



# Mingle All The Way

## (Christmas Falls: Season 2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** When I go home for the holidays, Santa has a secret waiting for me

I wandered far and wide in search of happiness, never finding what I sought. When I return to Christmas Falls to lick my wounds, the last thing I expect is for Santa to send me a golden-haired, blue-eyed man I once called my best friend—the friend who was taken away from me when we were kids.

Milo Montgomery is back in town, and he doesn't wait for miracles to come to him. There's a special sort of magic in the way he spreads joy throughout our town.

His chocolate shop might be struggling, but that can't break his festive spirit. His optimism is contagious, and his cheerful mood makes me feel like I'm thirteen again, catching snowflakes on my tongue. As we walk down memory lane, recreating every Christmas Eve we spent together, our friendship becomes everything I've been missing.

Milo confesses I was his first and only love. But as a straight man, I can never love him the same way. Or can I? I'm beginning to question everything I thought I knew about myself. About the world.

Maybe happiness has nothing to do with a place. Maybe all it takes is the right person.

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# Page 1

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ONE

MILO

Not that anyone asked, but if I were to rank my favorite hours, then mid-March noon would be high on the list, when clear, bright sunshine promised the real start of spring and when you could sit on your front lawn and enjoy a cup of something sweet. Higher still, I would put the golden hour of late August. The first breath of fresh air would remind you that the sweltering heat couldn't last forever. But the best—the very best—hour was at half past six in the morning in early December.

The sky was still dark, but the clouds were soon catching the first rays of sunlight high above the town. On some days, the sky was clear, the infinity of scattered stars impossibly bright, and the few wisps of clouds would look purple against the indigo horizon. On other days, snowflakes replaced the stars, glimmering in the orange glow of streetlamps in Santa's Village.

I yawned and pulled the blanket closer around my shoulders. The dancing steam rose from my snowman-shaped mug, spreading the aroma of coffee and cinnamon throughout my little apartment.

Only one lamp was on in here, leaving the window mostly transparent. In it, I could see the faint reflection of my huddled figure. I didn't want to imagine what I would look like to a wandering passerby who had the misfortune to be out this early and glance at my window. My unruly curls poked in all directions, and the blanket around my torso made my body look like a small mountain of fabric with a sleepy head perched on top.

A laugh bubbled inside me, tugging up the corners of my mouth, and I shook the image out of my head.

As I slowly emptied my snowman mug, the night faded from the sky. I didn't need to look at the time to know I was running out of it. Shedding off the blanket, I moved quickly through my studio to clean it up and get dressed. Swapping my striped pajamas for the uniform was the worst part, but it only took a minute, and there was no point in turning on the heater for that. Not when the shop had to use power all day.

"Come on, come on, come on," I whispered as I rubbed my hands for warmth. This wasn't how I'd imagined my first winter back in Christmas Falls, but it still beat doing nothing. I glanced at the mirror in the small bathroom. My fitted cream shirt was tucked into my comfortable black trousers, sleeves rolled to my elbows, and awaiting the apron in the kitchen. Putting on a pair of sturdy canvas shoes that would protect me from slipping in the kitchen, I felt ready to face the day.

The shop, which occupied most of the building's floor plan, was still dark, lit gently by the streetlamps and the hints of morning sunlight brightening the cloud-laden sky. The silence was near absolute, aside from the humming of the equipment in the kitchen.

Before anything else, I fired up the heating because my breath was misty in the cold air of the shop.

I turned on the lights, giving my little story all the cozy vibes I'd been daydreaming about for years. The Edison light bulbs made such a huge difference when paired with the dark wooden surfaces on the interior. Cracking my knuckles, I picked up a cleaning cloth and a disinfectant to clean up the surfaces all the way from the front doorknob to the cash register on the far end. The shop was tucked into a small building with only one tiny room on the side for living, and the kitchen in the back for making my products, together with the inventory, took up half the space I had.

The storefront was conveniently cluttered with several wooden tables and chairs. Some held heaps of fresh products, while others were meant for customers to sit down and enjoy all I could offer them. Not that I had too many customers lining at my door. Not everything could be exactly as I'd imagined, right?

The air was warm at last by the time I went into the kitchen. I wiped the stainless steel surfaces, then hurried to restock cocoa, sugar, cream, and flavoring ingredients. Deep in work, I heard myself humming the opening tune of "The Little Drummer Boy"; then, I put a stop to it before the earworm took hold of me.

Nothing in the world felt as good as heating that first block of chocolate at the crack of dawn.

Okay, maybe a few things felt better, but I didn't exactly have time to procure them. Or an opportunity. Chocolate it is, I told myself with satisfaction. The really good thing about chocolate was that it never got your hopes up over the course of an evening only to leave before breakfast and never reply to your messages, making you wonder what the hell you'd done wrong and how you hadn't realized that you had been doing it.

As the chocolate melted smoothly in the double boiler, the rich, sweet aroma filled the kitchen, wrapping around me like a warm hug. I took a moment to savor it, letting the warmth seep into my fingers as I stirred. Once the chocolate was perfectly tempered, I grabbed my favorite molds—each shaped like tiny Christmas trees, snowflakes, and ornaments. I set them on the counter, my heart quickening at the thought of creating something special.

With a steady hand, I poured the velvety chocolate into the molds, filling them just right before gently tapping each to release any air bubbles. As I worked, I imagined the excitement on my hypothetical customers' faces when they discovered these delightful bonbons—each a small, edible piece of magic. After letting them set, I

filled them with luscious ganache infused with seasonal flavors like peppermint, orange, and cinnamon, each bite a little surprise wrapped in chocolate.

“And now, we wait,” I said softly to the treats on the countertop, turning my attention to other products.

When the clock struck nine, I lifted my head and stretched my arms and back. It was crazy how quickly time passed when I worked.

I unlocked the front door and turned the door sign around to let the passersby know we were officially in business. I wondered what else to do to attract attention, but my lack of talent in that area was astounding. Maybe they’ll come when the festival gets going , I told myself, knowing well that the festival was already happening and that the streets of Christmas Falls were flooded with returning natives and countless tourists. People flocked to this town either to experience the festive spirit or to rediscover the magic of Christmas they’d lost somewhere along the way. Both kinds got precisely what they wanted.

Christmas Falls was a quaint town that had nearly been wiped out in the transition to the modern world. Had it not been for the imagination of its residents and their love of artisanal crafts, Christmas Falls never would have survived, let alone thrived. As things stood now, the tourism from the winter holidays fueled the town’s success. I’d hoped for a slice of that on my return this summer. I’d hoped to see my investment show signs of paying off with the seasonal tourism boom.

Give it time , Dad had told me. You’re a hard worker, Milo, and a talented craftsman. Give it time . But I wasn’t sure how much more time I could give it. And because I could provide answers to none of these questions, I put it out of my mind.

As if sent by my guardian angel, James Willoughby walked into the shop half an hour later. The bell above the door alerted me while I was crouching behind the counter

and making sure I had enough packaging materials for the inevitable run on my store once every town visitor heard of my chocolates.

“Good morning,” I singsonged as the wood-and-glass door shut behind him with a little clang.

“You’re rather cheerful,” James said in a flat tone.

“Always,” I said. “Unlike some in here.”

James let out a snort. “It’s too early to be happy about anything, Milo.”

“I’d love to see you say that in front of Ezra,” I said.

James’ eyes widened a little with concern and mischief, two conflicting expressions that somehow made perfect sense. Whereas James hid his jolliness deep beneath his surface, his boyfriend, Ezra, wore it on his sleeve.

“What can I get you?” I asked, half chuckling at James’ change in expression.

“Er, I should have written it down,” James admitted, scratching his head.

“Is it for Ezra?” I asked, unable to hide the bubbling laughter. There was something cute about the way James struggled when he clearly wanted to do well. Once upon a time, he had been a corporate bigshot in New York, but last year’s visit to Christmas Falls reminded him of where he belonged. That and the fact that Ezra Thorne was a force of nature that swept James off his feet with his Christmas cheer. Together, they’d saved Nicholas Willoughby’s toy store—to be perfectly fair, they had basically saved it from James and his boss—and continued the long tradition of being the one true Santa’s home in Christmas Falls.

“You know it,” James said hopefully.

“I got you covered,” I said with a wink. Ezra loved the white chocolate pralines with coconut filling. He was my biggest customer.

I put together a box and ran it through the cash register.

“Keep the change,” James said, sliding a bill across the counter. “It’s for saving my skin.”

I thanked him, then pushed over a small bag of individually wrapped bonbons. “And this is for Nick and Marigold.”

James eyed me. “You know, you don’t need to give your work away every time.”

I met his look with playful defiance. “Ah, but I want to.”

James hesitated, then lifted the little bag of treats. “Fine. But only because Marigold is going to love you forever because of it. Thanks.”

I watched James’ back as he walked out of the store with my chocolates. Marigold ran a trinket shop near Nicholas’ toy store. The two town elders were fierce competitors but also the living, breathing proof that it was never too late to fall in love.

I made myself sigh as I thought about it. Nicholas and Marigold had unintentionally driven each other’s businesses up by bickering publicly, then began dating in secret in their sunset years, especially after James and Ezra took over most of the work in Santa’s Workshop, giving Nicholas the free time he deserved. Not that the old Santa would ever give up on a chance to make a child’s day. Almost every time I stopped by, Nicholas was in his rocking chair, carving wooden toys like he was still an eager

apprentice.

The day slowed down significantly after James' visit. No matter how much I manifested, I couldn't magic another customer through the door. One woman stood at the large window, watching the display of sweets and goodies for so long that I was sure she would buy my entire inventory, but she received a phone call that distracted her for long enough to forget all about my chocolates. An older gentleman walked in around noon, but he needed help finding the White Elephant down the street and wasn't allowed to eat sweet food, politely refusing to give them a taste test.

I wondered if I was doing something wrong. The thought that I was simply offering bad products made me lose my appetite over lunch.

Maybe I had just dreamed it all up way too big. Maybe I'd let the fantasy go too far.

As the end of the day neared, streetlamps lit again, and snow lightly dusted from the overcast sky. Marigold Fairchild walked into my shop as I was closing.

"Darling," she said in a low and hurried tone. "What a marvel you are."

"You got the chocolates, Ms. Fairchild?" I asked cheekily.

She smacked her lips. "I don't know how you do it. I simply don't know."

"Secrets of the trade," I said, touching the side of my nose conspiratorially.

"Do you know, there was one with menthol that was positively divine," Marigold said as he neared the counter. She wore many of the trinkets of her own making on her fingers, wrists, and around her neck. Wooden beads, polished stones, and various metalworks drew my attention to her products.



Was there a way I could wear a chocolate hat in town to drive my business out of this crisis?

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. I’ve been testing a new recipe,” I said, stifling the giddiness that rose in me whenever someone expressed genuine interest in my craft.

“Do tell,” Marigold said, leaning against the counter and looking at me expectantly.

“Well,” I started, feeling a thrill at the chance to explain, “it’s all about balance. I wanted to create something refreshing but not too overpowering. So, I infused the filling with menthol crystals—just a tiny amount to get that cooling sensation without it tasting medicinal. The real trick is blending it with white chocolate ganache. The sweetness of the white chocolate mellows out the sharpness of the menthol, creating this smooth, cool burst when you bite into it.”

Marigold’s eyes widened in delight as I continued.

“Then, I coat the whole thing in a thin layer of dark chocolate to give it a rich, slightly bitter contrast. The combination makes it feel like you’re biting into a frosty winter breeze, but it melts into warmth on your tongue. Perfect for the season, right?”

Marigold clapped her hands. “Darling, that sounds positively enchanting!”

“I’m glad someone likes it,” I said, finding a couple of them in a sampling bowl and sliding them on the counter between us. “Want one?”

Marigold’s eyes glimmered mischievously. “I really shouldn’t,” she said mock scoldingly. “Oh, what the devil. No one needs to know.” And with an expression that lacked any hint of guilt, Marigold unwrapped one bonbon and popped it into her mouth.

I did the same, letting the flavor take me back to my childhood in Christmas Falls. It opened a flood of memories from the first sweet treat I remembered to the taste of fresh snow we really shouldn't have put into our mouths. It brought back the aroma of cold air biting your nostrils when you've been building that snow fortress for way too long, and your fingers were becoming numb, but you just wouldn't give it up. I remembered the snowball fights and red cheeks and misty breaths from those days. I remembered us building the biggest snowman the town had ever seen, only to have it topple almost squarely onto our heads.

It was strange how a single bite could make me so nostalgic for a time I could never revisit.

"We're all so lucky to have you back, Milo," Marigold said sagely. "So many people are returning. Young people, too. And wouldn't you know it? I ran into your old friend this morning."

"Kody?" I asked. "Is his wedding looking any better?" I picked up a cleaning cloth to wipe the counter. Kody was a good friend, both since our childhood in Christmas Falls and because he understood the woes of running a business in this town. The White Elephant thrived, unlike Jingle Bites, and my friend had his plate full with a wedding that just rattled me.

Marigold shot me a dubious look and forced away a sneaky smile. "I'm sure he knows what he's doing," she said. "But I meant the Underwood boy."

The cloth slipped from my fingers. Breath hitched in my throat, and I blinked. Forcing myself to act normal, I cleared my throat. "Christian is back?"

Even saying his name brought back those same snowballs, fortresses, and snowmen. The mischief in his chocolate eyes and the redness in his pale cheeks burned so vividly before my eyes.

“He sure is, dear,” Marigold said. “Isn’t it wonderful how you all go away to see the world but always come back?”

“Um...my parents had to move for work,” I murmured distantly, my mind coming up blank while my heart raced. My focus sharpened again, and I looked at Marigold. “I never would have left on my own.”

She gave me a soft smile. “What matters is that you are here now.”

Christian Underwood was back in town. I never would have expected it. When I’d asked around, Kody said Christian had left years ago and hadn’t been back that often. Some big-city career had been keeping him busy. Of course, I was happy for him, and I didn’t ask about him too much. I didn’t want to be so obvious, especially because it was the quickest way to earn someone’s pity.

“Is he well?” I heard myself ask.

“I wouldn’t know, darling,” Marigold said in a low voice. “I saw him from afar. I wouldn’t have recognized him if it wasn’t for his mother. And when I told Nick, he said it was true. His grandson had seen Christian near the rink just the other night.”

I forced a small smile to my face. “I hope he has a nice time off.”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this,” Marigold said quietly. That was how all the juiciest gossip started. “But I don’t think he’ll be going back. A friend of a friend was over at their house a few weeks ago, and Joan Underwood was talking about Christian’s struggles with work. It looks like he’s back for a while.”

My heart gave a stupid lurch that shouldn’t have carried as much hope as it did. This didn’t mean anything other than that Christian’s life wasn’t as good as I would wish for him. That was all. The end. Nothing more.

“Don’t tell anyone I said so,” Marigold warned me. “I don’t care for gossip.”

“Of course,” I agreed, lifting a corner of my mouth into a small smile.

Marigold met my look with a glimmering one. “You cheeky thing.” She swatted at me with one hand, then said she needed to go. “But have more menthols ready tomorrow. Nick will make a big order, I believe.”

Relief washed over me, and I did my best to conceal it.

“And don’t be a stranger,” Marigold said. “Visit the stalls at the crafts fair, darling.”

“I’ll come around,” I promised.

As Marigold left, I locked the store and turned everything off. Slipping through the hallway to my studio, I couldn’t ignore these odd sensations in my body, feelings tugging my heart in so many directions. Christian...

We’d been best friends once upon a time. Had it not been for my parents’ work, I never would have left him. I would have spent every Christmas with him, like we had for years. I never would have stopped.

My blankets awaited me in the bed after I showered and put on clean pajamas. It was easy to get warm beneath them, but I struggled to fall asleep. It was elusive, like the happiness of my childhood and the feeling that anything at all was possible. I could see it on the horizon, but I just couldn’t come close enough to grab it.

Much later, sleep did take me, and the last thing I thought was that Christian was back in town.

## Page 2

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TWO

CHRISTIAN

I pushed food around my plate until my mother's firm suggestion to stop playing with it. The tone—not unkind—she used took twenty years off of me in an instant, making me sit up and hold my fork tighter like the eight-year-old I had once been.

“Sorry,” I breathed.

My mother's lips formed a little smile. “And don't let me catch you avoiding peas.”

Dad chuckled from his seat at the head of the dining table. “You heard the boss, Christian.”

“Ah, I think I'm old enough to know if I don't like something,” I said, bracing for a storm.

“That's exactly what a child would say,” Mom pointed out matter-of-factly. She scooped a large spoonful of peas and topped my plate.

I didn't have it in me to argue. If anything, some small part of me longed to be told what to do and to have no choice but to obey. The simplicity that no longer existed in my life seemed like the only thing that could make me feel a little less like crap right now. So I ate my damn peas and licked the plate clean.

I offered to do the dishes tonight. Dad cracked open a can of beer after dinner,

settling in his armchair facing the TV. Mom had a cup of tea and a sweet romance paperback open in her lap. Seeing them slide into their comfortable evening so easily made me both glad and mildly jealous. Not that I would want to ruin their unwinding time.

So I swiftly packed up my doom and gloom and carried it upstairs to my childhood bedroom. It still looked the same as when I had left it ten years ago. I'd spent little time back here since leaving for college, visiting my family twice a year, then only once, until three years ago when I'd stopped coming altogether.

They hadn't done anything to push me away. In fact, they'd tried hard to pull me closer, but facing their never-ending optimism that things would turn around if only I persisted had gotten unbearable. I couldn't keep visiting with bad news and disappointing reports. My life had not turned out the way I'd imagined, and I just didn't know if everyone had overpromised or if I'd screwed it all up so badly that I got what I deserved.

The bedroom was cozy enough. A small desk was tucked in one corner, flanked by a large bookcase with stacks of old comics and fantasy paperbacks. The ceiling was covered with fluorescent stars and snowflakes that glowed late into the night. The dark green walls gave the room a cozy, moody look when the lamps were on. My double bed was a gift from my grandparents when I'd outgrown my childhood custom-made sleigh-shaped bed. Other kids had slept in race cars, but my family had always lived and breathed the Christmas holidays all year round.

I looked through the old comics on my bookshelf, then lifted my gaze to the Lord of the Rings trilogy, the only hardcovers I had in here. My fingers traced them, and I indulged in some sweet memories of the long nights I'd stayed up struggling with the endless passages until some otherworldly magic would happen and the words would transport me to Helm's Deep or the Fields of Pelennor. Magic. Somewhere along the way, I stopped believing in it.

Holding a deep breath in my lungs, I picked up my black coat and gray scarf, turned on my heels, and walked out. I told my parents I would be back later, and I slipped out of the house and into the cold December evening.

Our house was a fairly big one for the three of us alone. Looking at the drive, it was similar to the houses that flanked it, except that my parents had gone overboard with the Christmas lights. Or they hadn't. This place had a zest for colorful lights, and my parents were no different than most inhabitants.

I walked down the street that led me straight into Santa's Village, where families enjoyed the festive cheer, Christmas music poured out of every shop, and the scent of cinnamon in the air was probably mandatory by law.

I wouldn't go as far as to say I was the town's Grinch, but I definitely didn't get it . Not anymore, at least.

As I passed Santa's Helpers Animal Shelter, the cozy orange streetlights drew my attention to the right. Nutcrackers, Santa's Workshop, Ginger's Bread, and the White Elephant lined the street I walked, but I pressed on to the town hall and took a left turn, trying to tire the thoughts out of my brain.

Just last month, I'd found myself needing to ask my parents for help. At twenty-eight, calling Mommy and Daddy for rent money was a devastating blow. I had scraped by for so long, trying my very hardest to impress potential employers in New York, yet my best was never enough. Those who had given me a chance soon found that my ideas were too "out-there" and "not exactly aligned with the cost-efficient philosophy of the client."

I didn't last long in those jobs.

As I walked across the street from the town hall, I slowed down. The shop on the

corner poured subdued yellow light onto the sidewalk. My legs had brought me here, not my conscious mind. Yet even at the first sight of it, I knew I had come to the right place.

Jingle Bites.

Mom had said that it was somewhere in Santa's Village, although she hadn't visited yet. She'd heard from Aunt Francene that Milo Montgomery was back in town, and I hadn't believed her. I couldn't. Milo had been such a huge part of my boyhood that it seemed impossible he could exist beyond those memories. It seemed impossible that he could have left Christmas Falls and had a life I wasn't a part of.

The shop was empty, but warmth washed over me as I pushed the door open and triggered a brass bell above my head. The scent of chocolate, rich and velvety, filled my nostrils and lungs with my first inhale, and the sound of a man's voice—not a child's, which again surprised me—came from somewhere in the back.

"Welcome," he called. The voice was high and melodic, unmistakably his. "I'll be with you in a minute." There was a little urgency in that tone. "Help yourself to some samples on the counter if you'd like."

I didn't know how to move my feet. I hardly remembered how to breathe. Warmth filled me so quickly that my cheeks burned and my eyes stung. This place was so incredibly cozy that it felt like stepping into a dream. Dark wooden surfaces, Christmas decorations, mistletoe wreaths, and potted plants were just the beginning. There were tables and a counter with heaps of chocolate treats, and classical music with festive overtones played from the speakers.

"Found anything you like?" Milo's voice asked before he stepped through a passage behind the counter and looked at me. The cheerful, welcoming smile on his face wavered for a moment as he halted, taken aback.



I stood in the middle of his little shop, watching him wordlessly as if to make sure it really was him. He was all grown up, tall and slim, his eyes impossibly blue and his hair dusty blond. The smile remained on his face, revealing dimples on each cheek.

“Hello,” I said quietly, not trusting my voice.

Milo stared at me a moment longer, then took quick steps around the counter and across the shop, throwing his arms around me in a surprise hug.

My body tensed in response, arms stuck for a few heartbeats, until the lavender scent mixed with something nutty and sweet reached my nose. Inhaling, I found myself relaxing, and my arms wrapped around him in a tight hug. It felt good to do this. It felt right.

Part of me wondered who this person was. I had to be as much of a stranger to him as he was to me after fifteen years. The last time I’d seen Milo, he’d been smiling despite the tears in his eyes, and the thick, blond curls on his head were matted with breaking sweat. Nothing was worse than crying in the summer heat.

As he slowly released me, we stepped back from one another as if to take each other’s measure.

“Hello,” he said, his voice electric with some mix of excitement and disbelief.

“Hi,” I whispered.

Milo nodded, his smile broad and pearly. “We did that already.”

“Yes, I guess we did,” I agreed, looking at him closely. His cheekbones had always been high, but these fifteen years had defined them, sculpting the boy I once knew into a man.

“I was going to look for you later this week,” Milo said, wiping his palms against the black canvas apron. I hadn’t noticed any smudges on his hands.

“You heard I was back?” I asked. It was a stupid question and the least important of all. The question I’d meant to ask was, You were going to look for me ?

“You couldn’t have been away for so long to forget the mass communication media of a small town,” Milo said in that light, fluttery voice.

I barked a laugh, my first in a long time, and shook my head. “I guess I should have known.” I scratched the back of my head and shifted my weight. “I wasn’t keeping it a secret.”

He smiled at that.

Words faded then. We stood in the twinkling yellow Christmas lights and the glow of Edison light bulbs, eyeing one another carefully.

The silence compelled me to say something, so I chose poorly. “How have you been?”

Milo snort-chuckled and shrugged. “Good.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Good.”

He pressed his lips together, dropping that blue gaze down my face and lifting it back to my eyes. “Now that that’s out of the way...” He laughed, and I joined him, my heart skipping a beat or two with nervousness. I’d run into the lair of so many fond memories without giving it all a single clear thought. I hadn’t even considered what questions to ask him or what things to tell him. I hadn’t even wondered how different he would be. I hadn’t asked myself what I would look like to him after all this time.

“Want a chocolate?” he asked.

Relief washed over me so incredibly quickly. The simplicity of the question didn’t require me to tiptoe around the answer and to call back on what I remembered of him. It was so easy just to say, “I would love one.” The relief was audible in my tone, a pent-up sigh releasing with the words.

Milo gestured toward the counter with a tilt of his head, his rich, wild curls swaying with the movement. “Come on, take a seat,” he said, patting a wooden barstool with a black faux leather seat.

I sat down, arms folded on the smooth wooden counter, and Milo circled it to stand on the other side. He narrowed his eyes and inspected me for a moment. “Do you still like sour cherries?”

My eyes widened for a split second. I’d completely forgotten about those bonbons with very sour cherry-flavored filling. “I...I’m not sure.”

A corner of his lips ticked up in a half-smile, and Milo pulled out a drawer from beneath the counter with individually wrapped candy bars arranged neatly. “Here. Try this.”

It was a small block of chocolate wrapped in gold foil with a red paper label wrapped around the middle third. It had the bonbon logo that matched the sign on the door and the name of his shop printed in an elegant font.

I frowned as I inspected it.

“It hasn’t gone bad, I swear,” Milo joked.

But my frown deepened as I ran my finger over the letters. “Is this...handwritten?”

“It sure is,” Milo said like it was no big deal.

I gazed at the chocolate with reverence. Carefully, I tugged on the label to pull it off, but its ends were glued tightly.

Milo laughed. “Just rip it, Christian. I’ve made hundreds of them.”

“It feels like a crime,” I said, catching a glimpse of mischief on his face.

“I don’t remember you worrying much about breaking the law when we were sneaking around Milton Falls Christmas Tree Farm.” There was nothing scolding in his voice, but I still felt the heat touching my cheeks. We’d been reckless at times. “Did you hear they added a light maze this year? Ugh, I wish I was twelve for just one night.”

My heart lurched, and I met his gaze squarely. “Did they?”

Milo nodded.

But I shrugged like it was nothing. “We made our own mazes.”

“That we did,” he agreed a little more joyfully. “Are you going to eat it or let it melt in your hands?”

I snorted and ripped the paper label. “There. I ruined it,” I declared, not exactly unfamiliar with the sensation, then unwrapped the gold foil and broke off a piece.

I popped the small chunk into my mouth, letting the chocolate rest on my tongue for a moment before it began to melt. It was smooth, velvety, with a rich cocoa taste that wasn’t overly sweet, just the right balance of indulgence. Then, as my teeth sank into the center, a burst of tartness hit—sharp, tangy, and unmistakably cherry. It cut

through the richness of the chocolate, the sourness making my lips pucker slightly, but in the best way possible. It was a nostalgic flavor, that same punchy sour cherry I'd almost forgotten, now surrounded by a luxurious coating that felt more grown-up and refined but still playfully familiar.

I closed my eyes briefly, letting the taste flood my senses. It was as if the flavor had transported me back to boyhood when Milo and I would sneak sweets and get into trouble. But this version? It was more than just a memory—it was layered with complexity. Beneath the sophistication, that simple joy remained.

When I opened my eyes, Milo was watching me, an expectant grin on his face. “Still like sour cherries?” he asked.

I swallowed and smiled. “Yeah. Still do.”

We were silent for a short time, and then Milo broadened his smile. “It’s good to see you, Christian.”

I nodded my agreement. “It’s good to see you too, Milo. You’ve no idea.” I broke off another piece of chocolate as the flavors slowly faded from my tongue. That incredible, colorful reaction was not as strong as the first time, perhaps because I knew to expect it, but the chocolate was just as delicious. “No way you made this,” I heard myself say.

Milo gasped, his hand grabbing his chest. “How dare you?”

We burst out laughing after a moment of suspense, the playful glimmer in his eyes growing brighter.

“So, you like it?” he asked once all of the chocolate was gone.

“I’ll tell you this. You won’t find anything half as good at éclair.” I folded the foil in half and pushed it toward Milo.

“Ugh. Don’t mention them,” he said, sweeping the trash from the counter and tossing it into the wastebasket somewhere below. “They don’t know it yet, but we are at war.”

“Are you?” I asked, leaning in.

He shook his head, his curls dancing with the movement. “I’m kidding. But if I ever see you in their store, I’ll unleash a tempest of congealed marshmallow and expired caramel upon your unsuspecting taste buds!”

“Oh, I see,” I said mock-gravely. “So, there’s some competition there.”

“Just good sportsmanship,” Milo said, waving his hand off. “You know how it is. They’ve had an outpost here for decades, and every business in town has standing orders with them.”

He played it down with a cheerful tone of voice, but I felt a tingle of worry somewhere in the pit of my stomach. It would be too forward to ask if he was struggling. We hadn’t spoken in fifteen years. I had no right pushing my nose up in his business so brazenly.

“But I’m new,” Milo said reassuringly. “These things take time, right?”

“I should hope so,” I said. “I mean, everyone who takes a bite of chocolate here won’t forget it soon.”

Milo looked away, forcing calm to his face after an abrupt smile had made him light up. He was still weird about compliments, then. That hadn’t changed a bit.

“Can you believe it?” he asked, changing the topic. “Fifteen years.”

“I’m trying, but my brain refuses to accept that,” I admitted.

He leaned on the counter, folding his arms and tilting his head to look at me. “I asked about you when I returned, but they said you weren’t visiting often.”

“Busy,” I said shortly.

Milo didn’t seem taken aback by the curtness of my tone. “Right. Well, when Mrs. Fairchild said she saw you, I couldn’t believe it.”

