”

“That’s cool, though. You get to decide how to present products to the market, right?”

“Yeah, I guess I do. It’s stressful though. I work too damn much. That’s why I’m in town, actually. I’m supposed to be relaxing. Recovering from a health scare.”

His eyes widened. “Jesus, are you okay?”

I waved away his concern and gave him a wry smile. “I’m great now.” The flush on his cheeks was adorable.

“Well, aren’t you charming?” He raised his eyebrows briefly.

I shrugged. “Whatever it takes to get a date with the hot barista.”

“Technically, I’m just a shopkeeper. Maybe a baker if you’re getting fancy.”

“I notice you’re not debating the hot part.”

His blush deepened. “You asking me out?”

“Only if you’re saying yes. If not, you can forget I said anything.”

“It sounds like fun. I’d love to.” A moment passed. “When were you thinking?”

“Can you manage to get away tonight? I go back to the city a few days after Christmas.”

His smile faltered. “Shit. Tonight? I almost forgot.” I raised my eyebrows and he grimaced. “Family obligations. I have to go to my family’s annual trip to sing carols at the Silver Creek nursing home tonight. We go every year.”

I couldn’t stop the smile on my face. “Really?” It was so selfless that it was endearing. “That’s adorable.”

He nodded. “My grandma lived there for years. This is our way of honoring her.” He glanced at the clock above the register, a big, analog one that reminded me of an elementary school cafeteria. “Oh crap. Speaking of which, I’d better get moving. I was supposed to close early so I’m not late for the singing.” He tugged his apron off and hurried to the door to flip the sign. “I’ll have to take a rain check.” He hesitated. “Unless...”

My eyebrows shot up. “Unless?”

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in joining us, would you?”

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Chapter Four

West

He chuckled in surprise. “Me? Go caroling?”

“Why not?” I gave him a little grin. “Could be fun.”

“I don’t know,” he hedged.

While he considered it, I made the rounds, doing a quick cleanup in the shop. I grabbed a broom and swept, glancing over periodically.

“Wouldn’t that be intruding?”

“Intruding how?” Honestly, he’d be helping me more than I could say... If I could convince him of one last thing, that was.

He shrugged and gestured to the room vaguely. “Family time? Holiday traditions?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I mean, it’s not a sexy first date or anything, so I understand if you don’t want to. It’s a lot of pressure. I get it. It’s just... Okay, so I have three brothers, okay? And it’s... there’s a little sibling rivalry, that’s all. I’m the oldest and every year, all of my brothers bring their partners. And every year...”

Cole nodded in understanding. “You’re the perpetually single one?”

“Bingo. It would be nice to have a date, for once.”

He grinned slowly, a mischievous smile that did things to me I wasn't ready to think about. “I'm in.”

“You are?”

“Sure. I'm happy to go caroling, if it means I get to spend more time with you.”

I bit my lip, considering taking things one step further. “Okay, one last thing.”

“Yes?”

“The other thing is... Would you... I mean, it's okay if this is too weird or something. Would you pretend to be my boyfriend? I kind of... told my parents a few months ago that I was seeing someone and they're going to think...”

A startled laugh bubbled out of him. After a second passed, he looked at me with narrowed eyes, an amused smile playing on his lips. “Wait, you're serious?”

I shook my head and went back to sweeping. “Never mind. I knew it would be too much to ask. Forget I said anything. A regular date is perfect. I'll tell them my boyfriend broke up with me or something. I'll figure it out.”

He held up his hands to stop my babbling. “No, it's okay. I'll do it. On one condition.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Sure. Anything. You name it.”

“You have to teach me how to bake some of your favorite cookies. Just one recipe, any one you think is easy. I want to surprise my mom.”

Relief washed over me and I chuckled, my mind already whirring through the cookie recipes I knew. “Of course I’ll teach you how to make cookies. Any kind you like.”

“Then it’s a deal,” he said, standing to pack his laptop away.

“It’s a deal,” I agreed.

“I’m going to run home and change into something that’s a little more meet-the-parents worthy, if that’s okay, and I’ll meet you back here. Half an hour?”

“Perfect.” The second the door closed behind him, I hurried upstairs to my apartment above the shop to shower and change. I slipped into a soft long-sleeve red sweater and gray slacks, and as I dressed, reality hit me. I was going on a fake-boyfriend date with a stranger, introducing him to my whole family, and I’d have to convince my parents and my annoying younger brothers that we were in love. What had I done?

Before I had a chance to spiral too far, the buzzer of the shop doorbell sounded, indicating that Cole had returned. I made my way downstairs to meet him and stopped in my tracks when I spotted him. He was wearing a dark green turtleneck and black slacks, and somehow, with the sweater stretched across his chest and shoulders, he looked incredible. I rubbed a hand over my face. Jesus Christ, what have I gotten myself into? I smiled, nerves zinging through me, and pulled open the door.

Cole’s smile was warm and genuine, his eyes bright. “Ready, then?”

“I should be asking you that question. You sure you’re ready to be my boyfriend for the night?”

“I can think of worse things to do with my evening.”

My face heated and I turned away to lock up the shop and get going. Silver Creek

was a small town by any definition but the nursing home sat outside of town by a few miles. I led the way to my car and we climbed in, cranking the heater up on high as soon as the car was running. We listened to Christmas music on the radio as I drove, while Cole peppered me with questions.

“So, how did we meet?”

I raised my eyebrows. “We met like two days ago at the coffee shop.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I don’t think they’ll believe we’ve been dating for months if you tell them that.”

“Right. Well, can’t we just back that up a few months then?”

“Good point.” He hesitated a minute. “How long have you owned the shop?”

I gave him a soft smile, touched that he was actually giving this a try. “Two years. Before that, pastry school. And before that, just a lot of similar jobs—pouring coffee, cleaning up other people’s messes, that kind of thing. You said you’re in marketing?”

He nodded. “I am. It’s nothing special. I’m the director of marketing at a firm in the city. Nexus Brandworks.”

“Director? That sounds important.”

“I was working toward a promotion to vice president when I had my health scare. It turned out to be a combination of stress, anxiety, and acid reflux, but my mom and brother were convinced it was a heart attack.”