Guilt slowly uncoiled in my stomach. It was a strange thing, fearing the distance we put between ourselves. “I would have looked for you sooner,” I said, my throat a little sore. “I was just...I don’t know. I came back a week ago.”

“I get it,” Milo assured me. “Christmas Falls can be a lot when you’re not around for a while.”

I chuckled, some of the guilt leaving me, but it was false. If only I scratched the surface, I would find plenty to feel bad for. Plenty I had done wrong. So I shook my head. “Mom told me the first evening. I just put it off because...fifteen years is a long time, Milo.”

He nodded as if he understood the most minute nuance of this argument. I wasn’t sure that I did. Why would I avoid seeing my old best friend? Why would I cling to the memory, afraid that seeing him would somehow ruin the good times?

“I want to fix that,” I said.

Milo lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “You’re here now.”

“Not good enough,” I said. “How about I buy us drinks at Kody’s place?”

Milo thought about it, then shook his head slowly. “I have a better idea. I was going to visit the Festival Museum and check out the Arts and Crafts Fair. Take me.”

“Deal,” I agreed heartily.

Milo didn’t hide the happiness on his face. In that, he was exactly the same person he had always been. “Let me clean up the kitchen, and we can see some stalls while they’re still around.”

And so I did. Milo hummed a Christmas tune in the kitchen while I looked at the space around me. The entire shop was like a fantasy that only Milo could have dreamed up. He’d always been such an imaginative person but also particular about the details. It was no wonder that he had grown into someone who excelled at what he did. Not like me, who was stretched thin between a million different interests, never rising above mediocrity in any.

But when Milo reappeared, he had changed into a pair of denim jeans and a sweater, wearing a dark blue coat over the outfit and a woolen beanie on top of his head. He shot me an expectant look, and I hopped onto my feet, leading the way to the front door.

I didn’t fool myself that it could be so easy, but it almost felt like it was real. It almost felt like we could slide into a friendship without any explanations, any catching up, any visits to the murky, melancholic days that followed the day Milo cried as his mother nudged him toward the car that took them all away for good.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 am*

THREE

MILO

I dimmed the lights and locked the front door. As I did, my fingers trembled slightly, so I slowed down, and a smile pulled on the corners of my mouth. Christian.

I resisted the urge to call him my Christian , although that had always been the way I thought of him in the privacy of my own head. He hadn't been mine. There had never been time for him to become mine. And even if there had been, Christian had just discovered girls the summer I left Christmas Falls, so I never needed to witness us growing in different directions and my heart beating for someone who could never feel the same way about me.

Even so, my heart did speed up as I turned around and tucked the keys into the front pocket of my jeans. He was standing in a pool of light, as achingly beautiful as he was darkly broody. His dark hair was nearly black, his lips impossibly red, and his eyelashes long like a girl's. He had a couple of inches on me, reaching just over six feet tall, no doubt, and he had a much more athletic build. I imagined that the big city life had treated him well, although Ms. Fairchild had hinted at some trouble. Christian's mile-long gaze gave her words the truth.

"So," Christian said, his voice crackling and husky. I wasn't sure what sort of quality I had expected his voice to have—and imagining him in all the different ways had been the only thing I'd done in the last twenty-four hours—but this warm voice fit him perfectly. "Chocolate," he added after a suspenseful pause, with just a hint of a question.

“Are you surprised?” I asked, joining him on the sidewalk in the light and slowly stretching one leg to start our easy walk to the Festival Museum.

“I’m not sure what I am,” Christian said. “But yes, maybe I’m surprised.”

I shrugged. “I was never gonna grow up to be a cowboy.”

We shared a laugh. “No, that was me,” he agreed. “It didn’t play out exactly as we imagined.”

When he smiled, it was like the chilly air warmed up. It was like he made the night less dark and lonely. There was a twinkle in his eyes that I remembered from school, from way before we’d ever been friends. Christian was the kind of guy everyone wanted to be around. He was the kind of guy you never expected would offer you his friendship, and when he did, it made you feel like you were the most special person in the entire school. I’d never dreamed of approaching him. He was a year above me—not an unbridgeable age gap unless you were nine and his age was in two digits already—and he’d noticed me looking at him from across the cafeteria.

Building a friendship with Christian had been the easiest thing in my life. My awkwardness didn’t bother him, and his forwardness and zest for mischief had pulled me out of my cocoon.

Few things had been so effortless in all the years I’d been in this world. And few things were so hard to lose as that. In the four years we’d spent together, we’d been inseparable. I remembered us running wild through long summer days while Tony Eggert visited Christian’s mother, using her old, unused piano to practice playing. We’d played every game imaginable and invented countless new ones, the games only we understood, and when the boyish life began to involve the talk of girls, it felt like a new frontier for us. It felt like something we were about to discover together. After playing cowboys, settlers, and pirates for years, we were embarking on a whole

new adventure. Except, it wasn't long before I realized no girl Christian mentioned sparked my curiosity the way she did Christian's. No girl made me want to be alone with her after watching a movie downtown. The idea of kissing one terrified me. Did I really have to? Couldn't things just be as they'd always been? Couldn't it just be us?

But I'd hidden my jealousy. Christian was my best friend, so I never let him know how it pained me to hear he'd made plans to have ice cream with Anne or go on a walk with Ruby. It wouldn't have been fair to tell him, especially when I didn't understand it myself. Not for a while, at least. And once I did, I understood the cruel twist of fate that had put us on the opposite sides of a vast river with no way to bridge it.

"Milo?" Christian said, his tone worried.

"Huh?" I lifted my gaze to meet his beautiful face and discovered those cocoa eyes focused on me.

Christian gave a soft laugh. "You were worlds away."

"Galaxies," I said. "What did you ask me?"

"Why chocolate? How did you get into it?" he asked.

I let a small smile touch my lips. "Wouldn't it be great if I could tell you how éclair had always left me wanting in our childhood, so I spent my youth chasing a fuller flavor that left me satisfied?"

"Yeah, that'd be pretty great," Christian said.

I shrugged. "The truth is, I struggled to fit in after we'd moved, so I looked for things I could do by myself. I tried building models of ships, but then I had glue on my

fingers for weeks. And a really crucial difference between glue and chocolate—and pay attention, this flies over most people’s heads—is that you can lick the chocolate off your fingers when you’ve finished.”

“But what about glue?” Christian asked seriously, playing along.

“I believe I remember a story that should have taught you what happens when you eat glue,” I said, referencing something he’d done in kindergarten that his parents would periodically bring up.

Christian reddened and shook his head. “Anyway...we were talking about you.”

“Right. So, ships didn’t work out too well. I’d made a very rudimentary model of the infamous *Bounty*, where the crew had mutinied against the captain if you know the story. But I hadn’t applied enough glue to hold it together once it all dried, so my hard labor started falling apart after a week. And it’s a running theme, really. I tried this and that, but clay is so damn hard to clean from under your fingernails, and after I mastered calligraphy, I saw no use for it. Making chocolate was pretty much an accident. I was making a chocolate glazing for a cake, went overboard, had a lot to throw away, and decided to make little bars that turned out pretty good, so I got interested in learning more about it.”

We took a few steps in silence, Christian deep in thought about my hobbies, and then he looked at me with those inexplicably sad eyes. “I didn’t realize you’d be lonely.”

It made no sense. I didn’t know why his words hurt, so I pretended they didn’t. “What about you? What did you do in high school?”

Christian was quiet for a moment, following my direction in the conversation. “It was weird when you left. I had friends, but it wasn’t the same. I wasn’t so close with anyone, so I kind of got busy studying and trying to score dates.”

I forced a hearty laugh. “With success?”

“In dating, yeah,” he said. “For some reason, all the boys my age were still too scared to ask the girls out. It never scared me. But the school suffered because of that. And when we discovered parties, it only went downhill. But those four years flew by way too quickly, and I was off to college like none of it happened. Now, that’s a whole different story. Girls in college were experienced in flirting, and they were pickier, so I had to learn a whole new thing.”

My smile remained on my face. I couldn’t possibly be jealous. It had been fifteen years. Just because he was geographically near me at the moment, my stupid heart had no reason to sink at those words.

“But college parties offered even more distractions, so I can’t say I passed all my classes with passing colors,” Christian said. “It took a while, but I wised up after graduating, moved to New York, and worked in advertising and public relations in various places. They tell you it’s a cutthroat place, but you can’t believe it until it cuts your throat.”

I winced. “That bad?”

Christian waved his hand off. “Ignore me. Life hasn’t turned out the way I thought.”

“You’re twenty-eight,” I said.

Christian glanced at me. “Right. Too young to have established connections and experience, but too old to excite a big deal CEO looking for fresh ideas.”

“It can’t be all that bad,” I mused.

Christian shrugged. “Seriously. Ignore me. I just got off that boat. I need to see where

I stand.”

I nodded. “And are you dating?”

That was the wrong question. If he had been dating, he wouldn’t have returned to Christmas Falls. And Christian’s look was just as dark and hollow when he heard the question. He just shook his head.

The boy I once knew would have told me all about it. He would have invited me into his bedroom, offered me Joan’s homemade chocolate chip cookies, invited me into his sleigh-shaped bed, and told me about everything he’d done in the hours we’d been apart.

It was silly to expect it from a man I didn’t know at all. Yet the absence of that openness made my heart clench. And I decided, once again, to just give it time. The questions that burned in me had to wait. We had to get to know each other. We had to see if we were even capable of reconnecting, if we were interested in it. I had no reason to dig through the past the way my heart desired. Didn’t you get my card? Why haven’t you called? What happened to all the promises we’d made to one another? And why did it really take you a week to find me?

Part of me hoped I could get away with never asking him. I didn’t need my suspicions confirmed. I didn’t need to hear the blunt words informing me we had never been as close as I’d imagined. That, I thought, was the scariest answer of all.

“Here we are,” Christian said with something like a smile in his voice.

The Arts and Crafts Fair was a busy event. It lasted a while, but as November trickled into December and people flocked to Christmas Falls for their festive overload, the fair only became busier. Familiar faces were behind all the stalls, but I searched for Marigold and Nicholas as Christian and I slowly moved through the crowd. And in a

prominent spot, with a table they shared, I spotted the wonders they had made with their own hands.

“Marigold told me that neither of them participated in a while,” I chatted with Christian. “But Nicholas has a lot of help in the shop, so he can take the time to just enjoy himself and socialize.”

“He’s hired people?” Christian asked.

“Sort of,” I said. “He hired Ezra, a newcomer from Chicago, but James returned last year, and he’s here for good. They’re together, and they run the whole business.”

Christian squinted, remembering James, who had been a child when he lost his parents one Christmas long ago. Nicholas had brought him up, but James had never been a happy child again.

“There they are,” Marigold declared as Christian and I walked up to their stall. The clutter on display was delightful. From toys piled upon toys to Marigold’s trinkets, the table displayed an array of crafts. “Look at these handsome boys, Nick.”

Nicholas Willoughby was as close to the real Santa as this town had to offer, although there were always at least a few Santas mingling with the crowds. Nicholas himself didn’t wear the red suit, but he did maintain a neat white beard, and he was impervious to cold, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and knee-length shorts while shoveling the snow in front of his store. He was also a skilled toymaker on a mission to bring joy.

“Let’s see,” Nicholas said, pushing his delicate glasses higher up his nose. “Christian Underwood, the top of the naughty list of oh-five, isn’t that right? What was the offense?” There was a jolly undertone to his booming voice that was infectious.

Christian's shoulders shook with laughter. "Forgive, but never forget, eh?" He shook his head. "I atoned myself, didn't I? I joined the carol singers for two weeks, lending them my angelic voice."

"Hmm," Nicholas said, considering. "You made a big mess in the ER, didn't you?"

Christian blushed. "Nobody can consume that much raw cookie dough and keep it inside. But I think that's enough embarrassing memories unless someone else wants a turn."

Nicholas pushed himself out of his chair and made a slow way around the stall to put his arms around Christian. "It's good to see you where you belong, Christian."

"I said so just yesterday, didn't I?" Marigold Fairchild chimed in. "Our young ones are coming home. More every year. And we have newcomers, too."

"It does feel like the right place to be," I mused quietly with Marigold while Nicholas questioned Christian about his family. I looked around. "Everyone's so...cheerful."

Conspiratorially, Marigold leaned toward me. "I overheard Scott and Anna, dear, and it really is none of my business, but can you imagine? Hank's house is still completely dark. He hasn't put a single Christmas light, and we're already in December."

"Why not?" I asked.

Marigold shook her head. "Busy, I suppose. And alone."

My heart clenched. "Alone?"

Marigold shrugged. "That's how I heard it. He's all alone in there with his three dogs."



Of course, dogs can be such a wonderful company, but they couldn't care less if the house is dark or alight."

That wouldn't do. It just wouldn't do. I filed that piece of information for later, but my brain was already turning. The solution was simple enough, so long as I had a partner in crime.

My gaze went to Christian. He was nodding attentively at whatever Nicholas was saying. My ears were drowned with the sound of my own heartbeat as I wondered if there was still enough of us in there to pull this off. Christian's family was well-off, and they were a bit obsessed with festive decorations, even according to Christmas Falls standards. The Christian I once knew wouldn't mind being my unassuming accomplice. Maybe this was as good an opportunity as any to find out if he was still the same person.

"And the sweet Remy," Marigold said. "His father broke a leg, did you hear? He's recovering just fine, but it's such sad timing. He can barely move. Of course, Remy doesn't expect his father to hop around, pulling all their cherished memories from boxes and hanging them on that wonderful arch, but this will be the first year they don't do it, and it just breaks my heart. Remy's late mother began that tradition, you know." Marigold Fairchild chattered on, but my heart gave another clench, and I bit my lip.

I remembered Remy's arch and the memorabilia that adorned it. "How sad," I said, earning an agreeable nod from Marigold. I wondered if I should just show up at Remy's place with a box of things, but I hadn't even brought any memorabilia with me. Besides, it was a family tradition. Barging in on something like that felt intrusive.

This required some thinking. I remembered little Remy from around the town, although I hadn't seen him in fifteen years. I probably wouldn't recognize him if he stood right in front of me. Whoever he was today, after so long, it hurt to think of him

being disappointed on Christmas. It hurt even more to think of him hiding that disappointment behind a brave face for the sake of his hurt dad.

I balled my fists. It was time to take things up a notch. I'd already shoveled snow off people's driveways in the dead of night when sleep wouldn't come and worry over the future of my shop kept me restless. Why should I meddle a little more? Someone had to.

Again, my gaze returned to Christian. The size of joy that filled me at the fact he was here was impossible to imagine. It was something so monumental that I felt like the universe was smiling down on me. Even if this were the extent of it, I wouldn't be disappointed. Christian Underwood was in the town, and we had a whole new chance to be friends again.

I ignored the sad lurch of my heart when I drew the line there. Friends, but that was all. And it was enough, I kept telling myself. It was absolutely enough.

If only I could make myself believe that.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 am*

FOUR

CHRISTIAN

There were plenty in the attic, but they were a mess. Untangling them would take me all night, so I stuffed the decorations into a large box and took it with me. Two pairs of hands would do it sooner than one. Besides, if Milo really needed more decorations in his shop, he wouldn't mind untangling them with me.

"Are you sure it's alright?" I asked Dad.

"Absolutely," he said, leaning against the wall at the bottom of the steps leading to the attic's trap door. He reached up to take the box from me so I could get down safely. "We like to rotate them."

"Of course you do," I muttered under my breath.

"Come again?" Dad asked joyfully.

"Nothing. The house is beautiful," I said. It was true. There was a massive sleigh perched on the roof of our house, drawn by the reindeer, with the first pair already flying upward, held so by a discreetly placed skeleton structure that was invisible at night when the lights glimmered madly.

I wondered what we looked like to an alien spaceship from my old comics. Were they scratching their heads up there and writing academic papers about the distress beams we put on every night for all of December? Did they have conferences with their

leading experts guessing the evolutionary purpose of gingerbread houses?

“And you tell Milo he’s welcome to keep them,” Dad said. “I’ve been meaning to drive to Chicago to look for something new anyway. Something you don’t see around Christmas Falls every year.”

God save us all , I thought. If flying reindeer weren’t exciting enough, I feared the size of Dad’s ambitions.

Dad patted my shoulder after I took the box in both arms. We headed back through the hallway and down the stairs, where Mom had stretched Christmas lights all the way along the banisters, rounded the Christmas tree near the bottom of the stairs, and went out with a rather cheerful “Don’t wait up.”

After the shortest debate with myself, I tossed the box into the car. A light dusting of snow came from the sky and slicked the roads and sidewalks, which would have been just fine for an evening stroll had I not had this humongous box of decorations for Milo.

The drive was so short that my car barely heated up by the time I arrived in front of Milo’s Jingle Bites. The wrapped candy logo lifted my heart as if I were walking into a pillow fortress at the age of eleven.

It was a strange feeling. Almost unfamiliar. It had been a long time since I’d felt this sort of warmth spread through my chest.

I lifted the box and carried it from my car into my old friend’s shop, triggering the brass bell above the creaky door. The shop was empty until Milo stood up from behind the counter, making me jump back in surprise. He must have been on his knees.

“Hello, stranger,” he called with a dimpled grin that bore every ounce of familiarity that had once existed between us. Again, the same question crossed my mind. Can it be so easy? Because he sure made it seem easy. As if the last fifteen years hadn’t happened at all. As if we’d never grown apart.

“Greetings, shopkeeper,” I said, making him laugh instantly.

Dear God, when did I last make someone laugh like this? But I didn’t let that thought show itself on my face. It merely twisted my heart with regrets, but my smile stayed on. “I see you bring goods to trade,” Milo played along. “Let us barter, friend.”

A snort broke out of me as I sat the box on the counter. “They’re yours, free of charge. Consider it a welcome back gift from my family.”

Milo lit up. “Wonderful, but I’ll still trade you.” He produced a small basket of countless different chocolates in too many shapes and forms to count. There was a box there, individual bars, and plenty of unique pieces, each carrying Milo’s hand-drawn logo and type. “This is for your parents.” He slapped my hand away as I reached into the box to pick up a chocolate bar. “I’ve got something else for you.”

Actual giddiness filled me at the sight of mischief on his face. “Really?”

Milo shot me a look of ‘How dare you doubt me?’ He tilted his head toward the door in the back of the shop. I felt unworthy of walking into his kitchen as he led the way behind the counter and into the polished, clean area where he did his magic.

On a large platter, there were Christmas tree-shaped chocolates waiting for us.

“I’ve been trying something new with cherry syrup, but it kept ending up too sweet,” he said, a sliver of frustration crossing his face. “So I swapped the syrup for a cherry liquor. I think it works better this way. What do you think?”

I took a piece, and it smacked the soul out of my body for an instant. It tasted like winter and Christmas. It tasted like joy. This wasn't a simple cherry liquor. There was something in it that tasted precisely how I would imagine the needles of a Christmas tree to taste if they were delicious.

"I think I'd like to apply for this job if you need a professional taste tester," I said, reaching for another.

Milo beamed as he turned away, shrugging as if it was no big deal. "Good, then." He said it casually, but his voice vibrated with happiness.

I ate the second piece before offering to untangle the decorations with Milo.

He looked at me a little shyly. "If you're not in a hurry, I'd love that."

I have nowhere to be. Nowhere at all, I thought.

"Why do you need more decorations anyway? This place is already glowing like Santa's living room," I said.

"Can't a boy have a secret or two?" Milo winked.

"We never had secrets," I mused, walking back to fetch the box.

Milo followed. "It's a special project," he said conversationally. "Is there such a thing as too much in a town like this?"

"I supposed you make a great point," I said, my voice straining as I lifted the box. "Where to?"

"This way," Milo said, leading through the narrow passage to a small studio on the

side of the shop. “Don’t get lost in this vast maze.”

I laughed a little, holding it back a heartbeat later, and put the box on the table by the window. It offered us a view of the street between the shop and the town hall, snow falling steadily, fluttering in the air where the orange lights made it glow. “It’s cozy.”

Milo looked around. “Don’t know about that, but it’s good enough for a single guy.” He gestured at the chair. “See, I’ve got two. Battle-ready for guests.”

I sat down while he moved through the kitchenette and put some water to boil. On a small tray, he set out two mugs, one of which made my heart leap. “You still have it?” The words practically jumped off my lips.

Milo looked into my eyes, and time slowed down. The glimmering look in those big blue marbles of his grabbed my attention and held it captive. He licked his lips, dimples slowly emerging as he smiled. “Of course.”

I had bought him the snowman mug during the last Christmas festival in the town. By that time, we’d both known it would be our last. Milo’s parents had already made the arrangements to move away the following summer after Milo’s school year ended.

“I forgot about it,” I admitted.

He kept his smile on as he turned away from me and put teabags inside the mugs. He poured the hot water over the bags and brought the tray to the table, putting it next to the decorations. On the other side of the box, there was a clutter made of scissors, papers, and fountain pens. I figured Milo had to be making tags for his chocolate delicacies.

“Single, huh?” I mused.

“Erm, yes,” Milo said, his voice pitched higher like I was asking something awkward. “But I meant living alone.”

“Oh. Right,” I said, flashing him a grin. The ceiling was low and angled, and it matched the wooden floor. The kitchen was snug but enough for one guy, and there was a fairly large bed tucked in the corner on the other end of the room.

It made sense that Milo was single. He’d only just returned to Christmas Falls this summer and had a whole business to set up. Maybe a nasty breakup sparked this move. Or maybe I was just pretending that moving to your hometown after a nasty breakup was the reasonable thing anyone would have done.

I didn’t know what else to do. Laura’s tired face veiled in the cigarette smoke for the first time in two years since she’d quit, her hair a tangled mess, her weary eyes looking at me and looking through me. “I can’t go on like this, Christian.” She’d never used my full name except when she was dead serious, always falling back to Chris, which I disliked just as much.

“What do you mean?” I’d asked, heart sinking. That morning, I’d gotten a lukewarm promise that the company would contact me regarding the extension of my temporary contract after a review. I’d wandered the streets of New York until the evening, when I found Laura sitting by the window, much like the way Milo sat now, her ashtray full of cigarette butts and her face long.

“We’re so unhappy,” she’d said, quickening my heartbeat and making me open my mouth to protest. “Don’t tell me you’re not. I know you’re unhappy, Christian.”

“How can you possibly know that?” I demanded, thinking it would sway her.

“Seriously?” she asked, not raising her voice or even her empty gaze. “When was the last time we did anything together?”



“Laura, it’s hell out there,” I said. “I’m trying my best.”

She shrugged. “I guess your best just isn’t gonna cut it, Christian.”

I had nothing to say to that, but I’d riled her up enough to want a fight now.

“You never do anything nice anymore,” she said. “You used to buy me flowers. And no, Christian, it’s not about the flowers. I don’t need flowers, but it was nice to know you thought of me on your way home. And dates? When was the last time we went out on a date? I’ve been trying to invite Hannah and Bert for a double date, but you’re always too tired, too busy, too whatever.” She pressed the cigarette into the ashtray, crushing it with an ash-stained finger and giving it a twist before reaching for the pack. “And while we’re at it, maybe you don’t mind going six months without sex, but I do. I haven’t felt attractive since spring, Christian. And the last time we did anything, it felt like you weren’t even there. Like you weren’t with me. There. I said it.”

I opened my mouth, but no sound came. I closed it.

“I don’t wanna be coldhearted, but I don’t even believe you when you tell me you love me. I’m sorry. I just don’t.” She lit her cigarette and inhaled a lungful of smoke.

“So, wh...what are you gonna do now?” I asked.

She looked at me, gaze moving slowly over my face, not finding whatever it was searching for. When she was certain it wasn’t there, she looked out the window and took a moment to let that sink in.

I didn’t know what she needed then. Had I thought she needed me to fall on my knees and cry that I truly loved her, I would have. Had I believed she needed me to lift her out of the chair, take her to bed, and show her what unrestrained passion looked like,

I would have tried my best. But the truth was, she was right. Sex had never been great, but I'd accepted it. I'd decided it was just fine. You couldn't have everything, and having lukewarm encounters instead of scorching ones was alright. The last time we'd made love, it had been the culmination of weeks of flirting followed by excuses. She had a headache; I was sleepy; watching TV until late in the night was fun for both of us; we had a few drinks, and I wasn't feeling up to the job. When it happened, it felt obligatory. It felt like she'd given herself to me because of an unspoken expectation. And I had taken her because letting her go would have hurt her feelings.

But that was just sex.

She was right about the rest, too. She was right that I couldn't make time for people coming over. What was I supposed to talk about? My inability to keep a job? The skyrocketing rents? The desperate feeling that if we scratched the surface, we would find that this relationship was held together with duct tape and necessity? They weren't exactly dinner party topics.

"I'm moving in with my mother," Laura said.

My mouth dried. "Laura..."

"Don't," she said. "Please. Let's break up the way we always were together—without a fuss."

Without passion, she meant. The words almost stabbed me, but I lacked the necessary passion to get angry.

It was a week later that I realized the very last thread that held me here was severed. The emptiness in me was so vast and dark that I couldn't stay in New York and continue facing the size of my failures. They stared out at me from every shop window and mirror. They looked into my soul whenever I inhaled. They were

everywhere around me.

I couldn't afford to stay in the city. Not without asking my parents for help. And at twenty-eight, there were few things I wanted to do less than run to Mom and Dad for rent money. So you moved in with them instead, a voice told me.

"Huh?" I blinked, realizing that Milo had spoken.

"Are you alright?" he asked, concerned.

I considered it before answering. I was warm and fed, my bills were settled, my town was aglow, and my old best friend had magically returned to my life by sheer coincidence. "Yeah," I said, a smile stretching my lips. "I really am."

Milo's gaze lingered on me for a few heartbeats, and then he pulled the box closer between us and began the work. "It's such a strange feeling, right?"

I looked at him, not quite able to focus on my work while he was there. Something about his presence so near me simply held my gaze.

As if we were reading each other's minds, he said, "There's so much to catch up on that I don't know where to start."

I chuckled, and Milo joined me. "I feel the same." Except, there were things I just didn't want to talk about. Not even with Milo—or, especially not with Milo.

A long time ago, we'd played pirates, terrorizing the town elders with our antics. Back then, I had always been Captain Blackbeard, and Milo had always been my first mate. I wasn't so sure if I had it in me to take the lead.

I racked my brain and came up with the simplest thing I could. "What made you

come back?”

Milo’s long, slender fingers worked to untwine Christmas lights and roll them neatly again. He had a deliberate and decisive way of moving his hands like there was nothing he couldn’t do with them. “At thirteen, it’s much harder to make friends than when you’re eight or nine. And I mean real friends both in high school and college. So, after roaming around, I realized I felt like I was ripped out of here. No matter what I was doing, I wondered what it would have been had we stayed. I wasn’t built like you. I wasn’t meant for all that.”

That made me laugh darkly. “Right. Because it worked out so great in my case.”

Milo rolled his round shoulders in a shrug. “At least you did what you always said you’d do.”

I bit my lip. I’d spent those years telling him how I would leave this place. I’d dreamed of bigger things than Christmas Falls. “And I’m back where I started. You could say it was all a waste of time.”

Milo sucked his teeth and looked at me. “How could it be a waste of time? You’re richer with these experiences.”

I held my breath and wondered why I was so ashamed of telling him the truth. After all, if I couldn’t confide in Milo, was there anyone I could trust? Either he was the same old Milo I had once known, who would keep my embarrassments to himself, or he was a completely different person, in which case none of it mattered anyway. Carefully picking my words, I said, “All I have to show for it is a string of lost jobs and bad breakups.”

“Then we’re not so different at all,” Milo said with some sympathy but no pity for either of us. “Tell me.”

And so I did. I told him about Laura, not going into the details of underwhelming sex, and I told him about the jobs I did in New York where they always told me I was good but never good enough to be picked for the job. I told him how I returned here with my tail tucked between my legs and a feeling like I would never amount to anything filling my heart.

“Two years,” Milo said, almost as if congratulating me. “I never made it past three months, Christian. Serves me right for picking the wrong guys.” He looked at me fearfully when he spoke those words, observing me for any reaction.

“Oh,” I said. “I didn’t realize.”

He still watched me intently, waiting for something.

I smiled my warmest smile for his benefit. “You shouldn’t have a problem finding a good guy in Christmas Falls.”

The relief on his face was heartbreakingly visible. Had he really thought something would change just because he was into guys? My words removed the last trace of worry from his face, smoothing out the creases of concern and replacing them with his soft and tender beauty.

Milo licked his lips. “I don’t know. I only ever wanted one guy, but that never would have worked.”

“Why not?” I separated some colorful trinkets into two piles, checking if any were damaged.

“He couldn’t love me the way I wanted,” Milo said wistfully. He picked up his mug. “Nobody can have everything.”

I spotted a cracked ornament and set it aside. “I’d say there’s plenty of fish in the sea, but I’m not so sure about that.”

Milo laughed, although it wasn’t the soft, melodic laughter from earlier. “Who’s got the time for dating?”

I did. I had all the time in the world, only not even the slightest interest in ruining two years of someone’s life the way I had Laura’s. I was out of that game. The truth I didn’t say to Milo, not because of some great secrecy but because it was a pitiful thing to acknowledge, was that I just didn’t know how to make someone happy. I didn’t know how to be the person they wanted.