“Oh my God.”

He shrugged, a small smile on his face. “I told you, it’s nothing. I’m already feeling a lot better.”

“What else do we need to know about each other to prove we’ve been dating a while?” I nodded in the direction of a parking lot coming into view. “We’re almost there.”

Cole shook his head. “I think we can wing it.”

As I put the car into park, I gave him a little grin. “That sounds like a dangerous plan.”

“I’ll show you a dangerous plan,” he murmured, leaning forward. For a fraction of a second, I thought he was going to kiss me, and my heart thumped hard as his mouth got closer to mine. Just before our lips met, though, a knock on the driver’s side window behind me startled us apart. My heart raced as adrenaline spiked through me.

“No making out in the parking lot!” said a voice from behind me.

I turned to see my youngest brother, Rhett, grinning widely and waving at us from the parking lot.

I hissed a swear under my breath and Cole chuckled.

“Showtime,” he murmured before climbing out of the car.

Here we go , I thought.

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Chapter Five

Cole

What in God's name have I gotten myself into? That was my only thought as we crowded into the nursing home's lobby with West's brothers, their girlfriends, and the Davies parents. My head spun as I realized I'd need to try to remember everyone's names. I took a deep breath and focused on the introductions.

"You're the boyfriend?" Mr. Davies asked, stepping forward to shake my hand. He wore a dark gray V-neck with a red and white cardigan sweater over it, along with jeans, and the only word I could conjure to describe him was "jolly." I nodded and took his hand to shake it.

"Yes, sir. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Davies."

He waved my pleasantry away. "Please, call me Chuck. Everyone does."

"And I'm Eleanor," his mom said. She looked elegant in a cream sweater and pearls, a dark green skirt, and her hair pulled up and tucked away into a bun.

West cleared his throat. "And these are my brothers, from youngest to oldest—Rhett, Nolan, and Beckett. And their partners, of course. Lacy, Noelle, and Summer." Each person nodded or waved at me as they were being introduced and I had absolutely every confidence in the world that I'd completely forget everyone's name within the following five minutes.

“Where are the kids?” West asked after introductions were done.

Chuck waved his hand as if the question was inconsequential. “We hired a pair of sitters. They’re at home. We didn’t think bringing a half-dozen kids would be a good idea for the residents. You know how the kids are.”

West nodded, but all I could think about was how there could have been another six names to learn, and thanking my lucky stars the kids had been left at home.

While I pondered that, Eleanor handed out a stack of white three-ring binders, each stuffed with the words and music to a number of carols—most of them classics, but a few I hadn’t heard of before. Seeing the music printed in front of me, panic gripped me again.

I leaned close to West. “I can’t read music,” I hissed.

He shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll get the tunes pretty quickly. If you don’t know it, just stay quiet until you’re ready. Nobody will notice.”

“Is there a backing track, at least?”

He shook his head. “We sing a cappella. You’ll be fine, trust me.”

With a tentative nod, I opened my book and followed his lead.

Eleanor clearly had a master plan, because she led us directly to the dining room to start off. We began by singing a few classics, including “Frosty the Snowman” and “Silent Night.” The residents mostly stopped eating and sang along with us, seeming to enjoy the music and entertainment. The room was decorated with swaths of garland, red and gold ribbons everywhere, and several Christmas trees decked out with ornaments set off to the sides.

After delighting the main dining room for a good fifteen minutes, we wandered on. The nursing home was big—much bigger than I’d expected—and the hallway patterns were so complex it felt like a labyrinth. “If we get lost here, I’ll never find my way out,” I murmured to West, who chuckled.

“Don’t worry, I’ll rescue you.”

We continued on, stopping at the entryways to activity rooms, at small apartments clustered together, and two more dining rooms. It was overwhelming, but rewarding to see the smiles of joy on the residents’ faces.

As we walked, West and I began to hang back a little, sharing private smiles and a few brushes of our hands, sending electricity zinging through me every time we touched. I wanted more—wanted to get to know him better, as a person and physically. At one point, we stopped at a nurses’ station and West chatted with a nurse for a few minutes about a resident.

“Hey there, Ashleigh,” he said, leaning on the half-wall surrounding the station. “How’s Mrs. Thomas these days?”

Ashleigh gave him a sad smile and shook her head. “Not great. She doesn’t get a lot of visitors. Do you want to pop in and check on her?”

“That would be great. Can you ask if she’d be willing to see us?”

Ashleigh nodded and stood up. “Let me go see. I’ll be right back.”

The minute she was gone around a corner, West turned to me. “Mrs. Thomas was my Home Economics teacher in middle and high school. She was the best. I’ve been visiting her as much as possible since she moved here, but with the coffee shop, it’s hard to get away sometimes.”

I nodded in understanding, but peered around him to where his family was continuing down the hallway. “Should we get back to the group?”

West shook his head. “We’ll catch up. No worries.”

A few moments later, Ashleigh was back with a smile. “Mrs. Thomas would love to see you,” she said.

West grinned widely. “Awesome. Follow me.”

Mrs. Thomas, it turned out, lived in a small apartment just a few doors down and around a corner from the nurses’ station. She was seated in front of her television on a small love seat, her curly white hair in a cloud around her head. When West stopped and knocked, her face lit up. “Come in, come in,” she called.

West took a few steps into the room and gestured for me to follow. “Hey there. How have you been?” He leaned forward and hugged her gently, my heart swelling watching the two of them interact. He seemed so comfortable and confident, not at all how I felt around older adults. As they chatted and caught up, I hung back, listening and trying not to interrupt. Eventually, Mrs. Thomas turned to me.

“And who’s this friend of yours, West?”

He grinned and took my hand. “This is my boyfriend. His name is Cole.”

My stomach did a somersault at that and I squeezed his hand gently.

“Cole,” West continued. “This is Mrs. Thomas. She’s the one who taught me to bake cookies from scratch the first time. She’s practically a wizard in the kitchen.”

Mrs. Thomas’s cheeks turned pink at the flattery. “You’re too kind to me, West. We

all know you would have made your dreams happen with or without my help. And Cole—you're so handsome. You two look like a match made in heaven. Just perfect for each other."

Before I could respond beyond mumbling my thanks, West spoke up. "We should get going. We have caroling to do. Can I come back and visit you after the holidays?"

"Of course you can. Come by anytime."

We said our goodbyes and headed back into the hall. Just as we did, stopping at the corner just outside of Mrs. Thomas's apartment, we spotted his family heading back in our direction.

"Oh!" Mrs. Thomas called. "You're under the mistletoe." West's face immediately flooded red, eyes wide. He glanced at Mrs. Thomas, who was smiling, a mischievous grin on her face. "You'll have to kiss. You know the rules!"

Before we could protest, one of West's brothers—the middle one, maybe—piped up, having overheard. "That's right! Kiss time!" His voice cut through the singing and everyone quieted down except his parents, who continued singing, both smiling and shaking their heads fondly as if they were used to this kind of playful teasing among their sons.

"You don't have to," West mumbled, looking at his feet. "I'm so sorry about this." Even the tips of his ears were red as he tried hard to avoid the demands of his brothers.

I put a finger under his chin and tipped his face up toward mine, urging him to look at me. "Hey. It's okay." I leaned in and pressed my lips to his gently, his breath hitching as I did. Around us, applause broke out, and people cheered. When we parted, West's fingertips brushed his bottom lip and he let out a shaky breath.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

“Thank you ,” I whispered back, feeling like I was the one who won in that interaction.

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Chapter Six

West

The rest of the caroling adventure went pretty smoothly—no more requests for kissing, at least. As much as I wanted to be annoyed at my brothers, I couldn't be mad at Mrs. Thomas for instigating the moment. She'd never wanted anything but the best for me. Of course, my brothers had never wanted anything but to get on my nerves, so I figured it all balanced out.

With the caroling done, the group of us found ourselves standing in the lobby of the nursing home bundling up to head outside. Mom stepped up to Cole and thanked him for joining us.

"It means a lot to see West so happy," she said, throwing her arms around him.

"Mom," I protested. "You don't need to do that."

She pulled away and gave us a radiant smile. "I know, but it's just been so long. I thought I'd never see my first baby find his person, and it's clear that you two are perfect for each other."

"Mom. "

She shook her head and tugged her scarf around her neck. "I'm sorry. It's Mom privilege to embarrass her kids." She glanced at my dad, who tapped his watch and tilted his head toward the door. "We've got to get going. The sitters can only handle

six kids for so long before they go into overdrive. But..." She looked over at me before plowing on. "Do you want to join us for card games?"

"That sounds like a good time," Cole said slowly, as if he were choosing his words carefully. "What night were you thinking?"

"Tonight! We always have a game night after caroling. We do it once a month, and December is always on the same night as our caroling trip." She glanced at Dad again, who was insistently tapping his watch. "Okay, okay, I have to run, but I hope we see you at the house in a few."

Heat flooded my face for what felt like the hundredth time that night. The minute my parents left, I turned to Cole. "You absolutely do not have to join us," I assured him.

"Are you going?"

I sighed quietly, wishing my mom had never brought it up in the first place. "I was planning on it, if I don't die of embarrassment first."

"Then count me in."

"Seriously?"

He shrugged. "Unless you don't want me to join. Which would be fine. I'd completely understand if you want it to be just family."

"No, I..." I shook my head. "I'd love it if you joined."

The slow smile that appeared on his face warmed me from the inside out. "Then it's a date. Again. Or still. Or something."

I laughed. “Sounds like a plan.”

A half hour later, we were at my parents’ house, dusty snow swirling outside as Cole absolutely demolished my entire family in Phase Ten. I’d opted out of the game, choosing to bake cookies for the kids to decorate instead, and as the game began to wind down, I stood in the doorway, smiling and watching Cole interact with my family.

“Cole, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re a Phase Ten pro.”

He shook his head and held his hands up as if he were surrendering. “Beginner’s luck, I promise. I’ve never played before in my life.”

The oven dinged and I hurried to take the cookies out to cool. From the kitchen, I heard a mixture of groans and cheering as Cole played his final phase, ending the game. Everyone stopped to tally points while I finished pulling out the sprinkles and filling piping bags with icing.

“Alright everyone, time to decorate,” I called once the cookies were cool. A stampede of children rushed into the kitchen, all six of them excited to get their hands on the sprinkles and frosting. Even Miles, the baby at just two years old, came running in, shouting about cookies at the top of his lungs.

After getting everyone settled at the kitchen table, I guided them a little, handing out decorating supplies as Cole meandered into the kitchen. He watched me for a minute before speaking up.

“Can I help, too?”

I grinned at him and then at the kids. “What do you guys think? Should we let him have a few cookies to decorate?”

“Uncle West,” began six year old Sadie matter-of-factly. “You’re supposed to share.”

I spread my hands wide, gesturing at the table. “The Queen has spoken.”

Cole chuckled and took a seat, the four-year-olds, Caleb and Levi, flanking him. “Can you show me what to do?” he whispered to Caleb, who gave him a nod and handed him a cookie.

“You just do it like this.” Caleb took a piping bag and squirted a lot of frosting onto a cookie before dumping a pile of sanding sugar on top.

Cole laughed a little and nodded. “I think I’ve got the idea.”

I hung back, charmed by the way Cole interacted with the kids, warmth spreading through me again. I found myself daydreaming about having Cole around in the summer, helping the littlest kids learn to swim, pushing the twins, Ava and Eli, on the swings in my parents’ backyard, and sneaking off to make out in the kitchen while everyone else was outside. After a few minutes of daydreaming, I caught myself, shaking my head. He’s only here for a few weeks, I reminded myself. He has a life in the city.

Finally, the cookies were decorated and the kids were yawning. I helped them get settled in front of the TV to watch a movie while they fell asleep, and once that was done, Cole pulled me aside. “I’d better get going. It’s pretty late and I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

“Sure, no problem,” I said. “Let me just get my keys.”

He shook his head. “No need. I’m staying just a couple of blocks from here. I can walk.”

With a frown, I put my hand on his arm. “Are you sure? I’m happy to drive you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Really.”