I would rather be on my own than watch a person I loved go through the slow and painful process of falling out of love with me.

Something in me was broken, I was sure of it. Something that was intact in everyone else, that filled them with passion and drive, that made me wake up with a smile on their face and walk through life with an unwavering desire to dedicate themselves to another human being, simply didn’t work here.

In the weeks since Laura had left, I often wondered if I had mistaken my loneliness and the simple comfort of her company for love. Had I loved her, or had I been used to her?

But these questions were pointless.

I tried Milo’s tea. Like all things in here, it was no simple chamomile. The cinnamon and orange peel filled my body and my soul. The flavors of winter wrapped themselves around me, and everything seemed fine. Just now, in the small studio beside a little shop, in a town so small and far away from the world, life was good.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 am*

FIVE

MILO

Ezra's smile was infectious after he'd tripped over my doorstep and exclaimed, "Chocolate-dipped fiddlesticks." He never swore.

"Hullo," I said with a wave as Ezra straightened his back and walked over. He was a cheerful guy around my age. I had no doubt we would have been excellent friends twenty years ago had he lived in Christmas Falls. Ezra was becoming a good friend now.

"You've summoned me," he declared, and we shared a laugh. Nearly a head shorter than me, Ezra looked up to meet my gaze from the other side of the counter.

"I have a favor to ask," I said directly. "I'm happy to pay in chocolate treats."

"You've got yourself a deal, my man," he said, leaning in.

"Do you know where Hank Beaufort lives? The guy with three dogs," I asked.

Ezra nodded. "Sure. He's Scott Jersey's guy."

The familiar pang of something passed through me. Everyone was happily taken in this town. Everyone but me. I didn't know how I felt about it deep down; I didn't even know what to name this little glimmer of joy followed by disappointment every time I remembered just how happy all the couples were around here. "Yes. So, I was

going to ask you to drop this off at his door when you get a chance. Just drop it there and run.”

Ezra ogled me. “Are we...are we blowing up Hank?”

I snort-chuckled and shook my head. “We are most certainly not blowing up Hank. He’s apparently too busy to be bothered to decorate his place, and, you know, living in a place called Christmas Falls makes it illegal to have no lights for Christmas.”

“That is factually correct,” Ezra agreed, nodding sagely. He peeked into the box. “And you figured to buy decorations for Hank?”

“Oh no,” I said. “I can barely afford my own. I’m just relaying the box from a Good Samaritan.”

“Got it,” Ezra said, narrowing his eyes in thought. “And I assume the Good Samaritan wants to remain anonymous.”

“Preferably,” I said. I wasn’t sure who to pin the blame on anyway. Christian was the provider of decoration, but Marigold put the wheels in motion, and Scott was the one talking about it like it needed to be fixed.

Widening his grin, Ezra looked at me. “There was talk of payment.”

I could barely hold back a laugh. Sliding a box of chocolates across the counter with Ezra and James’ names written on the label with little hearts flying around, I paid my dues for the favor. I had been meaning to give them a little gift for days. James was my most regular customer, after all.

Ezra melted at the sight of the gift and blushed. “I was kidding. You didn’t have to.”



I assured him it had always been part of the plan. “Enjoy them with your man.”

“This might even make him smile,” Ezra said cheekily, picking up the decorations and my gift to them.

“Oh, and one more thing,” I said before he turned away. “If you see Marigold before I do, could you tell her that I’ve been asking around? People are getting together to leave some trinkets on Remy’s arch. Nothing fancy, but some personal items, memorabilia, decorations, whatever they can think of that’s meaningful. Mable and Ruth were talking about it, too.” They weren’t, but they would be by the time I was finished with this. If someone wanted something broadcast in this town, all they had to do was ask Mable and Ruth to tell no one. “I’m still racking my brain to think of what to hang on it.”

“Why are we doing that again?” Ezra asked. It was typical for him to join the cause even when he didn’t know the details. I liked it.

“Marigold can tell it better, but Remy’s mom used to do that, and his dad continued since her passing. But he broke his leg, so he can’t, and the people feel bad for Remy, so they’re banding together.”

“This town...” Ezra was lost in his thoughts for a heartbeat or two. “It never stops surprising.”

I smiled at that before Ezra left.

Once I was alone, I got in touch with Mable, telling her that I’d heard it from Marigold. With Mable not liking Marigold very much—“What can I say, darling? You can never tell her anything in confidence.”—it was unlikely the two would cross paths and trace the rumor back to me.

The last thing I needed was for everyone to think I was cooking up some plot to promote myself and the shop the way they did in éclair. Every few years, they would pick up a cause and put their logo on every supposedly nice thing they did. It didn't matter that their parent company was a massive polluter and that they sourced their chocolate from the most inhumane contractors, so long as they washed it all with a few charity runs.

This wasn't about me or Jingle Bites. This was simply about doing what was right. And the truth was, it wasn't even me who did it. I just mentioned it to people, and they did it all by themselves. If they think everyone else is doing it, they want to be involved, I thought. People—all people, but especially our townies—had an infinite capacity for good deeds. All it needed was a little nudge, a little tending to it, and it would blossom.

As I went around the shop after a day of work, I decided to make a batch of cookies before cleaning the oven. As boys, Christian and I used to make these instant cookies from the bottom shelf in the supermarket. They tasted like wet tissues with a lot of sugar, their chocolate chips a travesty, but they were also some of my favorite memories from childhood.

I slipped into the kitchen in the back and made the dough with nothing but the mixture from the bag, some eggs, and milk. When I had my cookies laid out for baking, I opened the oven and discovered that it was cold.

For a moment, I thought I must have gone crazy. I could have sworn I had turned it on to preheat. Then I looked, and sure enough, the oven was on.

Swallowing a pained whimper, I stared at the last thing I needed in my life: an unexpected expense.

I paced back and forth, wondering what to do. A professional was out of my budget,

and the only person that came to mind was Christian. He'd always been handy. He'd always been curious about everything.

Moving my pride aside, I called him and explained what had happened. He said he had a good idea of what could have caused it and promised to be here quickly. It took him thirty minutes, but when the bell rang above the door, I leaped off my little stool in the kitchen and hurried to greet him.

"Thanks so much," I said, exhaling a pent-up breath of air and anxiety. "I didn't know who else to call."

Christian's face glimmered with mischief. "An electrician, I'd imagine." He lifted a box that had a brand-new heating element depicted on the outside. "But I'm pretty sure I can fix it."

"You're a lifesaver," I said. "Honestly, I don't think I would survive paying an electrician on moment's notice."

Christian walked after me into the kitchen, concern creasing his face when I looked at him over my shoulder. "Is it really that slow around here?"

I shrugged. He wasn't somebody I needed to lie to about it. "I've got customers. Mostly individuals, you know. I break even most days, but..." I hesitated to speak the harsh truth. "It's not sustainable. And I can't deal with nasty surprises like this."

Christian set the box down and examined the oven. It was a large appliance and one of the most important ones in my shop. So when Christian ran a hand through his dark hair, took off his coat, and rolled up the sleeves of his knitted sweater, I was already on the tips of my toes with worry. He began dismantling my oven, and I wrung my hands, feeling the pain that the oven itself couldn't.

I watched Christian bend and kneel and get in there, his broad shoulders stretching the sweater tightly over his upper back, fingers greased as he reached for his tools, and the little grunts coming from his throat as he yanked the old heating element out of the oven.

Very deliberately, I didn't look at his denim jeans or the way the sweater lifted and revealed a strip of flesh on the small of his back. I simply ignored his round butt even when he wiggled his hips and pulled himself out of the oven. I had to look away, or I would die.

Fifteen years hadn't been enough to erase the old feelings. What I'd always told myself had been a boyish infatuation still roared loudly within me at this very moment, making my fingers tremble and my heart skip beats.

When Christian dusted his dirty hands with a satisfied smile, it pulled me back to the present. "Wanna try it out?"

"I've got our old cookies on the tray already," I said, practically dancing across the kitchen to turn on the oven. By the time Christian washed his hands with hot water and soap, the oven was heated and ready. "I was going to invite you for cookies and The Nightmare Before Christmas."

He dried his hands on the kitchen towel and crossed his arms, a smile going nowhere from his face. "Really?"

"Like we used to," I said.

Christian nodded. He didn't need me to remind him.

"But I guess fate had other plans," I went on, looking at the oven. "Thank you. And I'll give you the money for the heating element when..."

“Don’t think about it, Milo,” Christian said. He must have seen protest rising to my face because he added hurriedly, “Consider it an early Christmas present.”

I sealed my lips and took a moment to accept this. There wasn’t much pride left in me, to be honest, but I had hoped to spare Christian the burden. And here I was, accepting gifts from him.

Once they were ready, I pulled the tray of cookies from the oven and led the way to my studio. Just entering it with Christian, standing near my bed, was enough to make the heat rise through my body.

“You still like these, right?” I asked, gesturing to the cookies.

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I haven’t had these in years. But yeah, of course.” He sat down on the edge of the bed, facing the TV.

I sat down beside him on the bed, my knee brushing his. There was an awkward beat before I grabbed the remote and queued up *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. We used to watch this every fall as kids, back when everything was simple. Back when I didn’t overanalyze every glance, every touch.

The movie started, and we sat in silence for a while, both of us too focused on our thoughts to pay much attention to the screen. Christian leaned back, stretching his long legs out, but there was still that tightness in his expression. Our backs leaned on the pillows piled up against the wall, and the tray lay between us.

Christian was biting his lip, eyes glimmering with something like sadness.

“Hey,” I said softly. “You’re doing okay, right?”

He didn’t answer right away, his gaze fixed on the flickering TV. Finally, he sighed,

rubbing a hand over his face. “I don’t know, Milo. Some days, I feel like I’m just...drifting. Like nothing I do is ever enough.”

I nodded, letting his words sink in.

“You’re here, though,” I said quietly. “That counts for something. And, for what it’s worth, you’ve always been enough to me.” I hadn’t thought it through. I hadn’t realized how heavily those words would make my face heat up.

Christian’s gaze flicked to my eyes, and there was something vulnerable in how he looked at me. I offered him a small smile and pushed the plate of cookies toward him, hoping the gesture would ease some of the heaviness between us. “That does make me feel a little better.” He picked up the cookie and ate it, careful not to leave crumbs all over the bed. “I guess I just miss the simpler times.”

“I think I do, too,” I admitted. “Especially...” I hesitated, but Christian waited patiently for me to go on. “Especially since you returned. I finally see how much it all changed since then.”

He formed a smile on his face that was almost real and not just something he did for my benefit. “You’ve made it, though,” he said in a reassuring voice. “All grown up.”

I barked a startled laugh. “I’m not sure about that. I’m not sure at all.”

“No?” he asked.

I shook my head and thought about it. Christian had leaned on one elbow, facing me instead of watching TV. I mirrored him without realizing what I was doing. When I looked into his eyes, we were much closer than we’d been at the start of the movie. “When we were kids,” I said softly, “I thought twenty-seven was ripe old age. I thought I’d be married, have a house, and probably even have kids by that time.”

“Really?” Christian asked. “Because I only thought I’d get to eat sweets before dinner. And not even that played out how I’d hoped.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed without restraint, and Christian’s face relaxed into a genuine smile. “Come over tomorrow before dinner. I’ll fix you up.”

“And just like that, all my childhood dreams have come true,” Christian said lightly.

The smile that tugged the corners of his lips beamed brightly and revealed his pearly teeth. He’d always had naturally white teeth. The image of his big, immovable smile and those brilliant teeth when he looked over his shoulder in a school hallway, and his gaze landed on my face was etched so deeply in my mind that it would never fade. It was the very first image my brain conjured up whenever I thought of Christian. He’d been a skinny kid with a long, slender face and high cheekbones, and the man who lay next to me was everything I had once imagined he would be. When I’d first fallen in love with him, he was what I thought I would have at the age of twenty-seven.

Our home.

Our furry babies.

Our life in Christmas Falls.

My face must have betrayed some of my feelings as I revisited this old, familiar fantasy of mine. I had imagined that the hope it sparked in me would be long gone by now. But then, I had never predicted seeing Christian again, returning to Christmas Falls, and being around him like before.

“What are you thinking about?” Christian asked.

I'm thinking about the fact that you had once been the love of my life. I'm thinking about the moment when you grinned at me, and I knew, in my heart of hearts, that I was nothing like other boys. I'm thinking about the single instant in time when everything changed. But I shook my head and said none of those things.

Perhaps I would have told him about it tonight. Maybe I would have opened up tonight and told him that he had been my first crush—maybe I wouldn't have mentioned that I had never had another—if it weren't for Christian's little shake of the head as he looked at the screen. "Laura never wanted to watch this with me."

He was straight, and I was not. What was the point in telling him about our ancient history? So I caught those stirring feelings, held them tightly, and pushed them down. They wanted to leap out of me, but I didn't want to ruin a nice evening. I didn't want to open that particular bottle of nostalgia. Especially not when I couldn't swear that I was over it.

"She has no idea what she's missing, then," I said and thrust the plate of cookies to Christian, turning my attention to the screen.

This was good. When I never expected any of it, I didn't need the whole cookie; I was fine with crumbs. So we kicked back and watched the final thirty minutes of our favorite holiday movie. I didn't have a bright and brilliant future waiting for me at my doorstep like so many guys in Christmas Falls did, but I had my friend back. That had to be worth something.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 am*

SIX

CHRISTIAN

When I walked out of the house on Sunday morning, I had the envelope from Milo in the inside pocket of my coat. My parents exchanged curious glances when I announced I didn't know when I would be back, saying quietly that Christmas Falls suited me. I didn't argue with them, although I didn't think it was the town that made a difference. The fact that few people even knew I was back was the first clue that it wasn't my geographical positioning that suited me. It was something else entirely.

Milo kept me busy. He had little errands for me when he was too preoccupied with the store. And I liked feeling useful more than anything. It was precisely what I needed to keep myself from facing the gloomy emptiness in my life. So long as I dropped off the groceries at someone's doorstep or carried or asked around for a babysitter that might be available on short notice, I didn't have to admit to myself that I was missing something so immense that the space where it was supposed to be looked like a black hole.

It seemed to me that Milo had an endless list of tasks. Today's was a simple walk near Remy's house. The envelope was one item that Milo would have dropped off by himself had he not had a big order to deliver to Kody's pub. Getting a sizeable order was crucial to Milo's shop, so I didn't even question it. I was ready to help. Townspeople were dropping off their little trinkets at Remy's place all evening last night and I had to make an early start to put Milo's item there. But the other thing I carried was my own. It was a leather bracelet, one of the two Milo and I had bought at the Arts and Crafts Fair many years ago. It had been safely kept in a box of

memories under my bed, and it was time it served a new and noble purpose.

When I passed Remy's house, the arch was in place, and it was full of decorative items people dropped off. Locketts, decorations, figurines, a little key that opened something secret and unknown to me. Now, Milo's envelope and my bracelet had a place there, too.

This morning, when I rummaged through the box of memories, I looked through the doodles from school and trinkets from my childhood. There were many Christmas cards, birthday cards, and cards from different places around the world that my aunt had been sending while on her travels. More often than not, the cards had arrived with a five-dollar bill to spend at éclair . The bills were long gone, but the cards remained.

Among them, almost as if I had forgotten that it existed, was a Christmas card that made my heart drop. It depicted the warm glow of a pastry shop on a quiet, snow-covered street. The back of the card was filled with text written in my best friend's small, delicate hand.

Dear Christian,

I should have written sooner. Four months flew by quickly after we moved. The new school is alright. I think I'm making friends already, and the teachers are pretty cool.

We have a nicer house. It's got two floors, and my room is upstairs, so I get the whole floor to myself every night.

It sucks that you're not here.

This is my address so we can keep in touch.

Your friend,

Milo.

The guilt that welled in me after seeing the card was insufferable. Receiving that card from Milo was the beginning of a totally different life. It wasn't the last one, but it was the most important. The second one was just as cheerful. It came to me in early spring, telling me how he had friends and how teachers liked him. He'd gotten a phone by then and put his number on the card.

The final one, though, was not in my box. I remembered it as soon as I let my mind turn in that direction. I remembered it as if it was right in front of me.

Dear Christian,

I'm not sure if my cards are getting delivered to you. Remy got his. And Kody, too. Maybe the postman was jealous of our friendship, so he's throwing them out. Or maybe not.

Not sure if you want to hear from me. If yes, I'm still at the same address. No more moving for us. And my number is the same.

Milo.

I had read it a thousand times before throwing it away. And that moment was when the memories stopped playing out before my eyes. They had to stop. I didn't want to spend another heartbeat trapped in ancient history.

I walked back to Milo's shop and let myself in despite the CLOSED sign on the door. The bell announced my arrival, and Milo popped out of the kitchen wearing a black apron, a white shirt with rolled sleeves, and a pair of black pants.

“Did you do it?” he asked eagerly.

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“And nobody saw you?” Milo asked.

“Unless someone was looking out the window, we’re in the clear,” I said. Knowing the nature of small towns, there were probably several people who found themselves near their windows at any given moment, glancing precisely when there was something happening outside.

“Great. Everyone’s apparently staying anonymous,” Milo said, shrugging.

“It’s a sweet gesture,” I said. “Now, do you need help? How big is the order?”

Milo smiled and shook his head. “Nah, I can manage it here.”

“Liar,” I said. “Let me do the dishes.”

“Would you?” The way his face lit up told me enough. He cleared his throat. “I mean, no, don’t bother yourself with it.”

I smirked and passed by the counter, moving into the kitchen together with Milo.

Plenty of appliances were on, although I didn’t know their purpose. What I did know were the white elephant chocolates lying on trays and waiting to be packed. Elephant molds were laid out on most surfaces, and dishes were so piled up in the large sink that I had my work cut out for me.

“Thank you,” Milo said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I decided that it was a rhetorical question, so I didn't tell him that he was more than capable of doing things by himself and that my help was pretty unimportant. The mood was too good for me to spoil.

"Let's get busy," I said heartily and picked up a spare apron. It was a little stained with chocolate, but I didn't mind that. I tied it around my waist and approached the sink.

Milo's shop had a sizeable restaurant-grade dishwasher that disinfected the dishes, but everything had to be thoroughly rinsed. It didn't require a lot of skill, so it was a great match for my capabilities. I soaked, scrubbed, and rinsed the pots, plates, accessories, and trays one after the other, sweating in the hot steam rising from the sink and stuffing the dishwasher to its maximum before turning on a quick cycle. It was like working on an assembly line. I would pack a plastic crate with dirty dishes while the washer worked, swap the clean ones for the dirty ones, unload the freshly washed crate, and start over.

Milo continued working on his white elephants, making several variants based on the same mold. All were made of white chocolate, but Milo combined it with pistachios, coconut cream, or strawberry bits. The flow of dirty dishes was constant, but Milo was completely in the zone, and watching him be so absorbed in his work was the most magnificent thing I had seen in ages.

My gaze kept jumping to him. His white shirt was snug, and it hugged him around his shoulder and upper back. It was tucked into his pants, although the constant movement pulled most of it out, and Milo's hands were always gloved and stained with chocolate, so it remained tardy. The pants he wore suited him perfectly. The fact was, Milo was as beautiful as the rays of sunshine in spring, and only a fool would pretend not to see it. He was so beautiful that it sometimes confused me. In moments when I was distracted or lost in my thoughts, I would look at him and completely lose myself in his delicate features. From his golden curls to the perfect Cupid's bow of

his lips, he radiated elegance and androgynous beauty. Only remembering that this was Milo Montgomery, my friend, lifted the hex from my eyes.

“Was the arch decorated this morning?” Milo asked without turning around. He was pouring velvety chocolate into the molds.

“Oh yeah,” I assured him. “I barely found room for our trinkets.”

“Our trinkets?” Milo asked. “I only had an envelope.”

“But I added mine, too,” I explained. “The braided leather bracelet. Remember?”

Milo looked at me over his shoulder, his eyes wide with wonder. “The same one?”

“Yep,” I said, smiling softly.

A moment of silence passed, and Milo lifted the corners of his lips into a small smile.

“I didn’t realize you still had it.”

“Of course I do,” I said.

He cocked his head slightly to one side. “I lost mine. About a year after we moved. Cried myself to sleep.”

“What?” I gasped. “Why?”

“Clumsy. Sorry,” he said weakly, shooting me an apologetic look.

“Not that, silly,” I said. “Why did you cry?” I wiped my hands on a kitchen towel and walked over to be closer to him. The hurt was all over his face.

He pushed a filled mold to the side and took his gloves off, wiping his hands on his stained apron. "I dunno. It was like losing something we had all over again." He let out a forced chuckle. "I was a sentimental kid back then. Had too much time to feel sorry for myself."

"But why?" I pressed. I didn't think it was a smart way to do this. I didn't think we should be having this conversation yet or at all. Why couldn't we just move on and pretend that the past had never happened? Why couldn't we go on with our lives like the last fifteen years had been a dream?

The need, the urgency in me to get answers out of him worried me. I sounded desperate to know the truth that lay at the bottom of it all. But to hear the truth from him, I needed to face the truth in myself.

"I was lonely, Christian," Milo said reluctantly. "After we left, I was always lonely. And losing it in the lake the summer after was the worst thing ever. It felt like I lost more than a bracelet." He shook his head.

"You wrote to me," I whispered, my voice tight with unbearable guilt. "You said you found new friends."

Surprised flickered on Milo's face for the shortest of moments. Hurt followed. Then, he softened his expression and blinked. "You got the card," he said in a low voice, confirming an ancient suspicion and wishing he didn't. It was plain as day in his downcast gaze.

"Yes." It was a heavy word to get over my lips.

Milo blinked twice in quick succession and looked at me, his face torn between apology and accusation. "I lied." For a moment, he was silent, then said, "Everyone wanted to be friends with you. I didn't worry about you in Christmas Falls. But it was

embarrassing to admit—to you, of all people—how lonely I was. It was embarrassing to tell you I didn’t have a single friend months after we moved away.”

I swallowed the tightening knot in my throat. “I thought you were doing great.”

“And that’s why you never got in touch?” Milo asked. He was done being apologetic; it was time for accusations.

I shook my head. “No. I...”

“Because I thought you hated me then,” he said, his voice quivering. “I thought a million things. I didn’t stop thinking about it for ages.”

“Look, I should have...”

“Damn right, you should have,” Milo said, his tone growing more passionate and fiery but still emotional. “I believed that we hadn’t even been friends, that I’d gotten it all wrong. Then I thought you figured it out and hated me for it. Then I thought you were too busy making new friends to send me a card or call me once in a while. Do you have any idea what that was like?”

“Figured what out?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Milo said, inhaled, held his breath, and exhaled slowly. “Look, I was going to pretend it didn’t happen. You had a rough patch, and this whole week seemed like living in a fairy tale. Part of me knew you got the cards. And I told myself to just ignore it. Water under the bridge, right? But I can’t. You had to have a reason, Christian. If you kept the bracelet, there had to be some kind of logic in it.”

“Milo, I’m sorry,” I said, my voice growing tighter with regret. “If I could go back in time, I would have done everything differently.”



“But you can’t,” he said.

To see him so hurt by something I had done so long ago was both devastating and completely right. I deserved to see it. I deserved to witness just how much damage I caused to everyone I cared about.

“So?” he whispered. The hope to have an answer was so bright and heartbreaking that I couldn’t take it.

“I missed you,” I said, the words tearing away from me. “You have no idea how much I missed you. When you moved away, I had nothing here. You say I had friends, but that’s not true. Sure, I ran with other boys, and I took girls on dates, but none of them were my friends. I only ever had you for those few years. And when that was gone, it was like someone took half of my soul to another state.” I tried to swallow, but my throat hurt. “Part of me hated you for that.” Not really, though. I’d bizarrely resented him for his ability to be my everything and have the nerve to leave me behind. “And part of me hated the idea that you made friends so quickly when I couldn’t. But the worst of all was that my childhood was over when you left. I wasn’t an adult yet—and I’m hardly one now—but the innocence was gone. The safety, the happiness, the pure joy of going over to your place in December and building snow forts, it was all gone with you.”

Tears rolled down Milo’s slender face, and he looked away from me. “I didn’t know,” he whispered.

“I fucked up,” I admitted. “There’s no mistake about that. I fucked up bad, and I went on fucking up for fifteen years, Milo. But you have to believe me, for the sake of those boys, the only reason I didn’t want to write to you was because it hurt too much.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “I remember how much it hurt.”

I let the silence settle between us for a little while. Then, thinking about the boy who had left Christmas Falls fifteen years ago, I said, “I could never hate you, Milo.”

“I thought...” He faltered and shook his head.

“You thought I figured something out,” I said, trying to avoid sounding suspicious.

He swallowed and sighed.

“What?” I asked.

“Since we’re in the truth-sharing mood,” he said reluctantly and paused again, crossing his arms on his chest. Once he looked at me, he seemed to be hugging himself protectively. “Christian, you were my first crush.”

Silence.

“I don’t blame you for not knowing,” he added. “I worked hard to hide it from you. But you’re the reason I realized I was gay. And I was in love with you more most of those years.”

Shock must have shown itself externally, but deep down, hidden beneath the layers, something unfolded. Obvious, I thought. It’s obvious. It was something that I would have known throughout my life had I allowed myself to consider it.

The real truth of the matter was that I wasn’t shocked at all.

“I didn’t know,” I said, but I wasn’t entirely sure that was true either. I had kept it away from myself, yes, but had I really been oblivious?

“After leaving, I was afraid that you somehow put it together and you just didn’t want

to have anything to do with me anymore.”

“Milo, I would never...”

“I know,” he cut me off. “But you can’t prove that to a lovesick fourteen-year-old.”

We were quiet again for some time. Neither of us moved away.

Milo glanced away, then looked into my eyes. “I don’t want to make things awkward, Christian. That was fifteen years ago...” His voice faded as he looked away again, a blush creeping into his cheeks. In a breathier tone, he tried to say, “Ages ago.”

But I didn’t believe it. Not for a second did I believe it was just some old fling he’d had and left behind in his childhood.

“But I was in love with you.” Milo, his cheeks red and glowing under the brilliant white light of his kitchen, chocolate smeared over his apron, and one wonderful, irresistible drop of it specked on his chin, looked up at me hesitantly.

My vision narrowed until he was all that remained. The hum of the dishwasher faded into silence, and the beating of my heart was all I heard. The warmth of all the appliances keeping the chocolate liquid was chilly compared to the heat that thickened between us.

Don’t do it , I heard myself say in the depths of my consciousness. Perhaps I should have heeded my own advice. Perhaps I should have pulled away from him. Nothing bad would have happened if I simply stepped back and told him how nothing could ever change the fact that he was my best friend, then, now, and forever.

That would have been a wonderful way to end this conversation. It wouldn’t have been risky or damaging to anyone. It would have been a reckless display of curiosity.

But I was curious. Simply looking at him made me feel like all the pieces were in place. And the way he looked back was too hopeful to ignore. I couldn't pretend that I didn't see it—he'd been looking at me that way for years. It had never occurred to me that there was more to this soft, longing look than I had always thought.

So when I took a small step toward Milo, all my instincts were overpowered. My brain might have protested, but the inevitability of this moment felt like it had been written in the stars.

The little step brought my body inches away from Milo's. He could have moved away if he'd wanted to. He had every chance to step back, to ask me not to, but all I saw was a boy who was in love with me today as he had been fifteen years ago.

When my hand reached the back of his head, our gazes locked. We paused for one infinite moment as if giving one another a chance to change our minds. Neither of us did. Holding my breath, I leaned in, my heart filled with excitement and my mind spinning over the possibilities. How would our lives have turned out had he never left? Would he have been my prom date instead of Nellie Shamway?

Would we have remained friends?

Would the timing be completely wrong, and would his admission freak me out so much that I would run?

My mind spun and spun and spun as I slowly leaned closer to him, the warmth of his body now overwhelming all other sensations, followed quickly by the aromas of chocolate, coconut, and strawberries.

My lips touched Milo's lips; my fingers ran through Milo's hair. The moment was terrifying and beautiful in a way where the two coexisted in perfect harmony. I shivered all over as I pressed my lips harder against his.

And now? I wanted to ask him. Are you in love with me still? He had told me once, just a few days ago, that he had been in love with someone who could never love him back. He couldn't love me the way I wanted, he had said.

Milo sighed and parted his lips a little more, pressing his body against mine with a yearning he was barely able to hold back. His entire being came closer to me, hands rising to my upper arms and holding on to me like a great, terrible wind would blow him away if he let go. And I curled my fingers in his hair, holding his head in place as I kissed him.

Him...

The realization shot through me like a lightning bolt.

This was Milo I was kissing. Not only was he a guy—something I'd never been even remotely curious about—but he was my best friend. I had already hurt him and lost him once before. I had already lost this friendship because of reckless, emotional decisions I had made.

Was this really a way to preserve the only good thing I had in my life?

Fear made my muscles tense, and Milo, ever the one to understand me when I didn't understand myself, felt it. He felt it and pulled back. The reluctance in the way he stepped away from me fractured something deep in me, but the action was enough to wake me up from this strange dream I had been dreaming.

I stepped back abruptly, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand and dying a little inside. "I'm sorry," I said hastily. "I shouldn't have done that."