“I think I’ll head out too. Wait just a minute and I’ll walk you out, at least.” I said my goodbyes and we headed out to the sidewalk.

“Can I keep you company while your car warms up?” Cole asked.

I chuckled and nodded. “Sure, if you want to.”

“I do,” he said quietly, stepping close. “I really do.”

“Oh,” I murmured the second before our lips touched for the second time that night. As he slid his tongue into my mouth, I inhaled sharply, letting one hand go to the back of his coat and grip him tightly. We kissed for several moments and as we did, heat and electricity exploded inside of me, spurring me on. I pressed our bodies together as we kissed and Cole moved a hand to the back of my neck, holding me to him. My breath hitched as we kissed, and Cole let out a soft groan of pleasure. I couldn’t believe what was happening—we’d been dancing around each other all night, but I was still surprised at how right it felt.

When we parted a few moments later, my heart pounding, both of us breathing heavily, Cole cleared his throat. “I hope that was okay.”

My cheeks burning, I looked at my feet briefly. “It was more than okay.”

“Good. I feel the same.”

A beat passed. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then? At the coffee shop?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he murmured. “See you tomorrow.” With that, he turned and headed off into the night. I climbed into my car and headed in the opposite direction, my mind swirling like the snowflakes on the ground.

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Chapter Seven

Cole

I made my way to the shop again early the next day. I had work I could do, yes, but I was more eager to see West than anything else. I hauled my laptop with me and arrived shortly after West opened the shop for the day. When I opened the door, the bell jingling to announce my arrival, West looked up sharply from what he'd been doing—stocking the pastry case—and his gaze met mine. Immediately his cheeks flooded pink, and a small smile formed on his face. I nodded by way of greeting and took the table that had become my usual spot.

I spent the day trying hard to focus on my work and not pay attention to the sexy shopkeeper who kept glancing my way, but I wasn't very successful. All I could think about was kissing him again—the way his body had pressed against mine, warm and firm and solid, the way his lips had felt against mine, soft but insistent. I wanted to do it again. I wanted more, too. Snow fell outside, heavy flurries that obstructed the sun a little, giving the coffee shop a disconnected, insulated feel. Toward the end of the afternoon, the crowd thinned out until eventually West and I were alone.

He made his way to my table and sat down. “So...”

I raised my eyebrows. “So?”

“I just wanted to apologize again for the whole, you know, family night thing.”

With a shrug, I gave him a sincere smile. “It was nice. Your nieces and nephews are

great. I really like how your family just... welcomed me in.”

“Yeah, they have a tendency to do that.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “They adopt people. Always have. Every time one of us had a friend in college who needed a place to go, they came to our house. Weekends, holidays, breaks, it didn’t matter. My parents always welcomed people with open arms. It was chaos, but they loved it.”

“I can tell. We were never quite like that in my family. My mom is great, but I can’t imagine her with a house full of chaos.”

He laughed a little. “It’s not for everyone.” A moment passed and he glanced at the clock. “Oh, wow. It’s closing time already.”

“Should I—?” I gestured to my laptop and tilted my head toward the door.

“No, not at all. I... like your company. Stick around as long as you’d like.” His cheeks turned pink as he spoke. “In fact... do you want to come upstairs and have dinner with me after I finish cleaning up down here?”

“I’d love that.” I turned my focus to gathering my belongings and packing up, so I’d be ready to go when the time came.

West stood and went to the door to turn the “open” sign over. As he did, he wiped the glass to peer out into the street. “Wow, that snow really came down.”

I raised my eyebrows and looked up. “What do you mean?”

“There’s at least a foot of it out there and it’s still coming down hard.”

“Really?” I got up and joined him at the door. “Wow, you weren’t kidding.” The conditions were practically white-out and just being near the chill radiating off the

glass made me shiver.

“It’s only going to get worse as the night goes on.”

I sighed reluctantly. “I should probably head home then.”

West looked at me, his eyebrows drawn tight. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s only a few blocks.”

He stepped back. “Be serious. You’re not wearing winter gear and you can barely see anything out there. You’ll freeze to death.”

“I’ll be fine,” I repeated, reaching for the door handle. I pulled open the shop door and a wind gust blew hard, wrenching the door out of my hand. It crashed back, rattling, and a huge flurry of snow rushed into the shop. I squinted and looked into the street, a sinking feeling coming over me. West was right. There was no way I was getting home safely in this weather. I wrestled the door closed and looked back at West. “Yeah, you’re right. I guess it’s a sleepover then.”

His cheeks turned pink and he looked at his feet, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. “Sounds like a plan. Should you—I mean, will your family be expecting you?”

“Good point.” I fished my phone out of my pocket and sent a text to my mom, letting her know I wouldn’t be home but that I was safe. A moment later, she responded.

Mom: I hope being safe means you’re using condoms.

She followed it up with a winking emoji. I rolled my eyes and tucked my phone away. I’d told her briefly about our date the previous night, and she’d been thrilled,

so I wasn't terribly surprised by her reaction, but it was still embarrassing.

West cleared his throat to get my attention. "Everything okay?"

"Yep. All squared away. Now... can I help you finish closing up for the night?"

He grinned and nodded. "That would be great, actually. Once we're all cleaned up down here, we can go upstairs and I'll make us something for dinner."

The idea of seeing West's apartment made my stomach flutter, sending warmth spreading through me. "Lead the way." I followed him to the back of the shop, where he picked up a broom and a dustpan.

"Do you mind sweeping? I'll close out the register and put things away."

"No problem." As I swept, West made his way to stand behind the counter and do whatever it was he needed to take care of to make sure the register was taken care of.

"Hey," he called out as I swept. "I can teach you to make cookies after dinner. Make good on my promise."

I grinned brightly. "That would be great."

A little while later, everything was tidied up and I was following West upstairs to his little apartment above the shop. The door opened into a bright living room, decorated in clean, light colors, a galley kitchen to the left.

"This place is great," I said.

He laughed a little, self-consciously. "Thanks." A moment passed. "Why don't you come in and I'll get dinner ready for us. What do you like?"

“I’m not picky.”

“I made a mean beef stew last night. I can heat us up some of that, if you’d like.”

“That sounds amazing. I didn’t realize you cook, too. You do it all, don’t you?”

His shy smile charmed me even further. “There’s plenty I can’t do. I’ve just been trained well by my folks. My dad loved to cook so when I was growing up, he made it a point to teach all of his kids, too.”

“And there’s the baking.”

“Pastry school. Anyone can do it.”

I laughed. “Hardly. I’m notorious for burning everything I try to bake. That’s why I’m relying on you to help me learn to make cookies.”

He ducked his head shyly. “I’m looking forward to it.”

An hour later, West had heated up two big helpings of stew and baked fresh dinner rolls, and we made ourselves comfortable at his little dining room table to eat. I took my first bite of stew and flavor burst onto my tongue, rich and hearty.

I groaned softly. “This is amazing.”

“Thanks,” he murmured, that blush returning to his cheeks.

“Seriously. You’re a man of many talents.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.” As soon as we finished, I helped West clean up. As I washed dishes, he pulled ingredients out of his pantry for the cookies. He paused for

a moment and looked at me. “Oatmeal raisin or chocolate chip?”

“Will you judge me if I say oatmeal raisin?”

West laughed and shook his head. “Of course not. They’re one of my favorites, too.”

“Perfect. Let’s do it.”

With the ingredients assembled on the counter along with a stand mixer and several bowls, West pointed at the oven. “First step is to preheat the oven.”

“What temperature?”

Before he could answer me, there was a crackle of electricity and the power cut out, plunging us into darkness.

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Chapter Eight

West

“S hit,” I muttered. There was almost no light in my apartment except for what little moonlight was streaming in the window through the snowstorm. I took a step forward and crashed into Cole. In my haste to back up and give him space, I stumbled over my own two feet and tumbled to the ground, landing on my ass. “Damn it.”

Cole’s shoulders shook as he chuckled, soft and low, the sound twisting my gut. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, delightful. Better than ever, really.” My tone was thick with sarcasm, and he laughed again. Cole held his hand out to me and hauled me to my feet. As he did, I stumbled into him, our bodies pressing close together.

“Whoa there,” he murmured as I steadied myself, his hand falling to my waist. “You good?”

“Great,” I mumbled, heat racing through my body.

In the dim light, I watched his gaze flicker to my lips and back to meet my eyes. A second later, he leaned in and kissed me, one hand curling around the nape of my neck and holding me close. My lips parted and he slid his tongue along mine, his grip tightening on my hip.

We kissed for several long moments before we parted, breathing hard, just as we had

been the previous night. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have...”

“It’s okay,” he said softly. “Don’t apologize.”

I stepped back a little, putting some much-needed space between our bodies. “I don’t—”

Cole held up a hand to stop me. “I don’t want you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with but I want to be really clear. I’m attracted to you, mentally and physically. If you’re interested in taking things further, so am I.”

Heat flooded me, my stomach swooping dramatically with his words. “Yeah,” I whispered, looking at my feet. I looked up at Cole to meet his gaze. “Yeah. Me too.”

He pulled me close and kissed me again. This time, he gripped my shirt in his fists and my hands found their way to his neck, my fingers curling in his hair. As I did, he groaned softly, tilting his head back and exposing his throat. I broke the kiss, dragging my lips down his jawline, scraping my teeth against the sensitive skin there before teasing it with my tongue. Cole groaned deeper, rocking into me with his hips. Between us, his cock was hard, thick and ready to be touched.

Cole’s hands tugged at my shirt, and the next thing I knew he was discarding it onto the floor before his hands returned to my waist to work open my belt.

“Wait,” I murmured as he unfastened my jeans.

Cole hesitated. “What’s wrong?”

“Maybe we should...” I tilted my head toward the bedroom. “Get more comfortable?”

A slow smile spread over his face. “That sounds like an excellent plan. Lead the way.”

I took him by the hand and led him down the hallway to my bedroom. The room was just as dark as the kitchen had been, just a little moonlight coming in through the clouds, and I pulled him to the bed before turning back to him. “Where were we?”

Cole kissed me ferociously, crowding into my space and plunging his tongue into my mouth. I groaned softly as he dragged his fingers along my bare chest before cupping his hands on either side of my jaw and inhaling sharply. My mind buzzed with eagerness and lust, my cock hard and aching. Abruptly, Cole broke the kiss and stepped back a bit before sinking to his knees and yanking my jeans and boxers down.

My cock throbbed in anticipation as he wrapped his strong fingers around the shaft and gave it a slow stroke, precum beading out of the tip. A moment later, heat enveloped me as he parted his lips and took my cock into his mouth. I sucked in a breath, burying my fingers in his hair.

He teased his tongue along the underside of the crown, humming softly and stroking me firmly, slowly building up a rhythm. As he increased his pace, the pressure building in my groin, I rocked my hips forward, sliding in and out of his mouth, chasing my climax. “Cole, I—” I couldn’t hold back much longer.

With a little moan, he took me deeper, until I nudged the back of his throat, his muscles contracting around me. That was enough to pull me under, and as the waves crashed over me, I groaned and gripped his hair tighter. My cock pulsed in his mouth and he swallowed it all, only releasing me when I was fully spent.

Cole stood and wiped his mouth with the heel of his palm. “Are you one of those guys who doesn’t like to kiss after?”

In response, I pulled him to me and kissed him deeply, relishing the taste of myself on his tongue. Reaching between us, I unfastened his jeans and worked them down until his cock was free. Before I could drop down and return the favor, he put his hand over mine and guided me to stroke him. As I did, I dragged my thumb across his slit, smearing precum across the head. Cole broke the kiss and dropped his head to my shoulder, breathing hard as I worked him.

He thrust into my fist as I stroked, his breath turning shallow and tight. Gradually, his thrusting became more urgent, and he began to let out breathy moans on every exhale, desperate and needy. A few moments later, heat pulsed from his cock, splattering my stomach as he came on a long groan. I stroked him through it, working his cock until he was completely spent and he sagged against my body, taking deep gulps of air.

“Jesus, West,” he murmured into my shoulder.