And it was true. There were a million reasons why this was a mistake. We were friends, for one thing. For another, I wasn't gay. And most importantly, Milo had had

a crush on me a decade and a half ago. Nobody was so great and wonderful to be loved constantly from afar for that long. Nobody, least of all me.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. “This was a mistake.”

The hurt rippled over his face, but he smoothed it in an instant. “It’s okay.” His voice was hoarse, so he cleared his throat and forced a smile. “It was all very emotional.” He turned away from me. “Forget about it.”

There was a blaze in me that I didn’t know how to put out. It burned so brightly that I was sure it would leave nothing standing after it was done. It consumed me, yet I didn’t know how to move on from its path of destruction.

“I should pro...”

Milo touched the edge of the counter where the countless pieces of elephant-shaped white chocolate rested. “I know,” he said in a tone that practically pleaded for an end to this conversation. “You should probably go.”

“Milo,” I whispered.

“It’s okay,” he said, giving me his best smile. “We can talk about it another time.”

He was giving me a graceful exit, and it was more than anyone could have asked of him. Not taking it would have made me an even bigger asshole. And maybe I should have stayed. Maybe I should have let us go through the hard conversation right now, but I couldn’t.

My heart hammered. My fingers trembled. I took his offer and walked out of the kitchen, running to the safety of solitude, chased closely by the unresolved things that threatened to catch up sooner or later.

I'd disappointed him again.

## Page 7

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SEVEN

MILO

My fingers trembled much longer than I would have liked to admit to another living soul. In truth, my hands had begun to shake when I had first uttered the words that had been my deepest, most cherished secret since I was ten years old.

I hurried to the front of the shop and locked the door, then walked back at a slower pace. The aromas of Kody's white elephant chocolates filled the air, strengthening the closer I was to the kitchen. The only trouble was that I struggled to force myself back in there.

The chocolates would be fine. I'd left them sitting on the counters, still to be wrapped, and I sat on the nearest chair, elbows resting on the small, round table. What on Earth had possessed me to tell him the truth?

And what the hell was up with him? A sliver of anger passed through me. Who gave him the right to be so devastatingly handsome? Who let him grow from a pretty boy to a stunning, heart-stopping man? It wasn't fair on the rest of us, destined to gaze at the likes of Christian Underwood and be unable to suppress the flutters of hope lifting in our stomachs.

He hadn't exactly taken that kiss from me by force or despite my grudging reluctance, but it wasn't right anyway. First kisses—even if they were also doomed to be the last—needed to be special. Where was the mistletoe? Where were the snow flurries and wind lashing against his coat? Where was the determination to kiss me



despite the raging storm?

When I'd realized where Christian had been heading with those inching moves, I was happy to let him do whatever crossed his mind. I was willing to throw myself at his feet like a wounded pup in need of protection. Stupid me; I had always had a weakness for him, but I had forgotten just how much of a problem that could be in the years of separation.

My fingers drummed against the wooden coffee table, and I chewed my lip despite all the effort to stop. Closing my eyes, I sent myself back in time with a single, deep breath.

The aroma of toasted bread filled the small apartment. Outside, snow blanketed the entire town. My small fingers tore off pieces of the toasted sandwiches, cheese sticking to my fingertips, and Mother put her hands on her hips. "Why aren't you eating your breakfast, Milo?" she asked, not unkindly.

"Not hungry," I said, although that wasn't entirely true. My tummy rumbled. It wasn't a problem in my stomach but higher, somewhere in my chest and especially in my throat. There was a tightness in it that hadn't left me since waking up from the sweetest, nicest dream I'd ever dreamed. The cold, dreary reality of a whitewashed morning that arrived in the place of the cozy warmth of the dream had left me in a desperate need to cry it out. Except I couldn't. I couldn't just bury my face in the pillow and cry after a dream I could hardly remember.

He was in it. That much I was sure about. Me and Christian and someplace warm. I remembered little else.

"You have to eat your breakfast, mister." Mom wasn't stern about it, but I knew I wouldn't get any time alone until I did what I was told. And I seriously needed to be alone. Every fiber of my being wanted to weep as if I lost something incredible. But

the thing was, I hadn't lost anything. I hadn't had it in the first place.

I knew I loved him. And I knew he didn't love me back.

Sometimes, when we lost ourselves in our games, I forgot the second part. My heart lifted with hope because Christian looked at me in a certain way that I was sure was reserved only for those he loved. Nobody got him grinning the way I did.

I collected the crumbs from my plate after forcing the sandwich down, walked to the window, opened it, and spread a handful of breadcrumbs on the windowsill for little sparrows to collect during the day.

Sadness overwhelmed me before I could hide in the safety of my bedroom. Something—anything—always reminded me of him. I knew I would see him later today; I knew I would see him every single day for as long as I lived. But it wasn't the same. He still wasn't going to be mine, and I hated it. I hated myself for loving him, and I hated him for not loving me back.

Please , I whispered internally to whoever was in charge of my heart. Please, just let it go away . These feelings were ruining everything. I wished to go back in time. If only it could all be before that fateful day I'd seen him at the lake and my world turned upside down.

Slowly, I emerged from the rich, vibrant memories and looked around my shop. Years had passed, but they still hadn't faded with time. They were as real as if I were still a heartsick boy nursing the sweet hurts of my first love.

I'll never be free of you , I thought hopelessly.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 am*

EIGHT

CHRISTIAN

I made my slow and meandering way along the main street while my lips still tingled. It felt as though I had closed myself in a ball of shimmering light, my heartbeat irregular and pumping fears and anxiety into my bloodstream, my stomach restless and fluttery. It was the strangest feeling, all-consuming, impossible to escape, and difficult to ignore.

The snow crunched under my feet as I left Santa's Village behind, passing the many shops along the way and pretending not to see the familiar faces looking at me.

My ears rang.

I had hoped to let go of these regrets when I told him how hard his move had hit me fifteen years ago. I had hoped to rid myself of the guilt I'd carried all these years. To the boy I had once been, severing the contact was easier than facing the sad existence of waiting when to hear from him next.

But it all went wrong again.

Instead of telling him I understood, I saw a possibility that had never crossed my mind. I saw something that felt like the swiftest way to resolve all our troubles. If only I could...

If only I could kiss you.

If only I could love you like you once loved me.

If only we could pick up where we left off.

But that wasn't the way life worked. I leaped at it like a desperate gambler tossing the final pair of dice and lost. We both lost.

My fingertips moved over my lips before I realized what I was doing. The sweet scent of his cologne and the aromas of chocolate still lingered on me. The lavender scent of his shampoo remained on my fingers and brought tears to my eyes when I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with all I had of him.

Melancholia was a tough and shitty thing, yet I was prone to it the way Milo was drawn to crafts and finding beauty in the tiniest little things.

The wonderful Milo. My wonderful Milo.

Once I was well away from Santa's Village, I walked aimlessly, taking turns here and there and following whichever sidewalk was shoveled cleaner of snow. The direction wasn't even close to the first thing on my mind—it was Milo. It was the entirety of Milo's life and being that crawled under my skin and made itself at home there.

On the day Milo left Christmas Falls, I roamed the streets we had once explored together. Every shop window that had once bore two reflections now only showed me mine. They showed me the loneliness and loss of the one thing I had never wanted to be without. Each friendly smile from the adult residents and shop owners only made me feel the vast emptiness that remained where Milo had been until that morning. Every thought that needed voicing strangled me because I had nobody to voice it to. Silly jokes I thought of on that day and on the days that followed brought tears to my eyes.

And now I wondered if every boy felt that way about his friends. I wondered if every man felt such an infinite desire to be with his friends. I wondered if other guys wanted to be so involved in their friends' lives, to be so crucial to their existence, and to be the bringers of eternal joy. Was that what friends were like? Because it sure as hell felt like something Lauren had wanted from me yet never gotten.

Lauren, who fell out of love with me slowly, a bit at a time, whenever I disappointed her, who wanted me to come to her and sweep her off her feet and kiss her with uncontrolled desire. I loved her; I had no doubts about that. I wished her only the best and wanted to celebrate her successes and mourn her failures. I wanted to talk to her on the phone and hear where she was in life. But I didn't want to wake up next to her. I didn't want to tell her how hot my heart burned when she was around. I didn't want to look into her eyes and feel the depth of grief over the time we had lost, then try to make up for it by kissing her despite all the risks.

In truth, I had kissed Milo not because I had hoped it would solve anything. I had kissed him because the need to do so blinded me. I knew, just then, in his kitchen, that not kissing him would kill me.

It felt as though it had been inevitable.

Because I want to kiss you , I thought. I want to cross the room in haste and put my arms around you and kiss you until your knees are weak and you're out of breath .

My heart hammered faster. The fear of the welling desire was a natural response, I decided. And I wasn't merely afraid; I was terrified. Not only did it dawn on me that I had wanted something entirely different from him for far longer than I had realized, but I understood just how close I had gotten to ruining it altogether.

Or was it too late?

Would I get another chance?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:44 am*

NINE

MILO

I packed the boxes carefully so as not to damage them and piled them up in my arms. As I did it, I realized that I needed to find a better way to deliver goods to local businesses. That, assuming I would have more large orders from local businesses, which was not guaranteed. éclair had a complete monopoly in this town, and they offered better prices. It was a simple fact of life and Economy 101. They were a big company with a robust infrastructure. Not only that but as soon as my shop opened, éclair offered discounts to all their existing customers and even bigger discounts to whoever signed contracts with them now.

While my shop functioned just above the red line of death with the daily customer flow, I wasn't going to survive without a few big clients. Quite a few, actually. Or another loan from my parents.

Out of the question, I told myself. They would wait forever for me to repay what they had already invested in me, but I wasn't going to let them reach into their retirement savings to bail me out if I failed. Enough was enough.

So I carried the boxes across the street to the White Elephant, pushed the door with my butt, and entered the pub with the stack of chocolates piled all the way to my head.

Kody lit up when he saw me. It felt like it had been ages since we'd last spent any time together, although it had only been a week since we'd spoken. Christian's crash

landing into my life knocked me out of my orbit, and I didn't even know what to say about this morning's events. It was like the asteroid that had killed the dinosaurs. My heart sank. I had done a brilliant job of pretending it hadn't happened; I'd made the white elephants for Kody, packed them, hummed some festive tunes that came to me, and locked up all my thoughts of Christian in an unbreakable mental box. Yet he kept trying to break out of it.

"Gosh, let me help you with that," Kody said, rushing over and taking half of the stack from me. The weight lifted, and I inhaled a little deeper. "I could have sent someone to pick them up."

"It was on my way," I said, following Kody to the back of the pub. "I was heading out for a walk to clear my head."

"I bet," Kody said.

My brow wrinkled in surprise. Did he know something? "Why?" I asked in a low voice.

Kody cocked his head to one side and shook it innocently. "You're beat."

I was.

We left the boxes in the inventory and walked back to the bar. Kody offered me a seat at the corner and waved for two nonalcoholic cocktails with winter flavors of orange and cinnamon and dried apples as I settled myself on a bar stool, my back facing the window. Somewhere behind me, my shop was locked up and dark.

"Thanks for bringing those," Kody said. "Can't wait for people to see them."

I smiled. "I'm happy to do it." A thought floated through my mind elusively. If I



asked him, he would agree. I could prepare the sweets for his wedding, too. But it felt too close to begging, and I couldn't get myself to say it.

Something must have crossed my face because Kody frowned. "Are you alright, Milo? You don't seem..." He trailed off, which was good because my vision blurred, and I couldn't focus on him. "Crap," Kody huffed. "Not good?"

I realized that the blur came from welling tears, and I blinked furiously to banish them before they spilled. Holding my breath, I looked away and tried to swallow the growing knot in my throat. "It's just...I remembered that you're getting married." He shifted uncomfortably. "I'm happy for you."

In a low tone, Kody said, "Right. But you don't look too happy."

I forced a smile to soothe him, although it failed the mission. Christian had smashed the box open and leaped out of it. He was fully and shamelessly on my mind, and I couldn't hold it back any longer. "I am happy for you, but it reminds me just how badly I chose..."

"Chose what?" Kody asked.

I wiped my eyes angrily and took a sip of the cocktail. As if designed to make my heart cry, it catapulted me back to cold winter mornings when Christian and I were boys, eating breakfast after a sleepover at his place in that incredible sleigh-shaped bed, and I pretended I wasn't in love with him.

"Who to fall in love with," I whispered aloud. Aside from admitting an ancient crush to Christian, this was the first time I said the words to anyone. The real words. The no-pretend words of "I am in love with him ." I didn't use the past tense to omit the fact that my heart had only ever beat in the rhythm of Christian's name.

Kody gaped. “Milo, nobody chooses who to fall in love with.”

I bit my lower lip hard while he spoke, then looked into his eyes. “Don’t we?” I shrugged. “Because I think I was very intentional about not falling for anyone else.”

Memories of dates flashed before my eyes. There hadn’t been many, but those guys who had managed to scale the battlements I had put up around myself and stole a night with me had been disappointed. What was hidden away was not meant for them, and it hadn’t been worth the fight. Those guys had been perfectly fine, but I had never even considered something more. I had pushed them all away because they weren’t him.

“It’s Christian, isn’t it?” Kody asked with deep compassion in his warm voice.

I nodded, then laughed a little bitterly. “He kissed me.”

Kody’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“I told him,” I said slowly, shaking my head. “Silly. I told him he was my first crush, and he kissed me.”

“But...why are you crying?” Kody asked.

My shoulders lifted high up, and I wondered where to even start.

“If you’re in love with him,” Kody reasoned carefully, “and he kissed you, it couldn’t have gone all that wrong.”

But it had. It had gone wrong all the way. Some silly notion had pushed Christian to do that. Maybe he thought he owed me one for never calling. Maybe he thought a kiss would make me happy and be just enough. But when it happened, he must have

realized that I had been right all along. “Christian could never love me back.” It was as simple as that.

My words sparked bewilderment on Kody’s face. “What happened then?”

“He left,” I said shortly and let the silence linger between us for a short while. “He so much as said he should. And I don’t think he’ll be around. Not after he lets his overthinking mind go over it a thousand times.”

I didn’t say that Christian had already ghosted me once. I didn’t say that when Christian Underwood lifted the walls, not even the bravest and most relentless people could get through. Whatever frightened him then would surely be there still, and I decided I couldn’t bear any more sympathy for one evening.

“Alright. But I have one question,” Kody said. “Isn’t that Christian standing in front of your shop?”

And when I turned around, my heart thundered in my chest. It was. A tall, beautiful figure wearing the same black coat and dark pants stood in the pool of orange light under a streetlamp right in front of my shop. He hugged himself against the cold wind that made the lower hem of his coat flap. He stood straight and waited.

“Kody, I need to go,” I said. “Thanks for the drink and, well, for listening.”

“My pleasure,” he said. Then, as I got up, he added in a much more enthusiastic voice, “Don’t let him go, Milo.”

I wasn’t entirely sure I would follow Kody’s advice. Not if Christian was here to say goodbye once and for all.

But as I headed for the door, my heart hardened despite my hope to remain open. It

hardened so that the disappointment wouldn't cut as sharply.

TEN

CHRISTIAN

I waited outside Milo's shop, my breath curling up in clouds around me as I paced the sidewalk, feeling the prickling cold work its way through my jacket. My nerves were raw, a mess of torn threads pulling tighter the longer I waited.

The night felt like it was holding its breath, waiting for me to either get it right or mess it up all over again.

I kept running through what I'd say, what I'd ask of him—anything that would make this make sense. But even in my head, everything sounded messy, tangled up in questions I couldn't answer myself. Why had I kissed him this morning? Why couldn't I walk away after I had? And more than anything—why did it feel like he was the only thing keeping me anchored in what seemed like a terrible storm?

I looked up just as Milo stepped out of the White Elephant, tucking his hands into his pockets. His scarf was wrapped high around his face, and I could just see the tips of his light hair poking out from under his beanie. He gazed right at me as though he was expecting me. The way he moved, cautious and reserved, had my stomach knotting all over again.

When he finally reached me, he didn't stop close. He left this careful distance between us, his eyes guarded, assessing. It wasn't like we were strangers, not even close. But right then, it felt like we were worlds apart, standing on opposite sides of a bridge that was somehow both too narrow and too wide.

All of him was torn. He looked like he was physically holding himself back, holding himself in place.

“Milo,” I started, struggling to keep my voice steady. He didn’t respond, didn’t even nod—just watched me, waiting. “I...I need to talk to you,” I said, my throat tight, my chest tighter.

“You do?” he asked, his tone gentle, expressionless, almost hopeful. Like he was holding back something.

He had every right to be angry or at least wary. I hadn’t exactly handled things well this morning. If I’d been more honest with myself, maybe I’d have known what I wanted all along. But there I’d been, getting lost in that one moment—one impossible kiss that seemed to stretch out forever and then collapse in on itself.

I took a step closer, desperate for him to see what I couldn’t say. “Just...walk with me. Please.”

His eyes narrowed, a flash of hurt there that he couldn’t quite hide. “Where?”

“Anywhere,” I said, my voice soft, pleading. “Just...come with me.”

For a second, he stood there, looking at me like he was trying to read something between the lines. I thought he might turn and walk away, just like I had this morning. But then he let out a slow breath, his shoulders relaxing, just a fraction. “Alright,” he murmured. “Lead the way.”

We started walking down Main Street, the quiet pressing in around us like an unspoken question. I kept glancing over, catching glimpses of him under the glow of the street lamps. He walked with his head down, hands still buried in his pockets, and that cautious distance still between us. I wanted to reach out, close that gap, but the

fear was too sharp, too deep. I had already leaped once today.

A long time ago, I thought things would be easy. Once I'd gotten used to my life without Milo, I had different goals. I was going to study, move to the big city, meet a nice girl, score a great job in marketing, and have everything I wanted.

But now I didn't even know what "everything" meant anymore.

As we walked, I kept thinking about that kiss. The feel of his lips, the warmth that spread through me like something I'd been searching for without ever knowing it. I tried to push the memory away, tried to remind myself that it wasn't what I'd planned, what I'd worked toward. It had just happened, like an explosion that had been brewing, pressure rising, yet never seen or noticed by anyone until it was too late. But it kept creeping back in, whispering promises I wasn't ready to believe.

I glanced over at him again, and he caught me looking, his eyes flashing with something I couldn't quite place. Hurt? Hope? I couldn't tell. All I knew was that whatever we'd had before, whatever closeness we'd shared, I'd put a crack in it. And now here I was, trying to patch it up without knowing how.

"So...you wanted to talk," he said finally, his voice soft, but with an edge to it. "What do you want to say, Christian?"

I swallowed, searching for words that didn't feel like they were there. "I...I don't know," I admitted, feeling the weight of it settle over me. "I just...I don't know what I'm doing anymore."

He let out a small, humorless laugh. "Funny, neither do I."

We walked in silence after that, his words lingering in the air between us. I kept telling myself to say something, to explain why I was so caught up in this—why I

couldn't seem to shake him, even though I'd unknowingly spent half my life trying. But all that came out was a quiet, broken whisper. "I thought I knew what I wanted."

Milo looked over at me, his expression softening. "And now?"

I took a deep breath, feeling the truth settle heavily in my chest. "Now? Now everything feels wrong without you in it."

He blinked, surprised, and I could see the guardedness slipping from his face. "Christian..."

"I spent years thinking I needed something bigger," I continued, the words coming out faster like I couldn't stop them. "A big job, a city where I could disappear, where I didn't have to feel...anything. A girlfriend. Because that was all I thought I needed to have. And then we returned here, and it's like my whole life flipped on its head." I held my breath for a moment longer, then caught his gaze. "We were too young to know what we felt. Or I was. Too swept up in wanting to grow up and have what everyone else had. And now, it's coming back like waking up from a long, deep slumber."

"Christian," he whispered.

"Sorry," I said, mainly for getting all poetic.

He stayed quiet, watching me, his eyes softer than they'd been before. I wanted to reach out, to touch him, to pull him close. But there was still that gap between us, still that echo of everything I'd walked away from once already, and I wasn't sure how to close it.

"All those years, I told myself that leaving was what I needed," I said, my voice barely a whisper. "That this place wasn't enough. But it wasn't this place, Milo. It



was me. I was the one running..." I rubbed my brow and tried to put it into words. "Running from you." His arched eyebrows were a warranted reaction, so I hurried to explain. "Milo, I could see you everywhere in this town after you moved away. I thought I missed my friend, but I'm not so sure anymore. I'm not sure who we were to each other."

Or who we are now.

His expression softened further, a hint of something warmer breaking through. He stopped, turning to face me, his eyes searching mine. "So what now?"

I looked down, swallowing against the knot in my throat. "I don't know," I admitted. "I just know I don't want to lose you. I can't lose you, Milo. Not again."

The quiet stretched between us again, the tension thick and heavy. I could see the conflict in his eyes, the war between wanting to believe me and the hurt I'd put him through. I didn't blame him. Hell, if I were him, I wouldn't trust me either. But here I was, hoping he'd give me another chance—hoping he'd see that I was trying.

Finally, he nodded, just barely, but it was enough to make my heart skip. "Then...let's keep walking," he said softly.

And for the first time today—and maybe in ages—I felt that distance between us start to close, just a little, as we took the next steps together.

The edge of the town gave way to fields before a distant forest encircled us. I didn't want us to follow the winding old road to the forest, but when we left the most populated part of Christmas Falls behind, I stopped and gazed out at the fields, the ripples of the land. A flat, thick blanket of snow lay over the slopes, untouched except for the crow's feet here and there or the prints of some benign, wandering deer.

“Old Ridge Road is up there,” Milo said softly, his voice warm and knowing.

“It is,” I said. I turned to Milo and looked at him expectantly. “Do you wanna?”

He nodded enthusiastically, and we moved on. Not a hundred yards from us, there was a dirt road leading into the hills and out of the town. It wasn’t our first time here, although the gap of fifteen years had pushed the forest further into the distance.

High up the sloping road, we veered into an empty, snow-blanketed field. Our shoes broke the undisturbed surface of the snow and sank deep into it. Step by slow step, we walked across the field until we were surrounded by vast emptiness and near complete silence. “Milo,” I said, still digging through my heart and soul for the right words.

“Hush,” he said. “This is the spot.”

I couldn’t stop the bubble of laughter from escaping me even if I tried. My arms stretched wide, and a breath of air I drew into my lungs plunged me back into my childhood. Freely, without a trace of fear, I let myself fall gracefully on my back, landing in the deep layer of snow that softened the impact.

Milo gave a shriek before doing the very same thing, landing just a few feet away from me. And so we lay under a clouded sky, and in deep snow, limbs stretched far to all sides, wiggling to clear away the snow.

Sixteen or seventeen years ago, we had been boys with nothing but free time and heads full of wild thoughts of adventure. Back then, I would have given anything to go away with Milo on a grand journey and stay with him forever. I would have traded all my collectible toys and cards for it. I would have sold my dearest comics to the devil if he promised to let Milo and me stay friends forever.

We had been inseparable.

And between building snowmen and snow forts, we had found the time to explore the empty fields and make snow angels.

My limbs were heating up and sweat broke all over my body to the point that I desperately wanted a shower. Yet I dragged my arms up and down to create the wings. They were narrow; the snow was beaten into a solid wall on each side, but they were unmistakably angels.

Only when I was out of breath did I realize we were laughing aloud, huffing and puffing with the effort. I lay still in the snow, satisfied with the hard work of the evening. The silence slowly returned and settled over the land, only the pounding of my heart filling my ears.

“I shouldn’t have left,” I said. As the words left my lips, I realized I didn’t know which leaving I was talking about—this morning or years ago. All the years I had wandered about felt like a waste, teaching me that my place was here and nowhere else because I wasn’t meant for anything better than Christmas Falls.

But Milo’s answer to my words was applicable to both. “What matters is that you returned.”

“Do you mean that?” I asked bluntly and with unrestrained hope.

“I do,” he assured me.

Relief that washed over me was enough to lift me up almost literally. “Because I don’t know, Milo,” I said, staring at the sky. It caught the light of the town and glowed orange until it paled into dull grayness in the distance. “I don’t know what I came back for, and you need to know that.”

Movement to my left told me that Milo was on his side now. I slowly turned as well, facing him. His expression was expectant but not hopeful.

“I...I used to think we’d be together forever,” I admitted. “And the moment I saw you again, the same old feelings came over me. I don’t understand them, Milo. They’re not...not what I thought they were.”

He let the silence stretch for a little while. “How so?” he asked, his voice calm. Tell me. I can take it , his tone said.

I inched closer to him within the confines of the snow angel, then even a little closer, destroying the outline of the angel to be closer to Milo. He mimicked me, although not completely, and we remained separated by a mound of snow as I rummaged through my thoughts for a way to put this into words. All I could do was start at the beginning. “I know the right thing to do would be to say I shouldn’t have kissed you,” I admitted. “There’s a million things I should apologize for. And I get it. What you told me in no way led me on. Alright? It wasn’t your fault. The real hard truth of it all is that I wanted to. I thought...” I grasped for words again, seeing them run away from me. “When you told me about your feelings—” Ancient feelings , I should have added. “It felt right. I can’t describe it, Milo. It felt like that was it. Like you put my feelings into words.”

Milo’s calm exterior cracked a little as he blinked quickly. “Do you mean...? Do you mean you felt the same way?”

“Hadn’t I?” I genuinely asked. “All my life, I missed you. And before that, all I wanted was to be with you. Just not...not like that.”

The hurt on his face flashed instantly, but he smoothed it out.

It made my heart want to cry to see that. “What I’m saying is this: I didn’t want you

like that because I never thought it was possible.” I swallowed. “I’ve been thinking about this all day.” I sat up slowly and faced Milo, who sat up a moment later. The angels were only a distant memory. “I never questioned anything they promised. You grow up, go to college, find a girlfriend, buy a house—it’s how life works. It never crossed my mind that I wouldn’t fit into that plan. But I didn’t. I barely graduated, never had a real relationship, and can’t afford to rent a place on my own, let alone buy one.”

“Right,” Milo said with a gentle air of confusion and even a gentler one of frustration.

“I know. I’m stupid like that. It took me years to realize that what I wanted then—and what I wanted the moment I saw you again—had never changed. Something I never thought I could want because it wasn’t part of the plan.”

I could hear Milo’s breath hitching in his throat.

This was now the hard part, but I was done trying to protect my feelings. “I know it’s been fifteen years for you, Milo. I should never have assumed this morning that you might still...”

“I do,” he said, words flung into the open as if he was terrified of missing this chance. “I know. It’s been a long time, Christian, but you’re still you, and I’m still me.”

Silence.

Stunned, expectant, unbearable silence.

We gazed at one another as thoughts rushed through my mind. It was that simple. I was me, and he was him. Did it have to get any more complicated than that?

Then, in an instant, my thoughts evaporated. My brain slowed down, and my body

switched to the simplest, most basic settings.

Milo's big, hopeful eyes invited me, and I found myself leaning in, reaching for the one thing I wanted more than anything else in the world. I had no capacity for fear just then. I had no capability to consider the risks and to worry if I wouldn't like it as much as I had hoped. It wasn't like this morning when I leaped and kissed him, worrying after the fact that I just wasn't able to feel what I most certainly felt. No. It was better now. It was so much better because I leaned in slowly and carefully, completely aware of what was leading me to this place of unspeakable joy.

Milo gave the tiniest nod once my face was inches away from his, our gazes locked onto one another, and our breaths misting between us.

There was no reason to wait. None whatsoever. Because I was certain that this was it.

So I leaned in. The few little inches of empty space between us felt like traversing galaxies until my lips met the soft warmth of his flesh. Our faces touched, and our mouths collided in an incredible, impossible sensation of sheer happiness.

The suspense of the heartbeats leading to it had been sweeter than waiting for Christmas morning to open the presents. The deliciousness of his lips was infinitely better than the finest chocolate he could ever make. The joy in my chest was so much brighter and warmer than the most incredible fire in a fireplace on the darkest, coziest winter evening.

This kiss, unlike any kiss in my entire adult life, made me complete.

Milo gave a little whimper, his lips pressed hard against mine, the moan rising from his nose. And as soon as he did, his hands clutched the lapels of my coat, and he pulled me in. Wet. His cheeks were wet as our faces pressed together, and he kissed me back fiercely as if it was all he had ever wanted, and he didn't want to risk ending

it too soon.

I couldn't blame him. Why wouldn't some part of him expect me to pick up and run away?

But I wouldn't. I matched his kisses and brought us together, leaning over him and pushing him until he lay back on the snow and my body sank onto him. The pressure and proximity gave us both warmth, but there was more than that. It was impossible, except that it was real. What I felt deep in my soul didn't stay locked and hidden there. Instead, my blood heated, and my muscles tensed. I clutched him against myself as I kissed him, relaxing and taking it slowly, exploring him until my awareness reached all the way down between us, where we were both clearly excited.

There was a moment of nervousness in the instant when I realized it. This was, after all, something I had never thought I could want. But as soon as I blocked out the expectations of the entire world and the notions of other people, it all became simple again.

Yeah. I liked it. I liked his body under mine, regardless of gender. I even liked the hardness of the bulge I felt under myself.

A shiver ran through Milo, and I remembered that we were deep in snow and far from the town. Quickly, I pulled back, heated and dazed, my ears ringing with a million wonderful sounds. "You're freezing," I murmured.