I just chuckled and pressed a kiss to his neck, humming quietly. “I’m going to get something to clean us up with. I’ll be right back.” I stepped out of my clothes and hurried to the bathroom to wash my hands, using a cloth to wipe my chest and stomach clean before returning with another clean, damp cloth for Cole. Once we were both cleaned up, he kissed me again, a slow, sensual kiss that lasted for several moments and took my breath away once more.

When we parted, I sighed softly. “I’m sorry we weren’t able to bake cookies.”

“I think we found something a little more interesting to occupy us.

I grinned, glad he wasn’t able to see the heat that flooded my cheeks in the darkness of the room. “I agree.” A beat passed, uncertainty tightening my chest. “It’s late. We should probably turn in. You can sleep in here and I’ll take the couch.”

Cole scoffed. “What? Why?”

“I don’t mind. You’re my guest. You absolutely get the bed.”

“No, I mean, why don’t we just... you know, share? If you want to, I’m up for it.”

A surprised laugh escaped me. “Okay. If you’re good with it, I’d like that. Yeah.” I kissed him quickly. “Let’s get to bed, then.”

Chapter Nine

Cole

I woke early the next morning, cheerful, blinding sunlight streaming into the bedroom, reflecting off the thick blanket of snow piled high outside, West curled against my side, my arm around him. He stirred a few moments later, groaning as his eyelids fluttered open. I tightened my grip on his shoulder and pulled him in close for a quick kiss.

“Good morning,” I murmured.

He grinned sleepily. “Good morning.” A beat passed before his eyes lit up. “Merry Christmas.”

“Hmm, so it is.”

“Christmas is my favorite holiday.”

“I’m not surprised to hear that.”

He smiled so brightly that it almost hurt to look at. “It’s the magic, you know? Presents and gift-giving and snow. Families getting together to show their love for each other. There’s just something special about it.”

I kissed him again. “I’m really glad I’m here to start your Christmas out right, then.”

He glanced around and let out another soft groan. "It looks like the power's still out." Before he could say anything else, there was a loud beep from the kitchen and the hum of his heating system kicking in. "Or not."

I slipped out of bed and made my way to the window to peek out through the blinds. "It looks like the roads are mostly plowed and passable, too." Turning back to him, I sighed. "I should probably get out of your way."

He shrugged, looking unbothered. "You're not in my way. I am headed to celebrate with family in a bit, but you're welcome to join. I'd really like it if you did, actually. I'm sure they're going to ask about you. You are my boyfriend, after all." He winked and grinned.

I'd almost forgotten about the way we'd convinced them we were dating, even though it had only been a few nights prior. I wished so much that I could take him up on the offer, but I knew it was impossible.

I shook my head and came back toward the bed, finding my discarded clothes from the night before and pulling them on. "I appreciate the offer, but my mom would have a fit."

West laughed. "I believe that." He hesitated for a brief second. "Are you headed back to the city tomorrow?"

A knot formed in the pit of my stomach and I bit my lower lip as I processed his words. The city. I'd almost let myself forget that I didn't live here in Silver Creek. "I guess I am. Gotta get back to work."

He nodded, sadness in his eyes. "I get it." A second later, he slipped out of bed and opened his drawer, pulling out clean clothes and tugging them on. Once he was dressed, he turned to look at me. "I'm glad you came to Silver Creek though," he said

softly. “I hope you come back to visit sometime.”

My stomach hurt at the thought of leaving him. I wasn’t ready. “Of course I will.”

He nodded again, swallowing, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he did. We looked at each other for a few moments, awkwardness settling in.

“I’m going to go,” I murmured. I moved toward him to kiss him goodbye, but second-guessed myself, shoving my hands in my pockets instead. “I’ll show myself out.” I nodded and left the room, grabbed my things, and left West behind.

The walk to my mom’s house was miserable—cold, snowy, wet. I wasn’t wearing thick enough clothing to protect myself from the wind or cold and I paid the price for it. By the time I’d made it the several blocks away to my destination, I was chilled through. I kicked my boots on the top step to knock the snow off and proceeded into my mom’s house without hesitation.

“Mom?”

“Cole? I’m so glad you’re home. I’ve been worrying all night.” Her voice got closer as she spoke until she was standing in the foyer in front of me, wearing an apron and holding a spatula. “And look at you. Soaked to the bone and covered in snow.” She pulled me in for a hug and continued fussing over me. “You just had a health scare. You can’t put yourself at risk like this.”

I hugged her back tightly. “What did you want me to do? Miss Christmas morning?”

She pulled away and smacked me lightly on the shoulder. “I would’ve preferred if you’d just used that brain of yours and not stayed out into a blizzard. Did you lose power over there? We lost it here. It just came back on about an hour ago.”

“Yeah, the shop lost power too. It’s okay, we were fine. His apartment stayed warm.”

Mom smirked and raised her eyebrows knowingly. “I bet it did. I hope you were safe.”

“ Mom , seriously. It wasn’t like that.”

“If you say so, honey. Now, go take a hot shower and change so we can get on with Christmas. I’ll let your brother know you’re here.”

A little while later, I was warm again, in clean clothes, and sitting around the tree with my mom and my brother, laughing and sharing holiday magic. My heart ached though—I couldn’t stop thinking about West. Had he made it to his parents’ house, or did he stay home, alone on Christmas? Would I see him again? Soon? Or was what we had a quick fling? It hurt to think of it like that, but maybe that’s what West wanted. I suppressed a sigh and re-focused my attention on the holiday at hand.

The next morning, I headed out of Silver Creek and back to the city, to work and my apartment and my stressful life. As the next few days ticked by, I got back into the routine of working—taking on less stress than I had before—but I still felt off-kilter. I just couldn’t stop thinking about West Davies, the sexy, sweet shop owner who’d taken a liking to me. The feeling had been mutual.

I couldn’t stop wondering if he missed me or if I’d been just a ship in the night for him. Finally, after a week, I texted him.

Cole: Hey there. I hope your Christmas was a good one.

I didn’t expect a response, at least not anytime soon, but it came quickly.

West: It was good. Yours?

I took a deep breath and decided to tell him the truth.

Cole: A little lonely if I'm being honest.

West: Weren't you with your mom and your brother?

Cole: I wasn't with you.