Milo only gave another whimper as if trying not to beg me to just keep kissing him. Then, reluctantly, he said, "I am."

So was I. "Let's go someplace warm."

"My place?" he offered carefully.

I nodded, taking his hand in mine as I slowly rose to my feet. The pressure in my pants was painful, making me hold my breath, and I held on to his hand as he got up.

“That was...” Milo said, then trailed off.

I squeezed his hand in reply. In truth, I didn’t think there was a word to describe it. But there was a promise. A promise I made myself internally. This was not the end.



ELEVEN

CHRISTIAN

Milo had rummaged through his wardrobe and produced an oversized hoodie, a pair of sweatpants, and a pair of dark blue briefs for me to take into the shower. Sweat had soaked through my clothes by the time we returned to his place. It had also cooled down significantly, making any attempts at existing inside my clothes unbearable.

It was the waiting afterward that brought on the waves of flutters in my belly. While Milo was in the shower, singing joyfully, I sat at the small dining table with my hands folded in my lap, looking around the place. The subdued lights that gave off warmth mixed with the countless candles that had clearly been in use for some time. They were everywhere—on every windowsill and every empty surface. They spoke of romance and aphrodisiacs, of clear signals and open invitations. And I wondered if that was what we were doing.

Would he want to?

Would I?

My heart stumbled nervously whenever I thought about it. It was sex, pure and simple, yet it scared me in ways I hadn't felt before.

My foot tapped the floor restlessly until I forced it to calm.

A few heartbeats later, the water was off in the bathroom. My foot resumed its

tapping, and I failed to stop it this time around. My hands were slick with cool sweat as I reached for the glass of water on the table and drank some. I suddenly forgot what it looked like to be a normal human being. I forgot how to sit or where to look. Was I slouching? No, my back was too stiff. I shifted in the chair, squirmed really, and balled a fist on which I rested my chin, except that my elbow had nowhere to rest, so I decided it looked silly and scrapped the whole plan.

How long did it take an average person to dry and dress after a shower? And was anything about Milo average? And what would I do with this information if I had it?

I licked my lips, wished I had some balm, remembered exactly where in my room I had left it, then had some more water.

Outside, a light dusting of snow was coming down from the sky, and I was suddenly grateful we were inside his little studio. It felt like the perfect place to be on a cold winter night. After rolling in the snow, it was lucky we had a place as nice and cozy as this to warm ourselves up. And Milo had turned on the heating so high that it felt like a deliberate effort to undress me.

Had he thought of that? I doubted it. But if he had, it was starting to work.

The anticipation of looking into his eyes once he stepped out of the bathroom grew tighter in my chest. It felt like an invisible hand squeezed me mercilessly.

Would he even dress himself before stepping out? My imagination, colorful and fast, took hold of my conscious mind. It launched me into a vision of Milo stepping out in a cloud of steam, naked and willing. My chest shuddered with an inexplicable combination of longing and fear. Wouldn't that solve just about everything? It would relieve the pressure off me in having to make decisions and moves. I would simply know where we stood. And aside from the certain mechanics—and let's face it, I had my best friend with me to show me the way—I would know what to do. As it was, I

sat in this silence, waiting to face him, waiting to face the choices I had made, and to either stand up and take what my heart desired or let doubts creep in once again in the slow and painful journey between a maybe and a yes.

I held my breath as light footsteps moved through the bathroom, and the knob slowly turned. White light poured into the narrow hallway as Milo stepped out. He wore a light gray sweater and matching sweatpants, his bony feet bare on the wooden floor, his hands busy with a towel soaking up the water from his hair. There was no thick cloud of steam that would slowly reveal his nakedness. Instead, his face was flushed and his eyes bright. His wet hair took on a honey-brown color that was nothing like the bright gold when it was dry. His long, dark lashes framed his eyes and invited my heart when he blinked.

“Want some tea?” he asked.

I thought about it. “No.”

He stepped closer, shaking his hair and tossing the towel over the back of the chair. “I’m sure I have cards somewhere if you want to play.”

We had spent countless winter nights playing cards. But... “I don’t think I want to play cards just now.”

“What do you want?” he asked softly, patiently, without a hint of hope or pressure. It was a forward question that begged a forward answer.

And all my doubts fell away as I rose to my feet. It really was very simple when you didn’t overthink it. “I want you,” I said.

Although the hot shower had left his face a little red, the blush that crept into his cheeks was sudden and obvious. He folded his lips momentarily, but a bright smile

prevailed. He extended both arms toward me, palms up, and I took them, pulling him into a warm embrace.

I could do this without a hitch. I could do it without fear and doubt. Because this wasn't some random act of exploration. This was Milo. Things were always special with Milo.

As our bodies came close, he let go of one of my hands and put his on the back of my head, gently stroking it from the top to the back of my neck. His cheek brushed against mine as our torsos pressed together.

"You know, if you just want to make out, we don't need to..." The words trailed off for a heartbeat.

I snatched that opportunity like it was a firefly in the depths of a summer night. "I want everything."

Breath hitched audibly in Milo's throat, and I put a hand on the small of his back, nudging his waist closer. When his crotch pressed against mine, the sensation was much sweeter than back in the field by the Old Ridge Road. This time, I was expecting it. More than that, I was hoping for it.

Milo was hard, his bulge pressing gently against me and air dragging into his lungs with immense effort.

My lips hovered an inch away from his, teasing his patience until he used the hand that was on the back of my head to bring our mouths together. Lips on lips, body against body, we kissed in a moment of brilliant heat and light, sharing something we had never shared before. Not this morning, not in the field; we kissed like lovers, eager and unrestrained. There was no testing the waters here. We had left the experiments behind us and kissed with a purpose. I wanted him, body and soul, and

he was willing. He. My past raced before my eyes, and all the doomed relationships played out in a quick slideshow of memories. The bare minimums, the passionless mechanics of sex, the steps one needed to take in order to move from point A to point B only to then shower and sleep the deep, dreamless sleep. It had been a waste of time, a waste of life.

This was something else completely. Milo, with his tender and hopeful hold on me and his parting lips welcoming my tongue, was unlike anyone I'd kissed before. The quietest moans coming from him were like the winds that spread a wildfire through my body. The gentlest touches were the embers that brought on a blaze of lust.

His most tender shifting from left to right made me desperate with longing.

I wanted to shake and shiver, to cry in the face of such beauty, and to fall onto my knees before him. I wanted to show him the affection that he rightfully deserved. But all I knew to do was kiss him.

My hands moved over his back, rising and falling, feeling the bunching muscles that only vaguely and distantly reminded me that Milo was a man, a whole new style. I kissed him freely, no longer afraid of making some terrible blunder. If I couldn't trust him, then who could I trust at all? If I couldn't make an embarrassing mistake with my Milo, what was the point of trying anything ever again?

As if a divine force filled me with power, I felt my muscles swelling and strength rising through me. I held on to him, pressing us close and hard, letting our torsos get familiar with one another, rubbing our bulging dicks together, and breathing in and out our mingling breaths. Every little moan that left his lips came into my mouth, the tips of our tongues fearfully playing with one another.

The lingering knowledge that Milo was a guy—though never just any guy—no longer terrified me. I pushed aside the implications. Instead, it served to fuel the fire of

passion between us.

I wondered, somewhere in the distant back of my mind, if the fact that we were both men made this somehow hotter. The forbidden element of it, the novelty, the surprise. Or maybe I had been voluntarily blind to the fact that I liked boys this much. Maybe it had nothing to do with the excitement of the unforeseen.

My right hand reached the back of Milo's head, fingers threading through his rich, beautiful hair, fist closing gently and pulling his head back. It was another thing I had never done to a girl. I had never seen a face with such pained desire gaze up at me, lips parted and eyes needy. With shallow breaths, Milo put his hands on my hips, pressing us together to the point it hurt. How odd that pain, when inflicted kindly, could bring so much pleasure.

My cock throbbed, and my fist tightened around his head, making Milo lift his chin higher. And as he stood like that, unmoving, I brought my lips down on his. A kiss, desperate and sloppy, broke another barrier in my heart.

But I reminded myself that this was not about me alone. This was not my little experiment that rightfully belonged in college dormitories and drunken parties. Milo had wanted this for so long that whatever I did now, I had to do it carefully. I wasn't going to break his heart for the sake of a new experience.

So I released his hair and cupped the back of his head, making a step forward that pushed Milo back. One more, then another, and the edge of the bed was behind Milo.

He ran his hands up and down my arms, kissing me back with hunger that no food could satisfy.

He gasped, pulling his head back. "Are you okay?" he asked.

“Yeah,” I huffed, only now realizing I was breathless. “And you?”

“I’m in heaven,” he whispered, his hands finding my hips again.

A grin stretched the corners of my lips at the sound of his voice. His hands slipped under my hoodie, which was pretty much a perfect fit for me, and shivers raced through my body. That was his bare skin on mine, his fingers on my flesh.

The novel desire was instant. I wanted him to like my body. We were fifteen years older now, and the childish feelings had become something else altogether. We were men now, and I wanted Milo to see me and like me.

It hadn’t crossed my mind that he might not until this moment. It hadn’t crossed my mind that what he longed for was to go back in time instead.

Sending these fears back to hell from where they’d come, I hooked the edge of my hoodie with both hands and lifted it over my head. See me , I thought. All of me .

Milo made a small, strangled sound when I threw my hoodie on the floor, and his eyes were wide and filled with desire as he looked at my torso. He lifted one slender, long-fingered hand and hesitated before touching me, his lips parted and air flowing carefully in and out of his lungs. He touched me with reverence as if I were something special, a feeling nobody had sparked in me my entire life.

And when his flesh connected with mine, everything in the world was good. Everything was exactly right.

“Let me see you,” I said softly, not ashamed, not overthinking, not worrying what he would think. And instead of waiting for him to make a move, I reached over and took the edge of his hoodie in my hands, then lifted it along his wiry torso. Only then did he help me, lifting his arms high and letting me undress him.

He was lean, the muscles of his torso lightly defined. The lightness of his body made his hips more pronounced, as well as Apollo's Belt forming on the sides of his waist and leading down under his sweatpants. His abs, mostly flat under his taut skin, were a contrast to mine, which showed more clearly. His chest was broader than the hoodie had led me to think, his shoulders round and his biceps swollen. He was, in short, the most magnificent thing I had ever laid my gaze on.

"You can touch me," Milo said with an undertone of bubbly humor.

And I did. I put my hands on his waist, surprised by the warmth of his body, and moved them carefully and deliberately up his torso. I pulled him in, making his abs touch mine while leaning my upper torso back to leave room for my hands. His nipples, small and dark, were a sharp contrast to his smooth skin once my thumbs moved over them. A small shudder passing through him told me they were more sensitive than mine. The flat chest with light definition and petite muscles was so different from what I was used to, yet moving my hands over it was profoundly and breathtakingly wonderful.

Milo moved closer with abrupt swiftness, as if he had been holding himself back until this instant and lost the battle at last, slamming his mouth against mine and kissing me so hard that it drained all the air out of my lungs and left me not caring about anything but the sweetness of his lips.

We kissed harder, almost grappling with one another as boys did, his hands slapping my biceps and holding on to me while I clung to his torso. He was so lithe that I feared any roughness would leave a bruise on him. It felt sacrilegious to bruise a body as ethereally beautiful as Milo's.

Even so, I found myself holding on to him harder, my fingers sinking into his flesh, my lips moving over his as if it were the only thing keeping me alive, and my crotch rubbing against his with the growing desire to be free of our remaining clothes.



“I want you,” I whispered against his lips. “I want you so bad, Milo.”

He moaned at the sound of my voice, bringing himself closer to me. He turned us around so that the edge of the bed pressed against the back of my legs, just under my knees, and I lost my balance precisely as Milo had intended. I dropped onto the mattress, sitting down and looking up, while Milo stepped back, tilting his head a little. “Are you really ready for this?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

He bit his lower lip, his hair falling on both sides of his face, framing its slender length and high cheekbones beautifully. He hooked his thumbs inside his sweatpants teasingly, but my arms shot forward, and I grabbed his hips, bringing him closer to me.

I wanted to tell him to let me do it, but my lips pressed silently against his flat stomach, and I kissed his heated flesh with careful and deliberate moves, going up and down while gently tugging on his sweatpants and pulling the back down over his firm, round ass. His briefs were pastel pink, something that made my heart hammer way more than it reasonably should have. I pulled my head back, still dragging his sweatpants down, and watched as the waistband got slowed down by his bulge, then slipped over it to reveal a hard length that was barely contained by the size of Milo’s briefs. At the very tip, where his cock stretched the fabric thin, a dark spot had formed. The sight of his precum made the butterflies in my stomach catch fire. My blood simmered with desire as my gaze locked onto it, my mouth watering and dick throbbing, all these new sensations racing through my nervous system.

Milo’s sweatpants dropped to his ankles, and I dragged my hands up his legs. He shaved his legs, I realized. They were smooth as silk, not a hair on his body. And as I discovered this, I learned that I liked it. Perhaps I would have liked him hairy had he chosen that. Perhaps my type was precisely what Milo was. Whatever the case, I

couldn't get enough of his smooth skin under my fingertips, my hands rising and falling on the outside of his legs, then circling back and inward to feel his thighs. And when I reached high enough to cup his ass, my heart skipped every other beat.

The feel of it was perfect, as if someone had sculpted his body to the exact measurements of my hands. Everywhere I touched him, he was my perfect fit.

"I want to see all of you," Milo murmured.

In one sweeping motion, I lifted myself off the bed for long enough to slide both the sweatpants and the briefs down. In the next heartbeat, Milo's hands were on my shoulders, pushing me back to sprawl on the bed.

I could see the shameless delight on his face and deep in his eyes. He gazed at my hard cock and the trimmed bush around it, at the happy trail leading up to my belly button and the smooth skin of the rest of my torso. And he slowly sank to his knees, hands on the waistband of my underwear, tugging slowly as he caressed me with his hungry gaze.

A total awareness of my naked body sprawling before him came over me. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was simply very new. There was a glimmer of excitement rising within me, born from the knowledge that the best man in the world was kneeling by the bed and dragging his beautiful gaze all over my body. And more than anything, this excitement came from knowing that Milo and I no longer had anything to hide.

All those wonderful years, we had been as close as two people could be, yet even so, some things had remained deeply hidden. Not anymore.

Milo skillfully released my ankles of the sweatpants and briefs that tangled there, then ran his slender hands up my legs, my thighs, and around my crotch to the sides

of my waist. On their way back down, his hands grazed my hard cock gently, and I hissed despite myself. It was a sensation so disproportionately more exciting than the sum of its parts. A brushing, a thumb, a moving gesture, yet it vibrated through my insides until I could barely breathe.

“Do you want me to suck you?” Milo asked, his face tilting forward and his gaze hidden under his long lashes.

“Do you want to?” I asked, answering his question with a question.

Milo lifted his gaze, his hands still caressing my legs and sending tingles straight into my heart. The way he looked at me rendered words unnecessary. Of course I would , he said. I’ve been dying for it .

And I believed him. Perhaps out of vanity or, more likely, out of the place of safety with Milo. I believed that he wanted to, so I propped myself up on my elbows and scooted closer to the edge of the bed, bringing myself near his beautiful face while my heart thundered with thrills.

I held my breath as our gazes locked on one another’s faces, Milo’s hands rising along my thighs to the spot where they normally paused and pulled back. Not now. He continued upward, caressing the smoother skin of my inner thighs until the arches between his thumbs and hands came all the way to my groin, curves fitting together like pieces of a puzzle, the sensation of such an intimate touch making my dick leap.

Milo’s fingers moved inward and under my cock, and then he moved his hands around and held me in his right hand, stroking me slowly right before his face, never taking his gaze off my eyes. To be seen by him, watched so intently by him, while he held me in his hand felt like my soul lay bare before a god. A god of all things beautiful and fine. A god of unimaginable pleasure. A god of small joys and big.

I shuddered and held my breath calmingly. My teeth clamped around my lower lip as Milo slowly leaned in and helped me plunge with him into a completely different kind of life and pleasure. We crossed the threshold together when his sexy red lips wrapped around my dick, his head bobbing down slowly and his eyes melting with all his dreams coming true. And this time, I knew it wasn't my vanity speaking. I knew what Milo looked like when he got what he wanted the most. Only now, his wishes were far more mature, but the joy in those big, wonderful sapphires was impossibly familiar.

A moan ripped from me as my cock filled Milo's mouth. His gaze pierced me, watching for any sign of discomfort or doubt and finding none. Milo's hands sank into the mattress on either side of my body, and he used his mouth to give me the pleasures I hadn't dreamed of. When he tilted his head lower, I could no longer look into his eyes. Instead, my gaze traced his torso.

He was kneeling, but he had lifted himself high enough to sink on me from above, his back flat and arms spread, his shoulder blades sticking out, his hair tucked behind his ears, and falling over the sides of his face stubbornly. It was divine, more so than anything holy I had ever come across.

Milo's muscles bunched and relaxed as he sucked me, his pace steadily increasing as he dipped his head lower, taking me in deeper by a fraction of an inch every time. His breath, hot and hurried, came from his nose, washing over my abdomen and taking in my scents whenever he inhaled. He sucked me harder, deeper, taking me into his throat; I could feel it constricting around the tip of my cock, and I could feel myself teetering on the edge of an orgasm I wanted so desperately to delay.

My fists clutched the linens, and Milo's hands wrapped tightly around my wrists. Inseparable, but in a whole different way, we found a rhythm that was dictated purely by our bodies, and yet we matched one another's tunes in perfect harmony.

And when I no longer trusted myself to hold back against the splashing, crushing waves of pleasure, I grunted and told him to wait. Slowly, Milo lifted his head, his eyes glassy with lust and his face heated with desire. He licked his lips, although his chin was wet and glistening, and my cock throbbed as air cooled down the hot wetness that covered it.

“I want to...” I said and halted, unsure of the feel of these words on my tongue. “I want you in my mouth.”

“Are you sure?” Milo asked, slightly alarmed.

I nodded fervently. “Absolutely.”

He hesitated only a moment longer, then moved back from me with an air of determination. “Slowly,” he said. “No need to rush.”

I nodded. “Tell me if I...hurt you.”

As he stood up, the dark spot of precum was larger, making the rest of his strawberry milkshake briefs seem paler in comparison. He hooked his thumbs inside the white stripe of the waistband, circled around his waist to the back, and turned slightly away from me. I wasn't sure if he had done it intentionally, but the gesture made it possible to see his front and back as he undressed. He pulled his briefs down over his smooth, firm butt, making my heart leap into my throat. As he bent down to drag his underwear to his ankles, my gaze followed. This was definitely something I wanted far more than I had ever expected, yet it was something I must have been wanting for longer than I realized.

It felt right. It felt so much more right than any intimate encounter of my life.

As I sat up on the edge of the bed, Milo stepped out of his briefs, leaving them on the

floor and turning to me, his cock long and hard, swaying heavily as he moved around. And when he stood, one hand lingered on his flat stomach, and the other hung limply on his side.

My gaze moved over the smooth skin of Milo's crotch, the length of his cock that pushed over eight and a half inches without a doubt, and the plump, smooth balls hanging between his legs.

With a watering mouth and wide eyes, I lifted my head. "You're so pretty," I whispered, failing to fully capture my meaning in words. Pretty? That was not even close to what I had meant to say. He was the embodiment of all the light in the universe. He was the god of erotic pleasure himself. He was the perfect counterpart to my lost and wandering soul.

And yet, Milo's face lit up as if I had said all this and not just one well-worn word.

Giddiness filled me as I moved closer to him, my hands resting on his hips as I slid off the bed and knelt before him. At twenty-eight, it was a shockingly new perspective to kneel before someone and look up at them with lust-filled eyes, but I loved that I was here, all the way down, while Milo watched me from up there.

"Slowly," Milo whispered as I opened my mouth.

Else you'll choke, he didn't say, but I deduced a thing or two about it.

I parted my lips wider, perhaps a little too wide, and wrapped my hand around his cock. Even holding it felt strange to me, somehow odd after years of holding only my own dick in that hand, but I brushed that off and inhaled deeply as I leaned in. The dominant scent of cinnamon and almond and honey body wash made itself known first, but the underlying hint of Milo's natural musk was the thing that made my heart hammer faster. It was wonderful, as if designed solely for my nostrils and my

pleasure. The slickness of the tip of his cock invited me, and I closed the distance between us, taking him inside my mouth, the tip rubbing against the middle of my tongue. A peculiar flavor I couldn't pour into words if I had a million years, and all the dictionaries in the world were both sweet and savory, yet the word that came to mind was "soft." Could a flavor be soft?

My lips closer around Milo's cock, and he throbbed inside my mouth, causing a smile to tug the corner of my lips. My face tensed in the moment of smiling, and Milo laughed as he felt it. He laughed shortly and joyfully, not mockingly. And it was at that moment that I knew just how safe I was in his hands.

It was alright to laugh. It wasn't a performance for an audience under the stern tutelage of Madame Giry but a deeply intimate act between two people who were just so comfortable with each other.

And after that, I relaxed, taking him into my mouth and making my heart do somersaults with every new barrier coming down and every new record getting beaten by the next.

Milo's hands rested on my shoulder and the back of my neck, but he didn't swing his hips or thrust himself deeper into my mouth. He allowed me to find my boundaries, so I did. Slowly and deliberately, I sucked him, making sounds that he hadn't made when the roles had been reversed. And when I felt him reaching close to my throat, I couldn't force it to relax the way Milo had his. Each attempt only made my eyes water and my heart pound.

Yet the sound of Milo's pleasure-filled moans was the finest music I had ever heard. At a glance from down below, I could see the way the muscles of his torso tensed and shivered with exertion, and I could tell he enjoyed this. He rose to the tips of his toes and returned in intervals that had no clear pattern, but somehow, they were answers to the things I did with my tongue. And while I couldn't take him even half as deep as

he had taken me, my throat refusing to relax for him, I could move the tip of my tongue over the rim of his cock's head and across the slit in a way that made him shudder.

Milo tore free of me and heaved a deep breath into his lungs, then ran his fingers through his hair and looked into my eyes. "Fuck," he whispered. "Christian..."

"Come here," I said, rising to my feet. My cock stood at full mast, so hard that it hurt, and straightening my back sent a bolt of pain through its length that I had to let a moment pass before I could move again. "This is so hot."

Milo's eyes widened briefly in reply. "Do you want to fuck me, Christian?"

My heart grew twice its size, and my dick pulsed painfully. "Fuck yeah," I said in a low whisper. It was the best I could do.

Milo climbed into the bed on all four, his lower back bent inward and his ass lifted high. Seeing him kneel in front of me, seeing the shape of his body and the tender flesh between his cheeks extending down to a thick taint and heavy balls, made me dizzy with a fresh wave of lust.

I wanted to taste him. I wanted to put my lips all over him and give him wild, world-shattering pleasures that nobody else ever could, yet I knew I was an amateur, and my skill only went so far, no matter the size of my intentions. Even so, I followed him into the bed while he reached over to the nightstand and produced condoms and lube. Before taking them, I put my hands on his lower back and dragged them closer to feel his peachy ass. Leaning down, I exhaled as if in a warning, and Milo moaned before folding his arms under his head. He lowered his head and upper torso to the bed, leaving his ass high up, and whimpered as soon as my lips touched the skin of his left cheek, moving inward until I was met with the warmth of his hole.



Now, nothing worried me at all. In fact, every cell in my body screamed with a desire to taste him. And if there had been any time I feared I might wake up from this trance and realize I had made a mistake, this had been its cue. Instead, I melted into him. My face buried between his cheeks, and my tongue dragged over his hole. The scent of honey and almond was strong, cinnamon existing somewhere in the background, and I kissed and licked him the way I would have done had he been a woman and I still been in denial about my desires.

Holding his hips so strongly that my fingers sank into his flesh, I yanked him back and pressed my face against him, sucking and licking his hole with growing intensity. I breathed through my mouth, making him moan whenever I exhaled, and minutes passed in blissful pleasure.

“Your finger,” Milo croaked in the heat of the moment.

He didn’t need to tell me more. My index finger appeared between my tongue and his hole in the moment that followed, and the pressure increased painfully slowly. This was, I realized, something I worried about. I couldn’t help myself. No previous experience resembled anything like this. I had sucked his cock the way he had sucked mine, no different from anything other people had done to me before. Yet this was new, and I feared I would hurt him. It was a fear so deeply rooted within me that it froze me, and I merely rubbed his tender hole in circles.

Either driven by lust or frustration with my careful movements, Milo reached back and grabbed my wrist, adding just enough pressure to direct me where he wanted me. My finger sank into the soft warmth of his body, and oxygen drained out of my lungs. It was incredible, every glimmering moment of it, to feel him tightening around my knuckle and relaxing. His hand gripped my wrist and showed me how to work him, nudging me back almost all the way out and pulling me back in, causing him to tense up and relax in erratic, unpredictable waves of sensations.

My finger worked him smoothly, my hand turning this way and that once I understood that it wouldn't cause him pain. And Milo moved his hips in slow motions, pushing his butt back against me and pulling himself away from me as I worked him.

I leaned down, letting the tip of my tongue feel the upper rim of his hole just where my finger entered him, and I rested my other hand on the middle of his upper back, just between his bony shoulder blades.

"More," he huffed in a strained voice. "Put one more."

I did it with more courage than before, although I was careful when I felt him clenching around the first finger. I fumbled around the bed with my free hand and found the small bottle of lube, then brought it above Milo and squeezed a few generous drops over my fingers and his hole.

A pained cry ripped from him when my middle finger joined the first, the tightness of his hole bringing them both close before he relaxed a little.

"Are you okay?" I whispered.

"Perfect," he said, and I believed him. He wouldn't have lied to me, not about this. So I pushed my fingers deep into him, causing moans to rise from his lips and sweat to break under my hand on the middle of his back. He breathed in the rhythm of my fingers working him, then skipped that rhythm every now and then only to hurry and catch up.

My hand moved steadily in and out, stretching him and slicking him for my cock. It made sense to me on a very practical level, but that was nothing compared to the pleasure I received from seeing Milo coil and hearing him moan.

“I’m ready,” he said, his voice thin and frail as I pulled my fingers out. They were slick with lube and saliva, and his hole throbbed and glistened with wetness under the many small lights around the bed.

Milo turned around and lay on his back while I reached for the condom. He watched me, kindness and neediness mixing in his eyes. He displayed these things so freely, wearing his heart on his sleeve and his intentions on his face. It was a lifelong wish, yet it was even better because I was doing this out of my own desire, not just to do what he wanted.

“Do you want me like this?” Milo asked.

I had just slipped the condom down my cock—luckily, we wore the same size—and poured lube over my fingers. I paused and looked at him. He lay on his back, legs bent and spread wide for me, his balls resting between his legs and his dick hard and thick, lying on his lower abdomen. “Milo, I want you any way you like.”

A smile appeared on his face, and he nodded. “Good. Because I want to look at you.”

“Yes,” I agreed. I wanted to look at his face when he came. I wanted to look into his eyes in that moment of lust and pleasure and see that we had made all the right choices for once.

I rubbed myself with a slick hand while Milo tucked a pillow under his lower back.

I inched between his legs and leaned down. Milo wrapped his legs around my waist while I rubbed the tip of my cock up and down his taint, suppressing worry as I looked for his hole.

Milo’s hand came between us, and he took me, looking into my eyes with the kind of longing that had clearly withstood fifteen years of disappointment. No hurt existed

there, only pride for prevailing against the odds.

I felt him relax as the tip of my cock pressed against his hole, his hand holding me firmly.

“Slowly,” he said. “And don’t worry. I’ll take care of us.”

My heart wanted to explode in my chest. It inflated with feelings that were beyond anything I could describe. And as these emotions spread through my body, I let my weight bring me down and inside of him.

Milo opened his mouth wider, but no sound escaped him. He tensed, I could feel it, and he relaxed. His hand moved from my dick and pressed my abdomen, slowing me down and pushing me back. Then, he nodded, urging me to return and sink deeper into him.

My dick throbbed wildly, threatening to end the fun just as it was beginning, but I held my breath and focused on his beautiful eyes as our bodies connected, merged into one being that was and had always been inseparable. We had always been the two halves of a broken locket, always been two threads of one unspooled friendship bracelet, and now we were whole. We were complete.

As Milo’s hands moved away from my abdomen and came all the way to my neck, his legs tightened around my waist, and I picked up the pace, penetrating him deeper and matching his moans with mine. Our breaths were synchronized, and so were our heartbeats. The joy of doing this with him was so impossibly big that I didn’t understand how so much of it could fit inside my chest. How was it not breaking me apart?

I never want to be without you , I thought as I brought us together as close as we could possibly get, my cock sliding all the way into him and sweat trickling down my

back. Milo's voice, finer than a bird's song, rose as he switched between panting and moaning.

My grunts were low and throaty as I leaned a little lower, hips swinging now that I learned how to move more gracefully, our torsos occasionally touching. Milo kept his hands on the back of my neck and head while I ran my fingers through his rich, silky hair. And I kissed him. I kissed him with all the need to do it that could fit into me. I kissed him with an endless desire that only welled and welled, like a river that was about to spill out of its bed.

We made love for what felt like an entire night, yet the concept of time was erased from my mind. I didn't know how long it lasted, and I didn't need to. It lasted a lifetime and a second. It was everything and forever, yet it was over too soon.

Milo's body convulsed under me as he slipped one hand between us. His dick was trapped between my stomach and his, but he held himself firmly and clenched his teeth as he gazed into my eyes. His breaths came in hisses between his teeth as I rammed my cock deep into him, never hurrying, always making sure we both felt the extent of pleasure that was given to us.

Milo shuddered while I fucked him, his hand wiggling and jerking, and his eyes rolled briefly. He rubbed the back of his head against the pillow, his cheeks flushed as if he'd run a mile and his muscles tensing everywhere, even down there, where it made my cock pulse madly to feel such tightness.

When he cried out that he was coming, I was holding on to my sanity with all I had, but it wasn't much. In fact, I knew just how quickly I was losing my mind.

My dick throbbed faster and harder as Milo's orgasm thundered through his body. His hole clenched and relaxed so quickly that I couldn't have counted the times even if I'd tried. Instead, the sensation spilled through all of me, making my toes curl as I

rammed myself into him, ripping a cry of pleasure and pain from Milo as hot ribbons of cum splashed and smeared between us.

My orgasm shattered what little sanity was left to me. It propelled my soul out of the Milky Way and across the stars, but Milo's was there, too. In fact, it was impossible to tell them apart.

I blinked and found myself in Milo's bed, our bodies coiled and tangled together, our breaths shallow and quick, our strengths spent to the last atoms. Yet we found the strength to kiss anyway. We kissed slowly and lazily, and the last lingering fears that I would regret it all afterward faded away.

There was nothing to regret. Nothing at all. Except, maybe, that we hadn't stayed in touch and that we hadn't gotten together sooner.

But as I couldn't turn back time, I decided to be happy. And even that decision made me the happiest I had ever been.

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TWELVE

MILO

I woke with a start.

The room was filled with the glimmering, dancing lights of the candles. It was warm—impossibly warm. Had something caught fire? My brain skipped over the thoughts, and I realized that the heat was coming from within.

My body experienced a crushing pressure that descended onto my chest. I had dreamed the sweetest dream. A familiar dream. There had been a time in my life when dreams such as these haunted all my nights.

By the time I blinked, the haze lifted off my consciousness, and I located the source of the heat. Next to me, breathing in and out slowly, lay Christian Underwood. My Christian. His body was partially covered with a thick comforter, and his upper torso was bare, skin taut over his muscles and nipples dark.

Was I still dreaming?

Christian blinked. “You’re not sleeping.”

“What time is it?” I asked, resisting the urge to pinch myself. It couldn’t have been late. The candles were still burning after the things that absolutely weren’t confined to the realm of dreams. He was as real as anything. I made sure of it when I rested my long-fingered hand on his bulging biceps.

A tingling, vibrating sensation made itself known down where I had taken him. It was a wonderful feeling, unlike anything I could compare it with. It wasn't purely physical, either, but a feeling that involved the knowledge of what we had done together. It reached all the way up into my heart.

"Just after one," Christian said. A heartbeat of time had passed since I had asked.

He gazed at the ceiling, his expression neither pleased nor concerned. There was something peaceful about the way he looked at it, but something else existed beneath the surface.

"And..." I ventured but hesitated in fear of an honest answer. "How do you feel?"

Christian thought about it, chewing his lip and staring at the ceiling. It tugged my heart down into my stomach. And when he held his breath, I braced myself for the worst. "I can't stop thinking," he said. "About the choices I made and...well, things I regret, I suppose."

I pulled my side of the comforter higher up my torso. I was too naked, too revealed. Still, I made no sound.

Christian noticed the gesture, panic setting into his eyes as he turned to his side and faced me. He was abrupt in the way he put a hand on my cheek. "God, Milo, talk about the wrong choice of words."

I lifted my eyebrows fractionally.

"I regret running away from my feelings, Milo," he said heavily, sadness filling those big, chocolate eyes. It was a devastating look, a sacrilege to mix sadness with such beauty. "I couldn't bring myself to stay in touch with you all those years ago because it was easier to be without you than to have you so far away. I never...I never



realized what that meant.”

“What did it mean?” I asked timidly, fearing that my idea of the answer wouldn’t match his.

Christian smiled gently at me and caressed my cheek with the thumb of his left hand. “It meant this.” Letting his body speak instead, Christian moved closer to me and pressed his lips against mine. It had a potent sobering effect. Every cell in my body was alert in an instant. I was no longer sleepy as if the hour of sleep I had stolen charged my batteries to the maximum.

Christian kissed me slowly, the sound of our wet lips touching now the loudest thing in the room. The rustle of bedsheets under our naked bodies and the uncontrollable sigh of pleasure added to the harmony.

Unfiltered joy filled my heart to the brim, welling deeper and spilling through my entire body. His hand on my face, his lips on my lips, his brown eyes glimmering with sadness that we had let fifteen years pass, it all combined in a heart-wrenching wave of melancholy. It wasn’t the bad kind, either, but that sweet vintage that you wanted to hold close and never let go.

What had begun as a reassuring kiss—a spark you’d never think could bear so much fire and power—spread quickly through the rest of our bodies. In eager, impatient moves, I held on to him, kissing him with urgency as if dawn would take him away from me forever. I clutched him, pulled him closer, let our limbs tangle and our bodies press together.

He was hard again, and I had been hard since waking up and thinking it had only been a dream.

We kissed and rolled in the bed, grappling to be on top. The tenderness of that first

kiss was long gone, and lust took its place.

Christian laid me out flat on my back and took my wrists, spreading my arms wide and trapping me under his body. I lifted my hips, thrusting my crotch against his, pressing my flat stomach against his abs. It was a small gesture, yet it made Christian moan with strained desire. He rammed harder against me, pushing me deeper into the mattress and covering me in ferocious kisses.

In a moment of weakness, his hands let go of my wrists, and I slipped free of his hold. Instead of letting him have his way, I put my hands on his round shoulders and rolled him onto his back, swinging a leg over him and tangling myself in the comforter. With a little bit of frustration, I pulled the comforter aside and sat on Christian. He let out a shuddering breath of air and put his hands on my hips, simply holding me as I swayed back and forth, rubbing my body against his hard length.

“I want you again,” I said, my hands pressing his swelling pecs. It was like all of him grew bigger when I spoke those words. His chest inflated, his muscles hardened, and his eyes widened.

“Always,” he whispered.

I reached over to the nightstand and took what I needed, never letting Christian move from under me. I slipped the condom on him quickly, a skill that probably made him wonder, and poured lube over my fingers generously.

My body accepted him easily; the barriers between us were gone. He kept his gaze locked on mine as I held my breath and took him in. Our bodies merged, and I sank on him slowly, carefully, wrapping my slick hand around myself and stroking gently.

Our breaths synchronized.

Christian put his hands on my hips firmly, following the motions of my body, never taking the lead while I was on top. He was a generous lover, although far more careful than I would have imagined. I figured it was the novelty of it all that made him so timid about trying things. What could he do when he didn't know all that was possible? Yet he still ventured into the unknown with nothing but blissful joy on his face.

Questions filled me, but I pushed them away. What am I to you? I wanted to know. Yet I wasn't ready to put my heart on the scales and have him weigh it against the life that he had always wanted to have. I didn't want to know what my place was in his world—not now, at least. Now, I only wanted one thing. I wanted this feeling to last forever.

Christian took my hands in his, fingers threaded, and moved his hips just enough to meet the motions of my body. He entered me deep as I swayed sensually against him. Each thrust led me to a happy place far from the real world. Each breath of air was the sweetest breath I'd ever breathed.

What are we going to be? The words welled in me, but I only tightened my hold on his hands, sinking lower on him until I felt his length deep within, rubbing against my prostate in a way that filled my chest with abrupt joy and made my toes curl. My voice, tiny and soft, rose an octave higher as I gasped, my eyebrows contorting while my gaze held his gaze.

Earlier, we had been driven by lust that had, in my case, been in the making for a decade and a half. Now, I was driven by something much more intimate. I was led by the desire to feel him inside of me, to feel every inch of him and to know the warmth of him and to remember his contained throbs. I wanted him, body and soul, and I wanted him to know it. Not through words and conversations but in his body and his heart. I wanted him to feel just how adored he was.

Our hands separated, and Christian sat up, wrapping his arms around my waist, pulling me in, and letting me move back in a slow and deliberate rhythm. If we had fucked earlier, we made love now. We savored the movements, the sensations of two bodies forming a single unit, a completeness that didn't exist elsewhere in nature.

He kissed me again, one hand rising to the back of my head, fingers running through my hair. The heat of our bodies mingled, our lips pressed together in a tight, needy way, our hearts galloping in wonder.

Hold me. Fuck me. Love me. Touch me everywhere you want, and let your lips explore me . Words welled, but I remained silent, making soft sounds of pleasure when holding them down seemed unbearable.

I put my hands on Christian's neck, sliding them over his traps and onto his shoulders, then around his upper torso to his shoulder blades. His muscles bunched under my fingers. His hips thrust upward with a quickening pace, grinding our bodies together. He held one arm tightly wrapped around my waist, supporting me as he rose and impaled me deeply.

When I came, it was in the blinding heat of passion. My cock throbbed hard between our bodies, rubbing against his stomach and mine, hurting with the desire to be touched. My voice ripped from me in a strangled moan as cum spilled hotly against my skin.

Christian's black eyebrows twisted longingly, and his lips parted as he brought himself deep into me, feeling the glimmering pleasure my body experienced. My hole tightened around the base of him, sparking the last, unbearable bold of pleasure in him and making him throb, all of his muscles shuddering as he came.

We held one another for a long time after, neither of us moving. I leaned forward, my brow resting on his, and we caught our breaths. He was inside of me, pulsing

occasionally. The sensation spread through us both. At each throb, my toes tingled, and Christian's muscles tensed.

And when he was soft again, slipping out of me with painless ease, he took the condom off, tossed it on the floor, and rolled me over to hold me tightly. The mess of cum and sweat on our stomachs was cooling, but the comfortable desire to remain like this was stronger.

We didn't sleep. Neither did we talk. There was audible satisfaction in every breath I drew.

After, we showered together. It hadn't been an idea one came up with but a spontaneous move out of the bed, hands held together.

I wondered if my younger self, the hurting boy I had once been, would find solace in knowing that all his dreams would eventually come true. Would the waiting have been easier? Would the weight of hoping have been any lighter? And would the depth of the following hopelessness have been any less devastating?

In the shower, we faced one another, bodies close and arms on one another. It wasn't exactly a dance, although we moved in a shared rhythm. Hot water poured down our heads, torsos, and legs. We caressed each other sensually until the bathroom was so full of steam that even breathing was a small struggle.

"Christian," I said softly, the sound almost drowned by the pattering of water against the tiled shower floor.

"Yes?"

I swallowed. We were already in this. Perhaps it was too late to make demands. "I have wanted this all my life," I said. "Whatever you do..."

“I’ll be gentle,” he promised. And when he kissed me under the pouring water, I believed him.

“Show me,” Christian said. His tone left no room for debate.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Or are you just asking because we had sex?”

He let out a chuckle. “Perhaps I’m asking because I want us to have sex again, and this is a way to seduce you.”

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, but I lifted the whisker threateningly. “I don’t need to be bribed.”

“And I am actually interested,” he insisted.

So, I gave Christian a tray and raw hazelnuts. “You can start by roasting these.”

“Aye, aye,” Christian said, taking me back to the days we played pirates roaming the land for hidden treasures while our ship was docked and awaited our return. I’d had my own version of that game that I kept to myself as a teenager with nothing but imagination to keep me company.

The kitchen was filled with aromas ranging from cocoa and coconut to cinnamon and nuts. We’d had a light breakfast in my apartment, Christian wearing only a pair of sweatpants that were a size too small for him; morning light had filtered through thick clouds, giving him a dreamy look by the window. It was an image that would remain etched in my memory for the rest of my days.

While I turned on the big mixer to a low setting to move through the thick chocolate filling, Christian was busy with the hazelnuts. He was thorough and careful, never letting them burn and perhaps putting in more elbow grease than was strictly

necessary. Still, seeing him packed into my clothes and wearing my spare apron in my kitchen was the kind of thing I'd never let myself dream about.

"You know, I could look at your accounts if you'd like," he offered. "I did marketing, but I often ended up sitting with the accountants to review budgets and spending."

"What could you see in my accounts?" I wondered.

He shrugged. "Where to direct your efforts for a start."

"I'm not against the idea," I admitted. The truth was, if he could tell me one thing that made a fractional difference in the way I operated my shop for success, I would be in his debt forever. And I had a few ideas about the repayment plan, so that was all good.

The bell above the door rang just as I had put the latex gloves on and got busy with a time-sensitive part of pouring chocolate into molds. "Could you get that?"

"On it, boss," Christian said as he removed the nuts from the heat, wiped his hands on the apron, and walked to the front.

"Well, well, well," Marigold Fairchild said in a tone that hinted at a depth of knowledge only a professional spy might have obtained. "How surprising to see you here so early, Christian. Trying for a job?"

"Something like that," Christian replied. "I might as well be useful while I'm in town."

A few drops of chocolate drizzled around the molds as my hands shook. Odd, that.

"How nice of you," Marigold said. "Nicholas sent me. He's so busy with children

lining in front of his shop that it gives me all the free time in the world.” The old competition between their shops had never gone away despite them being something of a couple. “If you’d give the message to Milo, I can be on my way.”

Christian returned to the kitchen a few minutes later. “Apparently, Santa was in town,” Christian said in a confused tone. “Whatever that means.”

I held back a happy smile. It was another gift delivered, thanks to Nicholas’ patience and understanding. He was somewhat of a Santa already, so having a secret little pipeline for his Nice List didn’t hurt anyone.

Christian looked at me with slight bewilderment, but I winked at him and pointed at the nuts. “We still have work to do.”

He saluted me with two fingers touching the spot above his eyebrow and returned to work.

The people of Christmas Falls were genuinely good. A small town like this didn’t have the capacity for evil, I believed. Instead, Christmas Falls was brimming with the potential to do good. It was clear from my gentle nudges and careful pulls of strings that people were ready to leap at any opportunity to help each other if only it was done the right way.

My part in all this was negligible. I couldn’t leave a wad of cash in front of every poor person’s doorstep or buy a pet for every lonely child in this town. I wished I could do more. I wished I could actually do what Nicholas did. The man had gifted his toys to children in need almost as much as he had sold them to the parents. And the trouble with making chocolate was that toys made way better gifts this time of year.

In my inability to do what clearly needed doing, I found another way. I believed in



people. And I told people, as close to openly as I could, what things needed to be done. And that was all it took.

Christian finished another batch of hazelnuts and stepped behind me. His arms wrapped gently around my waist, and he pressed his front against my back. He buried his nose in my hair and inhaled. “You smell like lavender and chocolate.”

When he kissed me, I thought that some cosmic scales had been tipped in my favor. My own Christmas miracle was coming true.

THIRTEEN

CHRISTIAN

Not a lot felt different in the days that followed, and yet nothing was the same. Milo worked six days a week, but I helped him out with as much as I could. It wasn't a lot. I had never been a chocolatier, and it was too late to become one now, but I could wash things and greet customers and clean tables, and, after a few false starts, I could make a mean espresso.

It wasn't the shop or Milo's need for help that drew me there. It was the simple joy of being near him. He was, as he had always been, a modest person. Every little compliment—and I rarely flattered him, rather choosing to tell him the truth as I saw it—made his ears red. His happiness affected me in the nicest, warmest ways. It was just another thing that was different, and I kept a pointless list of things that were better with him than with any girl I'd ever dated.

The conclusion, of course, wasn't that my ex-girlfriends had been bad in some way but that I hadn't been good. That discovery came to me near the end of our first week together. Laura, Hannah, Maddie...they had never done a bad thing to me except for leaving me. And the way I had been, leaving me had been the right thing to do. I didn't understand it then, but I understood it now.

I had lived my life as a model boyfriend at face value. I did all the right things, said all the right words, and exhibited all the passion of a wet towel. I had wasted their time if we were being honest.

And yet, when I looked at Milo, the infinite well of gratitude and affection brimmed so high that I didn't know how to contain it. So I never did. My feet carried me to his shop, my arms reached for him, my lips longed for his lips, and I surrendered myself so fully to the utter bliss that kissing him was. It didn't require thinking.

Everything was better with Milo.

We visited The White Elephant for wine-tasting night and the ice-skating rink the day after to see if we still had the chops we had once had as boys. We didn't. After a great deal of falling flat on the ice, we retreated to Jolly Java for coffee, then to Milo's place to play cards.

The topic we often talked about was the past. It felt as though some small parts of us still lived in the past. We talked about the ways it could have played out, only to ultimately agree that neither of us had been ready for these things even if we had stayed in touch.

"Maybe you'd have ended up resenting me," I said one evening. "Seeing me try so hard to fit into the societal norms would have hurt you over and over again."

Milo didn't say anything to that. Instead, he kissed me soothingly, and we soon forgot what we had been talking about.

I grew so fond of Milo's adorable clutter in his studio that it felt like stepping into a dream whenever I entered his place. The drying ink for his calligraphy, the cut-out papers, the envelopes, the labels he drew by hand, and the ribbons he formed into elegant little bows for his chocolate boxes never failed to make me smile.

Milo tested new recipes every other day, and I assumed the unofficial title of the chocolate tester. It was a delicious job, far tastier than any amount of marketing I would ever get to do in the city.

We roamed the streets of Christmas Falls, snow crunching under our feet and people carrying bags upon bags of gifts. We visited the festival, tried all the flavors of coffee in town, and ate cakes off each other's plates on any given evening. Things were good. Things were so incredibly good that I often woke up wondering if I had dreamed it all.

One morning, I found a text message from Laura in my notifications. It was a simple, sweet thing she had written, saying that she saw a man turning a corner who looked just like me from behind, with the "same melancholic slouch," as she'd put it. "I hope you're well wherever you are, Christian. And if there's anything I can ever do to help you be well, I will. Remember that I am still your friend."

On the second Friday since Milo and I got together—I was the kind of person who counted things unnecessarily—my parents insisted on hosting Milo for dinner. They didn't know anything other than that I had reconnected with my old friend, and it hadn't crossed my mind to sit them down so soon and tell them. Yet, when I brought the idea for Milo, he was excited to visit.

Mom made a roast chicken and mashed potatoes with her famous gravy, Dad selected wine, I cleaned up, and Milo, unsurprisingly, had spent the day crafting a particular box of chocolates tailored to my parents' interests. The shapes of the chocolates were all related to Christmas, which made nobody gasp in shock, yet my parents melted over the shapes. "How marvelous," Mom said. "Did you really make this yourself?"

"It's what he does, Mom," I said.

Mom swatted a silencing hand in my direction. "I know that. It's just so elaborate. My, my." She explored the delicate chocolates, each wrapped individually and labeled by hand. "What intricate work, Milo. You must be proud."

Milo beamed. "I'm glad you think so, Mrs. Underwood."

“Call me Joan, darling. You’re all grown up now.” Mom smiled as she closed the lid on the box of chocolates and then placed it on the coffee table for after dinner. “I’ll be savoring these, I can tell you that.”

Dad shook Milo’s hand and immediately said, “Don’t even try that ‘Mr. Underwood’ thing with me. We’re practically the same age.”

“Only twenty-four years apart,” I muttered.

“Your father stopped aging at thirty-five, and nobody’s been able to change his mind for nearly two decades,” Mom, who let her grays shine as a sign of maturity and wisdom, said kindly and with only the barest hint of sarcasm.

“Enough about that,” Dad said, running his fingers through his hair. I had never thought of my parents as people with looks . Good looks or bad, it was all the same to me. They were my parents. Yet now, if I squinted just the right way, I was able to see why others thought of them as beautiful. It was a reassuring thing, knowing I’d get to keep my hairline like Dad and the smooth, ageless face like Mom. It was vanity on my part, of course, but an image of myself aging gracefully next to Milo—in all my visions, Milo was ethereally beautiful—made me happy. It made me happy to think I’d keep up with him. It made me happy to see myself in a nice apartment in the city, mixing us a drink, existing in our golden years, and looking back at a lifetime of joys, big and small.

Dad’s exclamation that he was starving pulled me back from my daydreaming. I blinked and found myself looking at Milo, my heart rising higher in my chest, a feeling of weightlessness lifting me off the floor.

“Come on,” I said to Milo, pulling a chair for him around our dining table.

Dinner with my parents was a quiet ritual I’d fallen out of in recent years, but tonight

felt like slipping into a comforting rhythm I hadn't realized I missed. The clink of plates being set, the faint hum of Mom's favorite instrumental playlist in the background, and the scent of roasted chicken filling the dining room all made the moment feel warm and timeless.

Mom placed the roast chicken at the center of the table with a flourish. "Ta-da! The only recipe your father never critiques."

"I don't critique it because it's perfect," Dad said, already reaching for the carving knife.

"Let me help," Milo offered, but Dad waved him off.

"Absolutely not, son. You're a guest. Just sit back and enjoy."

I nudged Milo gently, shoulder to shoulder. "Told you they'd spoil you."

Milo chuckled under his breath, the sound sending a pleasant warmth through me.

I glanced at him as he sat at the table, his slender fingers tracing the curve of the wineglass Mom had set in front of him. His smile was small but genuine, the kind of smile that softened his features and made his eyes crinkle at the corners. He looked at ease—at home, even. That struck a chord somewhere deep in my chest. It wasn't just that he belonged here tonight but that I wanted him to.

Dad poured wine, filling our glasses with an easygoing chatter about how he'd found the bottle during a recent sale at the local wine shop. He had a way of making every small thing sound like an adventure. I noticed how Milo leaned in slightly, listening intently as if Dad's mundane story were the most riveting thing he'd heard all week. That was Milo, though. He didn't just listen; he absorbed, took people in, and made them feel seen.

Mom was bustling in and out of the kitchen, bringing dishes to the table, and each time she emerged, her smile for Milo grew wider. “Now, Milo, I don’t know how you remember everyone’s favorite chocolates, but that box you made for us is pure magic. Where did you learn to do all of this?” she asked as she finally sat down.

“Oh, I started experimenting as a teenager,” Milo replied, his tone modest. “My parents were endlessly patient with the messes I made in the kitchen.”

“Sounds like they knew they had a prodigy on their hands,” Dad said, raising his glass. “You know, Joan and I aren’t nearly as artistic, but we always appreciated a good chocolate.”

Mom gave him a playful nudge. “You appreciated it a little too much last Christmas when I caught you sneaking half the box before we’d even unwrapped gifts.”

Milo laughed, his shoulders shaking with the sound, and I found myself watching him more than participating in the conversation. His laugh had this way of filling the space around it, making everything seem brighter. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so comfortable bringing someone into my family’s world. With Milo, it wasn’t just natural—it was inevitable. It always had been, yet it had taken losing him altogether to learn this lesson.

As dinner went on, I found myself reflecting on how different this felt compared to introducing past girlfriends to my parents. I’d only done it a few times over the years, but it had been odd. It wasn’t just that Milo and I had years of history, though that certainly played a part. It was the way he carried himself, how he blended seamlessly with them. He wasn’t trying to impress anyone. He wasn’t worried about saying the wrong thing. He was just...Milo.

And I? I was just Christian. For the first time in years, I wasn’t wearing some imaginary mask, trying to convince the world—or myself—of who I was. With Milo,

I didn't need to be anything but the boy who once swore he'd protect his best friend from every bad thing the world could throw at him. A promise I had abandoned when losing him hurt too much.

"You must love working with chocolate," Mom said, bringing me back to the present. "Christian tells me the shop is simply gorgeous. I must find some time and come by. But that must be a dream come true."

Milo glanced at me, his expression unreadable for a moment before he smiled at her. "It is. There are challenges, of course, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. There's something special about seeing the joy on someone's face when they taste something you've made for them. It makes all the hard work worth it."

I felt a quiet surge of pride at his words, even though I hadn't done anything to help him build that dream. Still, hearing him talk about it with such passion reminded me of how much he'd accomplished. It made me want to be better—someone who could stand beside him and not just watch from the sidelines.

As Mom and Dad asked more questions about the shop and Milo's life in Christmas Falls, I found myself slipping into quiet observation. Milo's hands moved as he talked, gesturing slightly when he got excited about a topic, and his voice carried a warmth that drew my parents in. They laughed when he told them about some of the quirkiest customers he'd had over the months and nodded thoughtfully when he explained how he came up with new recipes.

I could see it happening—the realization dawning on them, slow and steady like the rising sun. They'd already noticed how easily Milo and I fit together, but now they were piecing together what that meant. I saw it in the way Mom's eyes softened every time Milo looked at me and the way Dad's smile grew just a little wider whenever Milo mentioned something about us spending time together.



“So,” Dad said eventually, leaning back in his chair with his glass of wine in hand. “How long have you two been seeing each other?”

The question hung in the air for half a beat too long. Milo’s gaze darted to mine, and I felt the heat climb into my face. I wasn’t sure why I was nervous. Maybe it was because, despite everything, part of me still worried about how they’d react.

“About a week,” I said finally, my voice steady but soft.

Mom’s smile didn’t falter. If anything, it grew brighter. “Well, it’s about time, don’t you think?”

I blinked. “Wait, what?”

She laughed, a light, musical sound that I realized I’d missed hearing. “Oh, Christian, I’m your mother. I’ve seen the way you look at him. Honestly, I’ve been waiting for you to figure it out since you were kids. And when Milo moved away, it was all the proof we needed.”

Dad looked at her with melancholic softness in his eyes. “I remember what you said, Joanie. ‘He loved that boy.’”

I choked on my wine, coughing abruptly.

Dad chuckled, shaking his head. “She’s not wrong. Even back then, we could tell there was something special between you two.”

Milo’s cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink, and I reached for his hand under the table without thinking. His fingers curled around mine, warm and steady, and I felt the last of my tension melt away. My heart still galloped, although it was slowing down.

“Does this mean you’re okay with it?” I asked, unable to keep the hint of vulnerability out of my voice.

Mom leaned across the table, resting her hand over mine and Milo’s. “Christian, we want you to be happy. And if Milo makes you happy—which, from the looks of it, he does—then we couldn’t be more thrilled.”

Dad nodded in agreement. “You’re a good man, Milo. Always have been. And now that you’re back in Christian’s life, I can see he’s finally got that spark again. So yeah, we’re more than okay with it.”

Milo’s grip on my hand tightened, and I turned to see the way his eyes glistened ever so slightly. I knew what this meant to him—to be accepted, not just by me but by the people I cared about most.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, his voice thick with emotion. “That means a lot.”

The rest of the evening passed in a haze of laughter and warmth. We talked about old memories and made tentative plans for the holidays. By the time dessert rolled around—Mom’s homemade apple pie—it felt as though Milo had always been a part of these dinners. And once upon a time, he had, but it felt like a wholly different lifetime.

“Do you play that piano, Joan?” Milo asked later in the evening.

Mom looked at the piano in the living room and waved her hand. “Not really. I’m so rusty, darling. It’s been close to twenty years since I played.”

“Nothing a few lessons wouldn’t solve,” Milo offered.

Mom smiled softly, but there was a trace of melancholy present in her eyes. “That’s

true. And yet, I never came around to doing that.”

Later, as we said our goodbyes and stepped out into the crisp night air, Milo turned to me with a soft smile. “Your parents are still wonderful.”

“They’re not bad,” I said with a grin, pulling him close. “But you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

He didn’t reply, not with words. Instead, he kissed me under the soft glow of the porch light, and in that moment, I knew. This wasn’t just a good chapter in my life. It was the beginning of something extraordinary.

Days melted into one another, pouring slowly like Milo’s chocolate fountain. A lazy, festive rhythm set into our lives. Milo came around and was showered with adoration by my parents. The awkwardness that some small part of me had expected to follow the first dinner together had never entered our lives. Mom and Dad took the news in their stride and made it incredibly clear that it made no difference to them who I was dating so long as the person was the right fit for me. And so long as I was the right fit for them.

“That sweet girl you brought here last time had her hopes up,” Mom had said one afternoon over a cup of tea. “And it was clear even then that she would be disappointed.”

“It wouldn’t have played out that way if I’d been more honest with myself,” I admitted.

As if speaking of her somehow invited her, Laura phoned me the following morning. Milo was particularly busy that day with some secretive scheme he and Nicholas Willoughby were plotting—every attempt at finding out more only earned me tight-lipped smiles and kisses designed to distract me; they worked deliciously.

I stared at the screen of my phone for a few heartbeats before answering. Aside from the nice text message from a week ago, I hadn't heard from Laura since the breakup. And frankly, she had no reason to call me. Or not the one I could think of.

"Hello?" I said, clearing my throat.

"Christian?" Laura's voice was soft and warm, far sweeter than it had been in the final weeks of our relationship. "I wasn't sure you'd pick up."

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked.

"Oh, you know..." She trailed off.

I let the silence last a few moments before speaking again. Truthfully, I said, "I don't resent you, Laura."

"Are you just saying that because you're nice?" she asked.

"No. I swear I'm not," I said.