When he didn't respond right away, I sighed softly, trying to decide if he was busy with the shop or just trying to send me a message without explicitly turning me down. I shook my head—I had to stop waffling and just act already. I went to Tim's office to have a little chat. I'd made my mind up, and I had every intention of going back to Silver Creek.

Chapter Ten

West

I went about the business of closing up the coffee shop for the day, a Friday evening after a long day, which was after a long week. No contact from Cole until the lunchtime rush, and he'd told me he missed me—well, not in so many words, but close enough. I'd spent the week missing him, too, aching to see him again. It was no use, though. Our lives were too different. I had the shop, he had his marketing job, and that was that.

The bell above the shop door jingled, signaling the entrance of a patron. Dammit, I must've forgotten to lock the door. "Sorry," I called, without looking up as I scrubbed under the coffee machines. "We're closed."

There was no response, just the shuffling of feet on the linoleum floor briefly, before that fell silent too.

I straightened, my back aching with the way I'd been hunched over to get my sponge under the machines. "We're—" My words fell away quickly. Standing in front of me, a knit hat in his hands, was Cole. "You're—"

He gave me a shy smile and nodded. "I am."

"What are you doing here?"

"I talked to my boss. I told him I needed some more time to recover. Convinced him

to let me work remotely for as long as I need.”

“So you’re staying?” My stomach fluttered at the thought.

With a nod, his smile widened. “I’m staying with my mom for the time being. Until I can find my own place.”

“You’re staying-staying?”

Another nod.

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. “Why?”

Cole took another step forward. “I really like you, West, and it felt like you really liked me, too. I didn’t want to give up the chance to get to know you better, give this thing between us a real chance.”

“Really?”

He laughed a little and stepped even closer, until he was right in front of the sales counter. “Really. If you want me to, I mean.”

I rushed around the counter and threw my arms around him, pulling him tight against me. “Now what?”

He hugged me back, warm and strong, and we held each other close. When I pulled back, his eyes were sparkling with mischief.

“I’ve already been to Mom’s and she knows I’m here. I’m yours for the night.”

My stomach swooped, heat building in my core. I tipped my head to the side slightly.

“Yeah?”

Cole put one hand on my jaw and kissed me gently. “Yeah. Now, I was thinking—”

I put a finger to his lips. “No more talking.” I took him by the hand and led him upstairs to my apartment, pulling him along with me in a hurry.

The moment the door was closed behind us, I turned and unceremoniously shoved him against the door, kissing him fiercely. As we kissed, we stumbled to my bedroom, kicking off shoes, tugging at clothes, and tossing them to the floor. By the time we’d gotten to the bed, we were both stripped bare, breathing hard, hands roaming everywhere. I pulled Cole onto the bed and he shoved me to the mattress, climbed on top of me, and planted kisses along my jaw and throat.

After a few heated moments, he lifted his head and looked at me. “Top or bottom?”

I groaned, rocking my hips up into the press of his body. “Bottom.”

He grinned and nodded before dropping more kisses along my collarbone and chest, working his way down until he was between my legs, spreading them and gripping the muscles of my ass. The next thing I knew, he was stroking my hole with one finger, before leaning in and dragging his tongue over the tight muscle there. I gasped and writhed as he ate my ass, slowly pushing one finger into me.

He continued to work me open, licking around his finger, letting out soft moans as he worked, eventually sliding a second finger into me, which caused me to let out a loud groan and grip my leaking cock.

Cole chuckled darkly and pulled back. “Ready?”

“Fuck me.”

“Do you have...?”

Desperate, I groped around for my nightstand. When I realized I’d never get to it, I looked back at Cole. “Top drawer.”

It only took him a few seconds to find the lube and condoms and the next thing I knew, he was ripping a condom open and sliding it on. I watched, eager anticipation quivering through me, as he poured lube into his hand and stroked himself before letting his hand drop to my ass and lube up my entrance.

“Come on ,” I murmured, eager and ready.

At that, Cole smirked, lined his cock up with my hole, and pushed inside me. I let my eyes flutter closed briefly and let the sensations wash over me as Cole took me apart. He thrust in slowly at first, letting me adjust to him, to the stretching and aching pleasure of the burn as he filled me. Soon, he was pressed in to the hilt, his pelvis against the muscles of my ass. He lowered himself until he was resting on his forearms, kissing me hungrily before he withdrew and thrust in again.

I arched my back and rocked back down onto his thick cock, fucking myself just as much as he was fucking me. The room filled with the sounds of our bodies coming together, our harsh breathing and soft groans. My cock throbbed and ached, the friction of our bodies too much to handle. I knew I couldn’t hold off long.

His breathing became tighter and Cole broke the kiss, our gazes meeting, locking on one another. Cole’s thrusts intensified and he groaned deeply after each one. Between our bodies, my cock leaked furiously. All at once, I came, moaning and bucking my hips into his, spurting thick strands between our stomachs. My ass clenched around his cock over and over, and a few seconds later, Cole cried out and came, filling the condom inside of me.

Once he'd fucked through his aftershocks, he slowly withdrew, gripping the condom as he did. I whimpered, missing the fullness already, and watched as Cole wordlessly discarded the condom in my bedside trash can and collapsed into bed next to me. We lay there for a long while, just catching our breaths.

When I felt like my breathing was back to normal, he let out a deep, contented sigh. "Well..."

I turned to face him. "Well what?"

"I was just thinking, you never did fulfill your promise."

My brows furrowed. "What promise?"

"You said you'd teach me how to make those cookies."

With a startled laugh, I nodded in concession. "You're right. Do you still want to learn?"

He grinned and kissed me quickly. "Let's get cleaned up first and then see how we feel." He put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. "We have all the time in the world now, don't we?"

"That we do," I murmured. "That we do."

Cole

“Y ou’ve got a little something...” I gestured to West’s face.

He wiped at his cheek, further smudging flour on his cheekbone. “Here?”

I reached out and wiped it away with my thumb. “Got it.” I grinned and leaned in, kissing him quickly. Instead of pulling away, I lingered, lengthening the kiss more than I’d intended, deepening it, parting my lips and letting our tongues slide together. I wrapped my hand around the back of West’s neck and held him close as we kissed.