"Good. That's very mature of you. Because I..." She trailed off again, and my heart sank a little. Please, don't say you miss me, I thought. But Laura steadied her voice and said, "I feel bad about the way I left. You see, I only needed to get out before I let myself feel anything else. And now I feel rather selfish."

"Laura, it's okay. Seriously, things turned out for the better," I said.

Again, that silence lingered between us. "You say that, but I can't help the way I feel." She gave a little laugh, a sad one. I hoped to God she wasn't calling because she regretted her decision. I really wasn't such a catch that she should. But as we spoke, I understood that she was happy with her choices and merely worried about

the loser she'd left alone. "It was sort of sudden," Laura admitted. "I just couldn't go on, so I had to cut all the ties, Christian. But the more I think about it, the more I realize how thoughtless all that was. It wasn't fair to you."

"Laura, I promise that I am doing fine. I'm back home. I...I'm dating someone," I hazarded.

"Oh?" Laura was caught off guard for only a moment. "Well, I hope she's a much better match for you."

A grin split my face. It always did when I thought of Milo. "You know, I think he is."

"He? Christian, that..." She stifled a shocked laugh. "Wow, I don't know what to say."

"Yeah, I think a lot of things make a lot more sense now," I said.

She thought about it for a moment. "They do, don't they? Well, I'm happy for you regardless, but that doesn't change the fact that the way I handled things could have screwed you over. And had, if we're being honest. So. If you remember Uncle Roy, he's scaling up his company. They're still small, practically indie, but they scored the rights to this comic book thing he loves, and they're developing a game."

"Which comic book?" I asked.

"Uh, Broken Horizon?" Laura's voice rose higher as she struggled to remember.

"Shattered Horizons?" I asked, gently correcting her just to make sure.

"Yes, I think that's the one. How many can exist out there?" She laughed. "You know it?"

“Growing up, I wanted to be Vex. Milo and I used to reenact scenes from the early volumes. God, they’re making a game?” I couldn’t wait to tell Milo. We would get a console as soon as the game was out. Wouldn’t that be a dream date? Well, for the two of us, of course.

“They are,” Laura said. “And they have some ideas on early marketing strategies, but the man running that division has some old-fashioned ideas about who plays games. Apparently, he thinks it’s just young boys. He’s going to leave the project.”

My heart climbed into my throat as I told myself not to hope. This could easily just be gossip between old friends and former lovers. “Okay.”

“Uncle Roy didn’t hear about us splitting, you see. He asked me if you’d consider the job. He remembers you raving about some comics last Thanksgiving. And even after I told him we were no longer together, he said he would like to speak to you. If you want to, of course.” Laura hurried to the end. “If you’d like, I can set up a call with him. It’s just a formality because Uncle Roy isn’t considering any candidates. It’s basically an offer.”

“Laura, that’s...I don’t know what to say. It’s incredible news.” I needed my heart to slow down and my brain to consider things before I said anything. Yet I couldn’t hold it all in.

Luckily, Laura spoke. “I hated myself for leaving without considering where that put you. You had to leave the apartment. So if this helps you get a foot back in the city, it would be my pleasure.”

“I...yeah. I mean, offers like this don’t fall out of the sky every day. I’d love to talk to Roy. And thank you. Honestly.”

Laura said that it was no big deal. She was just a messenger, and it was ultimately no

favor at all since Roy wanted me regardless.

My hands trembled for ten minutes after the call. I wanted to run straight to Milo and tell him everything, but Milo was busy, and it was still too soon. I needed to hear it from Roy before hyping everyone else up. For now, if all fell apart, it would only be my hopes that suffered. I sure as hell couldn't deliver more disappointments to the people I loved.

FOURTEEN

MILO

Christian had a little smirk on when he stepped into the kitchen. It was late, and I was burning my reserves of energy to get things done. Still, seeing him come in using that key I had given him just the other day filled me with the kind of supernatural power you only ever read about in stories. He made me think I could do anything.

“Now, what exactly are you up to?” Christian asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked innocently.

“Just that I saw Ezra Thorne from Santa’s Workshop this morning, and he asked me to tell you that Rudolph’s nose glowed red yesterday.” Christian laughed as he quoted the message.

“What a peculiar thing to say,” I teased. I had no reason to hide these things from Christian except that he was adorable when confused. Actually, that wasn’t entirely true. If I told Christian that I somehow tripped into the role of this town’s Secret Santa, he would think too much of me. He would think it was all my doing. And praise for other people’s actions was not what I was after. I didn’t want him to form idealized opinions of me because of that. I wanted him to see me with my flaws and still be with me.

“Peculiar is one word for it,” Christian said.



“You know Ezra doesn’t curse, right? Maybe it’s a euphemism.” I shrugged.

Christian frowned in horror as he tried to decipher which part of the message was dirty, and I barely stifled a laugh. The truth of the matter was that a very nice man got to do a very nice thing for his daughter, and Nicholas was the guy that did it. All I’d done was pass on the message.

“Forget about Ezra,” I suggested. “And come try this.”

Christian didn’t need me to tell him twice. He crossed the kitchen and extended his arms to hold my hips. As he came closer, lips forming a kiss, I pressed a small chocolate heart against his lips and inserted it into his mouth.

He looked positively in love. “Holy mother of sweets,” he singsonged. “How the hell did you do this? Be honest with me. Is it something terrible? Did you have to lace it with mercury?”

I threw my head back and laughed aloud. “The truth is the opposite. I’m cutting out most of the unnecessary ingredients. All natural.”

Christian let his head hang back as he savored the aromas. “It’s so silky and smooth. You’re spoiling me.”

“Good. That’s exactly what I want,” I said.

When he lifted his head again, he glanced around the kitchen as if coming back from a dream. “Need help here?”

“I could use your company while I tidy up,” I said. We both knew that wasn’t all he would offer, but I didn’t want to ask.

And without being asked, Christian let go of me and rolled his sleeves up, picked up an apron from the hook by the door, and began moving in sync with me to clean up the space. It wasn't hard work, but there was a lot of it. So when he took a little break with a large bowl where I'd mixed chocolate filling that still remained creamy, I joined him. He ran his finger through the inside of the bowl and licked it with a smack of his lips. "I'll never get used to the unlimited supply of chocolate."

"Is it good?" I asked.

Christian smiled to himself and ran his finger over the inside of the bowl again, then slowly offered it to me.

Butterflies scattered through my stomach as I thought of licking his finger, wrapping my lips around it, and taking it into my mouth. As I slowly moved closer, my lips parting, Christian moved his hand swiftly and pressed his chocolate-dripping finger against the bridge of my nose, smearing the chocolate all the way down to the tip of it.

A widening grin was his reply to my shock. "Don't get me wrong," he said in a lower voice, the one he used when he was feeling sexy. "You're always delicious. But a chocolate-glazed Milo is my new fantasy."

My eyes sparked with mischief. "Is he?"

"Uh-huh," Christian said, lifting his fingers out of the bowl and pressing them against my face.

I was still horrified, but it didn't escape me that this was easily the most seductive and erotic thing that anyone had done to me. Chocolate glazing was soft and creamy on my smooth skin, and Christian's fingers were determined and deliberate but never too rough. He made a mess of his hand and my face, looking into my eyes and at his

work in short, darting glances, his breaths growing shallow as I lifted my chin defiantly and took what he gave me. Smears went over my cheeks and my neck, and I waited patiently for more, but I also reached inside the bowl with my fingers and brought them to Christian's face. He was so consumed by what he was doing that he noticed my movement a heartbeat too late, and I pressed the chocolate cream against the side of his face, laughing like a giddy boy as I smeared his face with chocolate.

Christian gasped in shock, then laughed loudly and grabbed my hips as soon as he dropped the bowl on the smooth metal surface of the kitchen worktable. He yanked me close to him and brought his lips to mine in a fervent kiss that made me forget all else that was going on.

He kissed me so heatedly that the only thing I could still do that had anything to do with logic and reason was to whisper, "Let's take this to my room." However hot this abrupt foreplay was, and however much lust filled my veins, I didn't want us fooling around in the kitchen.

Not caring about any mess we made, Christian ran his chocolate-covered fingers through my hair and kissed me harder, inching back and pulling me with him. We slowly moved toward the hallway, kissing and gasping, holding on to one another as if letting go was never an option.

We bumped against the walls, tumbling back and forth, and kissing with more urgency and passion with each step we took. And when we reached the door and entered my studio, neither of us took the time to light the candles or turn up the heating. These things were so unimportant in the face of our need for one another.

We dropped our dirty aprons on the floor, taking them off each other in hurried moves, and we didn't stop for a second before reaching for one another's shirts.

I had never been with someone who was so filled with passion, so shamelessly

interested in me, and so free and willing in his lust. I had never been with a man who cared so much with his entire body.

Christian had told me how lukewarm he had been in his relationships before. He hadn't told me all the details, but he had hinted at enough for me to form an image of a much different dynamic. I hadn't expected his explosive desire to shine so brightly. I hadn't expected him to be so openly needy for my body.

So when he threw me on the bed and climbed in after me, I surrendered myself to him completely. He kissed me harder, then licked my chocolate-covered cheek and moved down to kiss my bare chest and my flat stomach until my toes were curling and my breaths were coming in deep, struggling heaves.

His lips caressing the skin under my belly button turned me on harder than any fantasy I could have come up with if I had a lifetime to daydream. He dragged his hands down the sides of my torso while inching lower with his lips. And when he reached the coarse fabric of my black pants, he showed off the skill of his nimble fingers, undoing the button and pulling the zipper smoothly before dragging the pants to my knees.

My cock throbbed painfully as Christian brought his face near the bulge in my briefs. He exhaled, and I felt the heat of his breath on my thighs, his nose and lips so near my packed balls that it tingled in my stomach just to see him.

He held my hips in his strong hands as his face sank between my legs, mouth open and pressed against my balls as his nose rested against my groin. It was a shocking sensation, wild and unexpected, holding me on the very edge between panic and delight.

He turned his head and kissed my inner thigh, his breath tickling me maddeningly and his lips soothing it quickly. His fingers, slow and careful, moved lower to hook

under the waistband of my briefs. He lifted it, gaze darting to the hard bulge before his eyes, and brought it over my cock, giving me a breath of relief before yanking the briefs lower, leaving me bare.

Christian took me in one hand, and I throbbed, making his eyes widen instantly. His other hand pulled my underwear and pants all the way to my ankles, his slow movement never changing as he stroked me.

“I love doing this to you,” Christian said in a husky, breathless tone. “Seeing you collapse like this.”

I moaned against my best attempts to stop it. He tightened his grip briefly in reply, then relaxed and continued to move his fist up and down.

His eyes were shining with desire. “I want to make you mine, Milo.”

“Make me yours,” I whispered, coiling under him in rapturous pleasure.

I didn’t have the faintest idea how he planned to do that, but I was willing to walk off the edge of the world with him just now. My heart had been his for so long that all he ever had to do was ask me, and I would give him the universe if I could.

Christian lowered himself and inhaled, taking my scent and giving a soft sigh of pleasure in return. He wrapped his lips around the tip of my cock and took me deeper into his mouth.

I reached down and threaded my fingers through his rich, dark hair, holding him where he was, but his hands found my hips, and he lifted me a few inches higher, pushing me into his mouth.

The practice had been slow and steady in the days after we had first gotten together.

Christian had slowly removed all the barriers, dismantled them one after another, and assured himself again and again that it hadn't all just been the heat of the moment. Every time we were together, he was so present in the moment that I knew he was reliving the experience of discovering just how right this felt.

He wanted it all, and he wasn't afraid to say it.

He wanted to taste every part of me, to kiss and touch and lick me. He wanted me to do the same to him, and I was only too happy to oblige. It was the last remaining dream of mine, one I'd had for the longest time, and to get to trace the shape of him with my lips was more than I'd ever truly hoped for.

His yearning for us to be together like this, to be a whole unit made of two bodies with lines blurring and disappearing, showed itself in his eagerness to do better.

I never minded his clumsiness. I never disliked anything he did as he learned the small uniqueness of my body. I was learning all about him anew, too.

He took me deeper into his mouth, breath coming in rapid bursts in and out of his nose. I felt his throat constricting against my cock. I felt it relaxing to let me in. I felt the trembling desire and pleasure in his fingers as he succeeded in taking me as deeply as I could take him. It was the first time, and he soon choked up, pulling his head back and smiling victoriously. The fact that he had choked didn't make him hesitate in trying again.

He had his way with me, teasing me and relaxing, bringing me to the edge of climax and loosening his hold on me to fill me with frustration and desperation. I wanted it to end, yet I wanted this sweet expectation to stretch on for eternity.

I thrust my hips upward when Christian could no longer resist his own urges. He had undone the button and the zipper on his pants and slipped a hand inside his

underwear, touching himself slowly while sucking me deep into his mouth. My moves, jerky and short, were enough of a spark to light a constellation on fire.

I cried out that I was close, and Christian tucked his lips around my cock. The idea that he wanted me to come inside his mouth was the final push that I needed, triggering the unstoppable and thunderous orgasm that rocked my body and the bed beneath me. I wriggled under Christian, his one hand pressing the middle of my chest hard and the other working furiously along the length of his cock.

When I throbbed and filled his mouth with my hot cum, he moaned against me and shuddered, lifted his torso, and pulled his underwear down, working himself for another two heartbeats before the ribbons of his cum shot across my chest.

I pulled him in as he trembled, his torso slick with sweat and lips shining with the evidence of our passion. He lay next to me, swallowing deeply and exhaling with satisfaction, then burying his head in the crook of my neck.

We lay still for the longest time before I got up and brought a warm, wet cloth to wipe us clean. After, I joined him in the bed again, naked and happy, warmth sputtering in my chest.

The first thing I noticed was the warmth of Christian's hand against my back as I nestled myself in the form of his arm. It was grounding and soft, a kind of touch I hadn't felt in so long that my body wasn't sure what to do with it. I let myself sink into the sensation, my cheek pressing against his bare chest. The rhythm of his heartbeat was steady and slow, the kind of sound that might lull you to sleep if you weren't so very awake.

His other hand rested loosely on my hip, his thumb tracing lazy circles on my skin.

The room was quiet except for our breaths and the occasional creak of the floorboards

below us. My studio wasn't luxurious by any means. The bed took up a third of the space, and the ceiling had cracks that spidered out in faint, uneven lines. I used to frown at those cracks. Now, lying here with Christian, they looked like constellations.

I tilted my head just enough to catch his eyes. They were half-lidded, dark and soft in the low light. "You okay?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He smiled, the kind that reached his eyes and crinkled the corners. "Yeah," he said. "Better than okay."

His answer made my chest feel too small for my heart. I ran my fingers over the line of his collarbone, tracing the contours of him like I was committing it to memory. Maybe I was. This was Christian, after all. My first friend. My first everything. And now, here we were, tangled up in sheets, tangled up in each other, like we were never meant to be apart.

I wanted to say something about how long I'd waited for this moment, how impossible it had always seemed. But the words felt too heavy to speak, and I didn't want to weigh us down. Not tonight.

Instead, I kissed him softly, just once. His lips curved up against mine.

"You're staring," he murmured.

"Maybe."

Christian laughed, a low, rumbling sound that sent a shiver down my spine. "What are you thinking?"

That you're here . That nothing has ever felt this right.



I shrugged, trying to play it off, but my face must have given me away.

“Milo.” His voice was warm, teasing.

“Fine,” I said, propping myself up on one elbow. The sheet slipped down my back, but I didn’t care. “I was thinking about how weird this is. Not bad-weird,” I added quickly, “Just...surreal. Like if I blink, it might disappear.”

Christian’s hand slid from my hip to the small of my back. “It’s not going anywhere,” he said. “I made you mine.”

And just like that, the words I’d been too afraid to speak earlier were stolen from my lips.

We lay side by side, staring up at the cracked ceiling. I felt Christian’s arm brush against mine, his warmth radiating even in the cool air of the studio.

“Do you remember the time we tried to build a tree house?” he asked suddenly.

I turned my head to look at him, surprised. “The treehouse that was more duct tape than wood? Yeah, I remember.”

He chuckled. “We were so proud of it, though. Until it collapsed.”

“Hey, it lasted a whole week.”

“Because we were too scared to actually climb into it,” he pointed out.

I laughed, the memory coming back in vivid detail. “Your dad was so mad about the mess we left in the yard. And then your mom made us clean it all up.”

Christian smiled, a faraway look in his eyes. “It was worth it, though. For a little while, it felt like we had our own secret place. Like nothing else in the world mattered.” His smile widened. “It felt like we were building our home. Christ, how did it take me so long to realize this?”

His words settled over me, warm and bittersweet. “I think that’s why I kept thinking about you all these years,” I admitted. “You were my secret place. My safe place.”

Christian turned to face me, his expression unreadable. “I didn’t know I was that for you.”

“You were everything,” I said softly. “Even when we lost touch, you were still...there. Somewhere in the back of my mind.”

The silence that followed wasn’t uncomfortable, but it was heavy. I could feel the weight of all the things we hadn’t said yet.

“I thought about you, too,” Christian said eventually. His voice was quiet, almost hesitant. “I mean, not all the time. But...sometimes. Especially when things were bad.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Just...life. You know how it is. Things don’t turn out the way you plan, and suddenly, you’re thirty, and you don’t know what the hell you’re doing.”

“You’re not thirty,” I pointed out, trying to lighten the mood.

“Close enough. But this will get better now.”

I wanted to ask what he meant, to press him for details about the years we'd missed. But I didn't. Not tonight. Instead, I reached for his hand, lacing our fingers together. "You're here now," I said. "That's what matters."

Christian's grip tightened, just slightly. "Yeah," he said. "I'm here."

We fell into a comfortable silence after that, the kind that didn't need to be filled. I traced patterns on the back of his hand with my thumb, small, aimless shapes that probably didn't make sense to anyone but me. The cracks in the ceiling started to blur as my eyes grew heavier, but I didn't want to sleep yet. Not when the night still felt like it belonged to us.

"Do you ever think about what might have happened if we'd stayed in touch?" Christian asked suddenly.

His question caught me off guard. "I don't know," I said honestly. "I like to think we'd still end up here, somehow. But who knows? Maybe we needed the time apart to figure things out."

"Maybe."

I glanced over at him. "Do you think about it a lot? The past, I mean."

"More than I should," he admitted. "But I try not to dwell on it. What's the point, right?"

I nodded, though I wasn't sure I agreed. The past had shaped us, for better or worse. It had led us here, to this moment. And for that, I couldn't regret it.

Christian shifted beside me, propping himself up on one elbow so he could look down at me. His hair was messy, his eyes soft, and I felt a pang of something I

couldn't quite name.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Of course."

He hesitated, as if he wasn't sure how to phrase it. "When you moved away...did you ever think about returning?"

"Every day," I said without hesitation. "But I couldn't. My parents were struggling. It wasn't a choice. I daydreamed about it."

Christian nodded, his expression unreadable. "I used to wonder if you were happier, wherever you were. I used to be jealous of your friends."

I sat up then, reaching for his face. "The ones I invented so I wouldn't look like such a loser. I wanted to impress you," I said regrettably. "You were the best part of my childhood, Christian. No matter how far apart we were, you were always with me."

He leaned into my touch, closing his eyes. "I wish I'd known that," he said softly. "I wish I'd let myself have you even if it was from so far away."

The night stretched on, but neither of us made a move to get up. The town outside was quiet, the snow muffling any sound. It felt like we were the only two people in the world, tucked away in this tiny studio, surrounded by memories.

I thought about the future, about all the things we hadn't talked about yet. But the idea of it didn't scare me as much as it used to. Because no matter what happened, I knew we'd face it together.

And for now, that was enough.

FIFTEEN

MILO

Joan Underwood was so swept up in managing the house for the holidays that she never got around to practicing that old piano. It wasn't fair. She'd been talking about it even when we were boys, running around, and she still looked at it fondly as if it was the only thing she missed in life.

It stayed with me long after our dinner at Christian's place, that longing look she'd cast at the piano when I'd asked if she played. The memory was with me on Thursday night when Christian was busy with his aunt Frannie, and I walked back down the avenue of memories to revisit Christian's house on a summer afternoon when music was playing from their living room. It hadn't been Joan's music, but the player was still in town. I had seen Tony Eggert just a few weeks earlier. He'd come into my shop. He'd asked me how I was and told me how he'd studied music. He still remembered how Joan had let him use the old piano to practice.

Something like a plan was taking root in my mind.

When Christian came around late on Friday, I was wrapping up in the front of the shop. He strolled in, swept me off my feet, and kissed me like he'd been waiting all day to do just that.

I felt like fainting, fanning myself as I found my footing, and the heat rose into my face even though we had been doing this for nearly four weeks. Every kiss I got from Christian felt like the first kiss.

“What’s that for?” I asked, pressing the cleaning cloth against the surface of the wooden table and clearing away the water rings my few customers had left behind.

“Do I need a reason?” Christian asked, his ears perking and his face bright with joy.

“Not at all,” I assured him. “Feel free to sweep me off my feet whenever you feel like it.”

Christian considered it carefully, then made a step toward me. “I feel like it.”

I let him kiss me again, and then he offered to help sweep the floors. I was all too glad to let him.

“Did you get a chance to look over the books?” I asked idly, fearing his answer despite my best effort to remain optimistic. Things just needed time.

Christian scratched the back of his head, eyes focused on the work before him. “Uh, yeah. I did.”

“Not good?” I asked, knowing what he was like when he needed to break the bad news.

“Not terrible,” Christian said, letting the broom lean against the wall and facing me. He came a few steps toward me and put on his compassionate face. It was warm and kind and made for kissing. “Look, I won’t lie to you. You’re barely breaking even during the peak traffic season. Your reserves are low when you should be filling up your coffers like every other store in town.”

I nodded bravely. I’d known all this, but hearing someone say it aloud was a lot more sobering than I had expected.

“I don’t know if Jingle Bites can go on for a year until the festival is on again, Milo,” Christian said with all the softness and gentleness in the world. His face melted into sadness as he looked at me. “It’s not the end, Milo. Things can turn around. I’m only telling you what the trend has been so far, so don’t lose hope just yet.”

I shook my head. “It’s alright.” My voice was surprisingly raw.

“Couldn’t we get the local business to sign up with you? Kody would do it in a heartbeat.” Christian’s tone grew a little more urgent.

I shook my head. “I can’t bring my prices down, Christian. éclair can run at a loss until they drive me out, and I won’t ask the shop owners in town to increase their expenses for the sake of my shop.”

Christian frowned. “But éclair will just drive up their prices when there’s no competition left.”

“Yes, but it won’t be me asking for charity,” I said, my voice rough as I turned away from him.

Christian’s arms wrapped around me from behind. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” I said, yet I furiously swiped the tears away from my eyes. Perhaps this was the right moment to accept things the way they were. Perhaps it was better than to live in denial for too long. “I knew this, Christian. I knew all of this already. I don’t know why I’m crying.”

“Shhh,” he whispered into my ear, holding me together like I was about to shatter. And maybe I was. Maybe all that was keeping me whole were his strong arms around my torso and his heated lips on my neck. “We’ll make it work. We’ll find a way to make everything work.”

“Not here,” I whispered. “Not in this shop.” I never should have prompted him. Not tonight, at least. I had wanted us to light the candles and play Christmas-themed board games tonight. I had wanted us to go into the festival’s final days with high spirits and all the cheer we could muster. I had wanted us to kiss under the mistletoe at the closing event on Monday. This only added doom and gloom to what was supposed to be a lovely time.

“Then we’ll go somewhere else and start over,” Christian said.

But I had spent so many years yearning to return to Christmas Falls. I had spent my life waiting for someone to invent time travel so I could step back into the endless summer days and long winter nights when Christian and I were busy playing Vex and Finn, or pirates, or building doomed tree-houses.

I couldn’t leave Christmas Falls and all the memories that soaked its ground, houses, and shops. I couldn’t leave the fields of snow angels and the tree farm where we used to sneak in to pretend we were lost in a labyrinth, chased by the fearsome Minotaur.

“We can go to New York if you’d like. I was going to tell you next week, but I suppose now’s as good as any time. I’ve been in touch with Laura’s uncle. He’s a game developer in New York, and he offered me a job. They’re making Shattered Horizons , and the head of marketing left. They want me to take on the project. Can you believe it?”

He must have felt the stiffness in my muscles. He must have felt the tension in my body. His enthusiasm died a quick death as I froze, my heart hammering with devastating panic.

“Milo?” he asked, concern dripping from his voice.

Was he serious? Was he still dreaming of leaving this place behind?



I didn't know.

How could I know? We had spent these weeks talking about our childhood, never daring to touch on the future. Because we knew, I realized. We knew we were going in different directions. Not right away and not before Christmas, but we were still trapped in vastly different currents. The boy whose dreams were too big for a small town like this and the boy who'd never wanted anything other than spending the rest of his days here.

Except, many years ago, the dreamer had been left behind, and the boy who wanted Christmas Falls had been ripped out of his little slice of heaven.

"Um..." My voice cracked as soon as I tried to speak. I shrugged Christian off and stepped away from him, not turning around. I couldn't face him just yet.

"It's just a thought," Christian explained hurriedly. "We haven't agreed on any details. I think I'll get the official offer on Monday. But... Shattered Horizons ? Remember?"

The happiness in his voice was killing me. If someone had wanted to design a trap to lure him away from me, this would have been the perfect one. He'd adored those comics as a boy. And it was the dream job in New York City.

"I do," I said, finding a well of inner calm that this situation needed. "It's wonderful news, Christian," I said, but my voice failed to convey that.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said immediately.

I forced myself to turn around and look at him.

"God, Milo," he said, his face collapsing from worry to guilt. "What was I thinking?"

We were talking about your shop..." He shook his head.

"It's okay," I said calmly. "My shop's failing. There's nothing more to talk about."

He perked up slightly as if the prospect of my shop going bust meant we would get our happily ever after in the big city. Didn't he realize that I would do anything else before living anonymously in a place that would swallow me whole for breakfast?

"I know," I said quietly. "I know this is something you need to do."

"No," he blurted, eyes widening in alarm. "We should do this. The two of us together. I'm sorry, Milo. I picked the worst moment. I thought...I don't know. I thought it might be a consolation to know that we won't be left with nothing if the worst happens here."

"But the worst is going to happen," I insisted. "A week from now, when the town empties, I won't be able to cover my costs. In three months, I'll be out of cash. In six months, I'll be so far behind on rent that I'll be kicked out of here. And you...you'll be in New York, Christian, where you belong."

"No, no, no," he hurried.

"Let's not pretend anymore," I said, taking another step back. "This was wonderful, Christian. Every second was absolutely wonderful. And it was more than I ever dared to hope for. But we both knew all along that we were going in opposite directions."

"What? I didn't know that," Christian said, panicking. "Nobody knew that."

I balled my fists and extracted the last ounces of strength out of my body. "Don't you see? We avoided this topic for a month, Christian. We never talked about it because we knew that this is how it ended."

His eyes were wide and glimmering with unspilled tears. “Milo, please. We’re talking about it now.”

I shook my head. “I’m not leaving this town, Christian.”

“Fine,” he said, lifting his head hopefully. “Neither am I. We’re staying here.”

Why did he have to make it so hard? Why did I have to spell it out for him? Hot tears rolled down my cheeks, and I shook my head. “No, Christian. You need to go. You need to take that offer.”

“I won’t,” he said. “It’s just a job. There’ll be another.”

I began to turn away from him and hesitated after a moment, not quite turning my back on him. “And then what?”

“Then, we’ll make it work,” Christian said, that momentary air of confidence draining from him.

“You’re going to resent me,” I said. He shook his head furiously, but I didn’t let him fight me. “When some time passes and things get bad, you’re going to look at me, and you’re going to see the reason for all your misfortune in me. You’re going to remember this night, Christian, and you’re going to tell me that you made the wrong choice. And it will be too late.”

I took a step away from him, but he grabbed my wrist just tightly enough to hold me still. “That’s not true.”

I turned around to look at him. He couldn’t promise that. Even now, even when his heart was pumping panicked, misguided hope into every corner of his body, he couldn’t make himself promise that.

“But it is,” I said heavily, barely holding myself together.

“Don’t,” he whispered. “Please.”

I drew a deep breath of air and looked into his eyes. His grip on me loosened, and I slipped my hand free. Instead of going away, I lifted that hand and put it on his beautiful face. I love you with every fiber of my being , I thought as I looked into his eyes. And because of that, I need to let you go .

“Goodbye, Christian,” I whispered, tempted to plant one last kiss on his lips to have something good to remember, then deciding not to do that. Our last kiss had been passionate and hopeful, not a farewell.

I tore myself free of him and spun around, making for the hallway that led to my studio.

A whisper of a plea came from Christian, but I didn’t look back. Instead, I went in and crossed the cold studio to the window. Nothing. For what felt like an eternity, there was nothing. Streetlamps gave off their cozy glow, but nothing moved out there. And I held my breath. I held it in until my lungs burned.

Christian’s figure seemed small as he slouched and walked out of the shop. He hurried away from me and my world, losing himself in the distance. And when he was almost out of sight, he paused, turned around, and looked right at me in the window as if he could feel my gaze on him.

He lingered there as my body shuddered and shook. Then, slowly, he lowered his head and turned away.

It was for the better.

In some alternative reality, Christian took me away with him, and I left everything I loved for the sake of being with him. I suffered quietly until the day I woke up resenting him.