A few moments later, West groaned and pulled away. “We’re never going to get these cookies baked if you keep that up.”

I shrugged and kissed him again, lightly. My voice was a whisper when I spoke. “Who cares?”

He leveled me with a look. “You wanted to take cookies to your mom’s place for Christmas. Homemade cookies. You know she’s going to love them.”

With a sigh, I turned back to the table. “Fine. We have the dry ingredients mixed. Now what?”

I watched as West mixed the dry and wet ingredients and the mixture became a dough. “See? Now that this is together, we just break off pieces to roll into a ball, and then coat it with the cinnamon sugar mixture.”

He demonstrated the first one, and once he had, I was confident I could do the same. “Got it.”

It didn’t take long until the snickerdoodles were lined up neatly on a baking sheet and ready to go into the oven. Once he’d closed them in and set the timer, West leaned back against the counter. “That’s all there is to it.”

I gave him a wicked grin and took a few steps forward until I was pressed against him. “Now what?” I murmured.

“Usually I clean up the mess while they bake.” He sounded calm except for the hitch in his breath when he said “mess” at the same time that I’d palmed the front of his jeans.

“I can think of something better to do.”

“Cole,” he said, half admonishment, half moan as I pressed kisses to his neck. “I promised you a year ago I’d teach you and we’re only just now getting around to it. I don’t want them to burn and ruin everything we’ve done.”

“How long do we have?”

He glanced over his shoulder at the kitchen timer. “Eight minutes.”

I hummed. “I can do a lot of damage in eight minutes.” Dropping my hands to his waist, I worked to unfasten his jeans.

With a groan, West pushed me away. “Let’s make a deal. We get the cookies out of the oven when they’re done and then I let you ravage me.”

“Right here in the kitchen?” I asked hopefully.

He gasped, pretending to be scandalized. “Not in front of the cookies, darling.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I know. Now, help me clean up.”

I did as he’d asked, helping to wash the dishes we’d dirtied while he cleaned up the counters and put away ingredients. Soon enough, the timer beeped, signaling that the cookies were ready. The second West had put them on the cooling rack, I sidled up behind him, wrapped my arms around him, and kissed his neck again.

“Now can I ravage you?”

He groaned, dropping his head forward, and rocked his hips so his ass pressed against my groin. “Yes, please. But make it quick. We have less than an hour before we have to leave.”

I didn’t have to be told twice. With that, I kissed his neck once more and grabbed his ass. “Meet me in the bedroom.”

Laughing, we raced each other to West’s bedroom, and the moment we crossed the threshold, we turned to each other, kissing each other desperately. I stripped West of his clothes and shoved him onto the bed. As he scrambled onto the mattress, I took my own clothes off and joined him the second I was naked. We kissed and touched each other for several moments before I pulled West on top of me, straddling my hips.

He took the cue and reached out, grabbing the lube off his nightstand and coating my bare cock with it—we’d ditched the condoms a few months in. My breath hitched as he slicked me up, and the next thing I knew, West was lining us up and settling down onto me, my erection breaching his tight hole.

I gripped his hips hard and set the pace quickly, thrusting deep into him, causing him to moan and reach for his own leaking erection. He was so beautiful as he rode me, rocking back and forth as I thrust into him. The heat of his body around my length quickly drove me to the edge, and before I knew it, my cock was pulsing, releasing deep into his body.

A moment later, he followed behind, spilling over his hand and on my chest and stomach, the contractions of his hole around my cock dragging out the final remnants of my orgasm.

When he was spent, he pulled off and collapsed onto the bed next to me, groaning. We lay together, catching our breath, until I was composed enough to grab a spare shirt and unceremoniously clean us off. Once we were clean enough, we hurried to shower and change before heading to my mom's house for Christmas Eve celebrations.

Once we'd arrived at my mom's house, I knocked on the door twice before pushing the door open and calling out.

"It's us."

"Andy, they're here," Mom said by way of response, sounding delighted that we'd arrived. A moment later, once we'd stepped inside the house, she was wrapping her arms around me and squeezing me tight. She turned to hug West and stopped when she saw he was carrying two tins, one in each hand. "Oh, now I thought we'd agreed that we weren't doing gifts."

"I made cookies," I announced.

"You made cookies?"

I nodded proudly before pausing. "Well, West helped. A lot."

“Still, it’s the thought that counts.”

As we gathered in the dining room to share our family meal, nerves started to overtake me, my stomach quivering. I shoved my hand in my pocket and toyed with the key on the chain I was hiding, my gift to West.

“Cole, you’re awfully quiet tonight,” Mom pointed out as we were finishing dinner.

“Sorry,” I murmured.

“Yeah,” Andy agreed. “What’s with you?”

I took a deep breath and pulled the key chain out of my pocket, placing it on the table between me and West.

“I have an announcement.” Everyone fell silent and all eyes were on me. I turned to face West, the man who had quickly become the love of my life. “I love you. More than I ever expected. Last year for Christmas, we agreed to start a semi-long-distance relationship, and this year has been the best year of my life. But I’m tired of all the driving back and forth. I’m tired of living in the city where I can’t see you every day. So I rented a house, just around the corner from the coffee shop. I’d like it if you’d consider moving in there with me.”

West looked at me, brows furrowed, lips slightly parted, as he processed what I’d said. “You want me to move in with you?”

I nodded. “I do. I love you and it feels like the right next step.”

A smile broke over his face. “I love you too.”

“So is that a yes?”

“Of course it is,” he practically shouted, leaning in and pulling me into a hug. Mom and Andy broke out in applause and cheered and West released me and turned to them. “Did you two know about this?”

Mom shook her head. “I suspected something was going on, but I didn’t know anything, not for sure. I’m really happy for you two.”

“Me too,” Andy said. “Glad you’ve finally seen the small-town light.”

We all laughed and once the conversation settled, Mom cleared her throat. “Well, let’s have some cookies, shall we?” When everyone agreed, she got up and brought the tins in from the kitchen.

As we passed the tins of snickerdoodles around and ate our cookies, which were imperfect but sweet and delicious anyway, I smiled, warmed. My life was much like the cookies—imperfect but sweet. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

The End