In another universe, I made him stay with me. I made him leave his dreams in the city and stay here for the rest of our days. And he hated me for it. Secretly, at first. In small ways, his resentment grew. He dismissed me in some joyful moment, making me feel silly for being happy when all his dreams withered away. He saw something I loved in a shop window, then felt a tickle of rage and refused to buy it. Bit by bit, he hated me more until we were older and wiser and sadder. And then, he told me so. After some mundane misunderstanding, the floodgates opened, and he told me how he had sacrificed his dreams for my sake, and we were never able to move on from that.

This was the only right way for things to end. It hurt like hell, but it hurt far less than any other outcome I could see. Because to be hated by him after all we had been through was a little death I feared the most.

SIXTEEN

CHRISTIAN

A vast emptiness had opened inside my chest. Like a black hole, it sucked in all that was good and bright in the world. Every trace of joy I'd ever felt was dragged into the point of singularity, never to be seen again.

As I walked home, unsure of everything in my life, the emptiness deepened. Dragging air into my lungs hurt. Blinking stung. Even my teeth hurt until I realized I had clenched them so hard that I was crushing them.

I walked faster and faster as a distant humming noise caught up with me. My skin prickled and burned, and the humming soon grew into a roar of wind and ocean waves.

My feet hurried. My legs burned with exertion, but I trudged on. I walked the long way around, not even taking all the right turns, passing through Santa's Village when I should have been far away from it already. I walked in circles, steering clear of the White Elephant, the town hall, and Milo's Jingle Bites. I passed by Nicholas Willoughby's busy toy store. He had faced a huge company that wanted to buy his place, and he had prevailed, but it had been different. His own grandson, James, had been the force behind both the sale efforts and the rescue. Milo didn't have allies who would save his little shop, and he didn't have the customers to support him. And it broke my heart all over again to think how sad the ending would be. All his dreams, seemingly coming true, only to be snatched out of his reach.

A chocolate shop he loved and a boy he'd longed to be with, both taken away in a single, stupid night.

My heart wept.

It was easier to think of Milo and his losses. What I didn't dare face—a truth that battered at the walls around my mind—were all the things I had lost tonight. Simply acknowledging them would tear me to pieces.

I had no life to look forward to. I had no goals, no hopes, no wishes. It suddenly felt like the most senseless prospect of all. A job? Was I leaving Milo for something as pointless as a job? My home. He had been my home.

This drive to go out and see the world and do these wonderful things in a sea of people I would never get to see twice seemed like a destructive force all of a sudden. Why couldn't I just be happy? Why couldn't this be enough?

For a moment, it had seemed so. It felt like it had been everything I'd ever needed.

But he was right. Every glimpse of a future I could envision was away from Christmas Falls, and Milo's were here. He had been taken from this place too soon, destined to forever long to return here. And it would be silly vanity to think that he had only ever wanted to come back for me. His happiest days had been in this town with or without me.

And yours? Where were your happiest days? But I didn't know how to answer this question. It was too scary and big for words. I was terrified of admitting that my happiest days were behind me. I always looked forward, ahead, to some distant horizon where things would finally be good.

The truth hit me squarely in the chest. My happiest days had ended tonight.

The cold night air lashed at my face as I continued walking, my breath clouding in front of me with every exhale. The rhythmic crunch of snow beneath my boots was the only sound accompanying the hollow drumbeat of my heart. My mind replayed the scene over and over, each moment sharper than the last, carving new wounds into my already battered soul. Milo's face haunted me, his eyes brimming with emotions I couldn't begin to untangle—disappointment, hurt, anger, and maybe worst of all, resignation.

It was the resignation that gutted me. The look that said he had expected this, had always expected me to falter, to let him down. And hadn't I? Hadn't I proven, yet again, that I was as unreliable as the snow that melted under the first hint of spring?

The streets of Christmas Falls, once brimming with charm and joy, now seemed foreign and unwelcoming. The twinkling lights strung across rooftops mocked me with their cheer, each flash and sparkle like a taunt: look how happy everyone else is. It was a lie, of course. Everyone had their burdens, but tonight, it felt like mine were heavier than anyone else's.

I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets as though that could protect me from the icy tendrils creeping up my spine. The emptiness inside me was unbearable, a gnawing void that no amount of holiday cheer could fill.

Milo had always been the antidote to that emptiness. Even when we were kids, his laughter could chase away the darkest clouds. I could hear it now, in the recesses of my memory, as clear as if he were walking beside me. His infectious giggle when we used to race down the snowy hills. His quiet chuckle when he beat me at cards. His full-bellied laugh the first time I fell flat on my face trying to ice-skate.

I should have known back then.

You did know, a voice inside me whispered.



I clenched my fists against the thought, my nails biting into my palms. No. I hadn't known. I couldn't have.

But the truth was undeniable now. Milo had been my constant, my safe haven, the one person who could see through all my bravado and make me feel like I was enough. And I had thrown that away because I was too scared to face the possibility that I might actually deserve happiness.

The wind picked up, sending a flurry of snowflakes spiraling around me. They clung to my coat, my hair, my lashes, blurring the world in a haze of white. For a moment, I stood there, letting the cold seep into my bones.

It was better this way, I told myself.

But it wasn't better. It was hell.

I resumed walking, slower now, my feet dragging as if weighted by the enormity of my mistakes. My mind drifted to the future, a bleak and featureless expanse stretching out before me. Every step forward felt like a step away from the life I had dreamed of—the life I could have had with Milo.

Would he ever forgive me? Would he give us a chance?

The thought of him moving on, finding someone else who wasn't as selfish as me, was unbearable. But didn't he deserve that? Someone who could give him the kind of love he had always given so freely?

And what about me? What did I deserve?

I had spent so much of my life chasing something I couldn't even name—success, validation, a sense of belonging. But now, standing at the crossroads of my own

making, I realized none of it mattered without Milo.

I passed by the small park where we had made snow angels as kids, before we discovered the undisturbed peace of Old Ridge Road, our laughter ringing out into the crisp winter air. The memory was so vivid it brought a lump to my throat. I could see us lying there, side by side, our arms and legs sweeping through the snow in perfect unison. It had been so simple back then, so easy to be happy.

I stopped at the park's edge, staring at the empty expanse of snow. The urge to step into it, to lie down and carve out one last snow angel, was overwhelming. But I didn't move. I couldn't.

Instead, I turned and continued walking, my head bowed against the wind.

I found myself in front of my parents' house, the familiar brick facade staring back at me like an old friend I no longer recognized. I hesitated on the steps, my hand hovering over the door handle.

Inside was warmth, comfort, and the illusion of normalcy. But it wasn't home.

Home was a small studio beside a chocolate shop, cluttered with ribbons and calligraphy pens and the lingering scent of cocoa.

Home was wherever Milo was.

I closed my eyes, leaning against the doorframe as the truth washed over me.

I had left my heart behind tonight.

And I wasn't sure if I would ever get it back.

My parents didn't ask painful questions. They did, however, extend an unbearable amount of compassion that hurt nearly as much. For that reason, I remained in my childhood room for most of my time over the weekend.

My thoughts were haunted by Milo, but I didn't do something foolish like going to him and making it all hurt more.

He had made up his mind. He had sent me on my way. He had said goodbye. And I couldn't blame him. In the throes of pain over the inevitable loss of his shop, Milo had had to endure my misguided enthusiasm, and he learned where my ambitions were.

It was never supposed to be like this, but I had revealed my cards with the best intentions and to the worst results. I had revealed to him just how different our paths were, making him face that in the moment when he was the most vulnerable.

I deserved the solitary life that a job in New York City entailed. I deserved to go back to the struggles of daily life that I had been wishing for all my life. Me and my damned, bleeding heart.

The entire Monday passed in one long, protracted sigh. That was how time felt to me now. I spent my days thinking about the things we were supposed to be doing. Mulled wine at Kody's on Saturday. Playing cards with increasingly naughtier stakes in Milo's apartment on Sunday. The closing ceremony today.

The whole town would be there. Everyone wanted to attend, and Milo had been looking forward to it so much. He never took time off despite the fact there was little to do at the shop. He had been so happy to plan our outing tonight and to carve out some free time for himself.

Self-hatred erupted within me. He wouldn't go. He wouldn't get that because of me.

So, I spent my day holed up in my room. I'd eaten breakfast and forced myself to shower, but that was the end of my successes for the day. I remained in my bed, deaf to the rest of the house. It was almost like I didn't exist. And that, in particular, felt good.

If I could somehow erase the entire history of myself, I would do it. Milo would be happier for it, I was sure. Everyone would be better off. I never would have dragged Laura to such a low point in her life that she would be desperate to leave our rotten relationship like it was a house on fire. And I never would have given Milo hope only to let my stupidity ruin it.

As the evening replaced the endless twilight hours of the winter days, my stomach rumbled out of habit. I couldn't really feel hunger. Everything tasted like eating ash and dirt anyway. But the rumbling told me I needed to eat something, so I crossed the room and opened the door.

Mom had put some music on downstairs. It took me a moment to realize that it was an instrumental recording of "Silent Night." It created a lump in my throat that was hard to swallow. I could barely breathe over it.

Part of me wanted to turn around and hide in my room again, but then the music stopped abruptly.

"Ah, darn," Mom said. Something creaked, and the music began again from the start.

My heart rose. What on earth was going on? Was it really that?

I forced my feet to move down the stairs, bringing me into the open space of the ground floor. On the other end, by the Christmas tree, my mother sat with her face turned to the rest of the room. She sat straight, her hands slowly and carefully gliding along the black and white keys of our old piano.

She played the melody perfectly, cocking her head a few times as if in reproach.

Silent night, peaceful night,

Stars shine down, soft and bright,

Love is here, this holy morn,

Hope and joy in a Savior born,

Rest in heavenly peace,

Rest in heavenly peace.

I mouthed the words as tears streaked my cheeks. And then, just as suddenly as the little miracle had happened, my mother stopped. She turned her head over her shoulder and looked at me with grief making her eyes shine. “Oh, baby.”

“You’re playing the piano,” I whispered.

“I suppose I am,” she agreed, standing up from the little chair in front of the piano and closing the distance between us. She took me in her arms like I was a little boy and held me warmly. I had forgotten what comfort a mother’s hug could provide.

I rested my head on her shoulder and shook as a sob rose through my chest. “I ruined it,” I whispered.

She didn’t tell me to be quiet. She didn’t tell me to let it all out. She simply held me so that I could safely fall apart.

“I ruined everything,” I said, tears coming anew.

Mom rubbed my back. It felt as though she fixed everything broken in the universe when she did that. How had I forgotten what it felt like to be home?

“I...I love him,” I sobbed, holding my mom and trying not to cry. “I never told him that.”

“Do you really?” she asked softly, not at all skeptical.

“I love him so much,” I said without hesitating. “I always did. You were right. I loved him even then. I just didn’t know.”

Mom ran her hand down the back of my head and slowly pulled herself away from me. She looked into my eyes with that soft, ageless gaze. “If you do, then you didn’t ruin anything, baby.”

“But I did,” I insisted.

She shook her head. “That’s just not how things end, Christian. You’re both still here, and you shouldn’t quit without trying harder because Milo loves you, too. You know he does.”

I did. He’d never said the words, but I had felt loved more than ever in my life. And I loved him in return.

I wiped the tears out of my eyes and exhaled. Calm returned to me, and I looked at the sheet music on the piano. I didn’t want to tell my mother just how wrong she was. Despite loving me, Milo couldn’t give me his heart again. I had wasted that opportunity. And I was still drawn to running away and paying the price for all I’d done wrong.

“How come you’re playing again?” I asked, hoping to distract my mother from her

attempts to lift my hopes up.

Mom hesitated as if reading my face and eyes for a few moments before biting the bait. “The strangest thing happened this morning,” she said.

I frowned. “What happened?”

“Do you remember Tony Eggert? I don’t suppose you do. While you and Milo were sneaking around the town, Tony came here to practice on our piano. It just sat there gathering dust, so I let him come and practice until his parents could afford to buy one. He teaches music now, you know. And this morning, he came here with sheet music and a smile on his face, saying he never forgot how kind we were to him. He said he remembered me talking about wanting to play but how I never got around to it. ‘Did you ever start practicing again, Mrs. Underwood?’ he asked, but I think he knew the answer because he planned to give me a few lessons. He even gave me a beautiful little note. See?”

Mom lifted an elegant envelope and handed it to me.

As I pulled the quality stock paper out of the envelope, my heart tripped. The handwriting was unmistakable, but the words were the final proof I needed.

Dear Joan,

A melody, once played, can always be heard again. The hands may falter, but the heart never forgets its rhythm. May this bring a little music back to your world.

—Secret Santa

“I need to see him,” I whispered urgently.

Mom cocked her head in bewilderment. “He’ll come tomorrow for another lesson.”

“Not Tony,” I said. My fingers ran over the elegant calligraphy. The constant clutter of inks and papers, the secret messages, the tiny, happy smiles, it all made sense now. How had I not realized this already? “This isn’t Tony’s note, Mom. It’s Secret Santa’s.” The mysterious person who had helped fill the arch at Remy’s diner and arranged birthday parties for elderly ladies, the person who had whispered to the town’s real Santa about the people who deserved to be on the nice list, the person who wanted to give so much to so many and never, ever ask for something in return... I looked at my mom and whispered, “This is Milo.”



SEVENTEEN

MILO

I tucked my hands into my pockets and moved through the crowd that had assembled at Sugar Plum Park for the festival's closing ceremony. I had spotted Nicholas in the distance, standing with Marigold, James, and Ezra. I would join them later. I wasn't yet ready to tell them why I was alone. I wasn't ready to tell anyone.

So I walked around, greeting people I knew only from passing. Those that I knew better, I avoided. That was why I came here so late. I missed everything that happened during the ceremony and arrived when the crowd was smaller. Still, I spotted Elias checking out the photography display under a tent as I passed. A few feet away, Nick, the local matchmaker and his new boyfriend, Leo, were chatting with a whole gaggle of family. The smiles on their faces hurt, and I hurried on.

When I had done two full circles of the park, I decided it was now or never. I made my way to Nicholas Willoughby and his family beneath the large tent that been set up for the event near the park gazebo. When all was said and done, I would always have friends there.

"There you are," Nicholas said in that jolly voice. I constantly expected him to give us a "Ho, ho, ho." His white mustache shook a little as he smiled. "I think Santa has been spotted in Christmas Falls quite a lot this year, Milo. Don't you agree?"

Marigold looked between us as if suspecting there was some juicy gossip that had escaped her. But just then, Ezra and James rejoined the group and handed out small

cherry liquors to everyone, including me. “It’s good to see you, Milo,” Ezra said.

“Weren’t you circling the crowd just now?” James poked.

I laughed airily and took my small glass of liquor. Marigold hesitated, but then she did the what-the-hell shrug and accepted it, close to giggling. A small glass of liquor near Christmas Eve was Marigold’s idea of debauchery. To her, this was peak naughtiness. But she laughed as she and Nicholas touched glasses.

“Hey, where’s Christian?” Ezra asked. “Is he here?”

I shook my head. I imagined Christian was having dinner with his parents, telling them about the exciting job that was awaiting him in New York City. “No,” I said, my throat too tight to speak at length. “He’s not here.”

Ezra’s eyes widened. “Oh, no. I’m so sorry, Milo. Are you alright?”

I looked around, hoping for a lightning strike or a meteor shower to distract everyone so I could avoid talking about this. Then, James nodded. “He’s alright. Aren’t you, Milo? We don’t need to make a fuss.”

For a man with as icy a pair of eyes as those, James radiated an unexpected amount of warmth. He offered his glass of liquor, and I lifted mine to clink them together.

“Good,” James said. That one word carried so much reassurance that I wondered if he could have given me more with an entire speech.

“I’ll make all the fuss I want, James,” Ezra said scoldingly, then threw an arm over my shoulder. “But not now. We can talk when you feel like it.”

“Thanks,” I said. And we left it at that.

People mingled in the park, heaters keeping them warm in the chilly outdoors. Nicholas decided to tell me what I'd missed. There were raffles and competitions, exhibitions, and speeches. It was all very nice and fun. He was hoping there would be dancing later because he'd been practicing for it, and Marigold laughed out loud, then covered her mouth with a hand and pretended she hadn't.

I wished I could enjoy it, but everywhere I looked, cozy couples reminded me of what I was missing. The museum director Harvey Novak stood close with the mystery man who'd stolen his heart. The hot former hockey player who'd taken over the rec center had a possessive arm wrapped around Scott Jersey, while Scott's son played fetch with their dogs. And if Jett nuzzled Remy one more time, I might just lose it. Heck, even that grumpy Gray Frost looked happy with his tech tycoon.

"What the fudge? What's that Nutcracker doing there?" Ezra whispered. I would have appreciated just how unquestioning his loyalty was if my breath wasn't kicked out of me when I spotted Christian pushing through the crowd.

I froze as Christian headed toward the gazebo. He glanced around, his gaze sharp but purposeful, and then he spotted me. My stomach flipped, but he didn't approach me. Instead, he moved into the center of the gazebo. A hush fell over the crowd.

Someone handed him the microphone, and for a moment, he just stood there, gripping it like it might fly out of his hands. His hair was tousled, and his cheeks were flushed, probably from the cold outside. His gaze scanned the park, and I wanted to disappear. Or maybe I wanted to march up there and pull him down before he could say anything too embarrassing.

"Uh, hi," he began, his voice cracking slightly. A few people chuckled, but he took a deep breath and pushed on. "I'm Christian, for those who don't know me. I used to live here a long time ago. And, uh, I'm sure some of you have noticed that weird things have been happening in Christmas Falls this year."

There were murmurs of agreement and a few laughs from the crowd.

“I’m talking about the Secret Santa,” he continued, his voice growing steadier. “The person who’s been leaving gifts or helping people out in small but meaningful ways. Fixing your broken fences. Finding babysitters so you could have that romantic date. Dropping off groceries. At first, I thought it was just...coincidence. Or some kind of Christmas magic. But it’s not. Well, maybe magic, but not that kind. Secret Santa visited Christmas Falls this year and reminded us just how capable we are of doing the right thing. He reminded us how we all deserved a little kindness and owed a little bit of it to the others.”

He paused, and my breath hitched as his eyes found mine in the crowd.

“It’s Milo,” he said, his voice warm and steady. Marigold gasped in shock and something like offense that nobody had told her. “Milo Montgomery. The guy who runs Jingle Bites, who spends every waking hour making chocolates that somehow taste like happiness. The guy who pretends he’s fine, even when things aren’t going his way. Milo, who’s given everything he has to this town without expecting anything in return.”

A ripple of surprised murmurs ran through the crowd.

“He’s the one who sent out those invitations to the party at Jolly Java?” Rocco Moretti said, sounding stunned. His boyfriend, deputy mayor Taylor Hall was by his side along with a truly massive group of family that were all whispering furiously now.

“The books for the library.” Nova turned to Kody. “Milo was behind that?”

There were other whispers. Heads turned toward me, but I couldn’t move.

“Milo doesn’t ask for help,” Christian said, his voice softer now. “Even when he needs it. And he does need it. His shop is struggling. He’s been working day and night to keep it going, even when the odds are stacked against him. éclair is pushing him out of business. Everyone should know this, and I’m telling you because Milo wouldn’t. He would never ask you to move your business to him, and I know plenty of you would. You’ve tasted his chocolate. You know what he can do. And despite all that, he still finds the time and energy to make the rest of us feel cared for.”

My face burned, and I shook my head slightly, but Christian wasn’t done.

“You’ve reminded me, Milo, of what it feels like to belong somewhere,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “Of what it feels like to have a home. I forgot that for a while, but you brought it back. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry for letting you down. For the years we lost. For not being here sooner. And for disappointing you again.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“I don’t know if you can forgive me,” Christian said, his voice breaking just enough for me to hear it. He slowly came down the gazebo steps. The crowd parted before him and made a clear way between us. “But I’m asking you to. Because I can’t imagine my life without you in it anymore. I don’t want to. So, Milo...”

His gaze locked on mine. My heart pounded as he approached, the microphone still in hand, his voice barely above a whisper now but somehow carrying through the park.

“Please. Let me be part of your world again. Let me stand beside you. Let me love you the way you deserve to be loved.”

The park was silent, and the weight of dozens of eyes pressed down on me. But all I could see was Christian.

The crowd disappeared. My friends, my neighbors, my casual acquaintances. I could only see the man standing in front of me, waiting for an answer.

His arms dropped to his side with the microphone still held in his hand. His words were no longer for everyone, only me. He gazed at me hopefully. "I love you, Milo."

My heart somersaulted in my chest.

"When I was thirteen, I lost my best friend. The pain was so great that I swore I would never be that close to anyone. And it took me a decade of failed attempts to realize that you had always been more than a friend. You are my soulmate. You are the home I want."

My lips quivered as I let myself come nearer to him. "What about New York? You'll always want to..."

"I won't," he said. "I used to want to run away from here. I don't want to run anymore."

I swallowed, trying not to let myself give in so quickly. It was risky. It was dangerous. "I'm sure you mean that now, but what if..." I faltered. Telling him about all the outcomes was pointless.

Especially when he took a step closer and almost pressed our bodies together. "What if I change my mind?" He blinked. "That will never happen, Milo. This month with you has been everything I've always wanted. It only took losing you to realize what you are to me, what you've always been."

I wanted to ask him what I was to him, but no sound came from my parting lips.

Christian smiled softly, his eyes glimmering with tears. "Everything," he said.

I no longer had it in me to hold back. My hands shot up between us, and I grabbed the lapels of his coat, pulling him in for a heated kiss that was raw with pain and hurt and fear but which incinerated each of those, one by one, and only left an infinite oasis of hope in their place.

Something like cheers and wolf whistles sounded in the distance, but my ears were flooded with the beating of my heart and the hum of my blood.

“You really love me?” I asked, feeling the heat creep into my cheeks. Had I doubted it?

“Do you need to ask?” Christian whispered. “Of course I love you, Milo.”

“Because I love you, too,” I said. “I’ve loved you my whole life.”

Christian’s grin widened, his hands settling firmly on my waist. “Good. Then it’s settled.”

“Is it?” I teased, the edge of my lips curving into a smile. “You sure you’re ready for a life of endless chocolate experiments and late-night crises about the perfect truffle texture?”

He chuckled, low and warm. “I’ve survived New York City corporate meetings. I think I can handle chocolate-induced chaos. Besides...” He leaned in, his lips brushing mine in a featherlight touch. “It sounds like heaven to me.”

I laughed. It burst out of me like the first notes of a song I’d forgotten I loved. Around us, the crowd erupted in applause and cheers, but the world had narrowed to just Christian and me.

“You’re really not leaving?” I asked, my voice soft, almost disbelieving.

His hands moved up to cup my face, his thumbs brushing lightly against my cheekbones. “I’m not going anywhere, Milo. My home is here. My heart is here. With you.”

“What about Shattered Horizons ?” I asked.

“If they want me so badly, they won’t mind me working from here. If not, then I’ll know my worth to them.” He nodded reassuringly. “The only reason I loved that comic so much was because of you. We reenacted it to death. But I don’t need that anymore. I’ve got you.”

The noise around us grew louder—Nicholas’s booming laugh, Marigold’s excited squeal, Ezra’s enthusiastic cheer—but it all faded into a gentle buzz.

I kissed him again, slower this time, savoring the taste of him, the feel of him. When we finally pulled apart, breathless and grinning, I looked into his eyes and saw the future I’d stopped daring to dream about.

A future filled with love, laughter, and, yes, chocolate-induced chaos. I didn’t doubt I would have more orders tomorrow than I could keep up with. But I also had Christian to sweep in and help me.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt whole.



## Page 18

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### One Year Later

The snow fell lightly outside, blanketing Christmas Falls in a soft white that shimmered against the strings of lights hung up along Main Street. I twisted a strand of lights around my hand, trying to untangle the knots I'd somehow made worse. Milo shot me an amused look from behind the counter, where he was spooning out a test batch of hot chocolate mix into small glass jars. He'd decided to add a few new blends this season, something he'd dreamed up last summer but only now had time to make real.

A full year had passed since we'd...well, since I'd come back. To Milo. To this town. To myself, I guess, though it was a hell of a road to get here. So much had changed that it felt surreal being here, doing something as simple as decorating the shop.

"Everything good over there?" Milo's voice broke through my thoughts, warm and familiar.

"Yeah," I said, giving him a smile. "Just fighting off the spirit of tangled Christmas lights."

He laughed, the sound rich and deep, filling the cozy space. "Maybe we should hire someone to decorate the place, let them be the ones to wrestle with all that."

"And take away my one chance to feel useful?" I quipped, trying to mask the warmth spreading through me as I caught his gaze. It was ridiculous how, even after a year, he could make me feel like we were teenagers, sneaking glances and hoping the other didn't notice.

But of course, Milo noticed everything. He always had.

I had more uses than untangling the lights, of course. Laura's Uncle Roy and I spent days talking about Shattered Horizons following our first interview. The man had a genuine passion for the series and appreciated seeing the same in me. When it came to discussing a way for us to work together, letting me live in Christmas Falls and work long-distance hadn't been a problem, aside from him wishing to gush about Vex and Finn and the rest of the gang more often. My work involved trips to New York for all meetings that we deemed benefited from the personal touch. Milo accompanied me to many of those meetings, enjoying the city in small bites and always sighing with relief when we returned home.

As time went on, I found myself so much more comfortable in Christmas Falls. It wasn't just Milo. It was the people that made this place. They knew each other and banded together in their time of need as quickly as they got together to celebrate someone's success. Jingle Bites had been receiving a steady flow of orders all year long. Bars, pubs, restaurants, small bed-and-breakfast places, and, above all else, coffee shops needed chocolate treats. It buffed up Milo's revenue and allowed him to hire help.

I glanced around the shop, letting my gaze fall on the new displays of chocolates and handmade treats that he'd spent the last few weeks arranging. The place was a work of art. His art. The walls were lined with shelves holding carefully stacked boxes, and every detail seemed thought out, from the hand-painted signs to the strings of lights wrapping around the front window.

"I don't think I tell you this enough," I said, clearing my throat, "but this shop? It's amazing, Milo. Really. You built something...incredible."

He looked up from his jars, brow slightly raised in surprise. "You tell me all the time."

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged. “It’s worth saying again.”

He looked down, his cheeks turning the faintest shade of pink, and I had to bite back a smile. It had taken us both a while to get used to how things were now—to the fact that we weren’t walking on eggshells around each other, waiting for the other to flinch or pull away.

Over the past year, we’d had our share of stumbles. I’d messed up more than once, tripping over my own insecurities and fears. But Milo had this patience about him, the kind that made me believe it was okay to fall as long as I got back up. And eventually, I learned to trust that. To trust him.

“What are you smiling about?” Milo asked, catching me mid-thought.

“Just...life,” I said, feeling the absurdity of it. “Where we ended up. Where I ended up.”

Milo’s eyes softened, and he set down his spoon, crossing the room to stand beside me. For a moment, we just looked at each other, and in that silence, I could feel everything he wanted to say. Everything I wanted to say but couldn’t put into words.

He reached for the lights in my hands, brushing his fingers over mine. “It’s been a year, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, letting the weight of it settle around us. “One hell of a year.”

And it had been. The first few months were tough. We’d navigated old wounds and new scars, learning how to love each other without the weight of the past dragging us down. I had spent nights here in the shop, working beside him, watching him pour himself into each chocolate, each recipe, with a passion that made me wonder how it had taken me so long to realize I loved him. And slowly, I learned to forgive myself for all the times I had let go by.

It wasn't always easy. I'd wake up some mornings, convinced it had all been a dream—that any minute, he'd vanish, and I'd be back in New York, buried in a job I was about to lose, in a life that didn't fit. But then I'd walk into the shop, see Milo at the counter with a grin, his hair tousled, and I'd remember: this was real. He was real. We were real.

The bell above the door jingled, snapping us out of the quiet moment. A couple of townsfolk waved, stepping in from the cold to pick up their orders. Milo greeted them with his usual warmth, his voice soft and steady, carrying a cheerfulness I knew he worked hard to keep alive.

When they left, he turned back to me with a smirk. "See? Good thing you're helping me decorate, or this place would be overrun with unlit lights and tangled garland."

"Who would ever believe that? Me, the decorating pro," I deadpanned, and he laughed, a sound that made the air warmer and filled with memories I could feel but never quite see.

As the evening drew closer, the shop grew quieter. Milo had almost finished his test batch, the air rich with the smell of chocolate and orange, cinnamon, and something else I could only describe as...him. I strung the last of the lights around the window and stepped back, feeling a strange mix of pride and contentment.

Milo joined me at the front, crossing his arms as he surveyed the work. "Not bad, Christian. I think you might be getting the hang of this."

"I had a good teacher."

"Too cheesy," he warned, nudging me with his shoulder, but he was smiling.

For a long time, we stood there, staring out at the street, watching the snowflakes drift down. It was strange, being in this place where everything had started. Strange and

good.

When I finally turned to him, he was watching me, his gaze so intense it took my breath away. “You’re quiet tonight,” he murmured, his eyes searching mine.

I shrugged, feeling suddenly self-conscious. “Just...thinking.”

He didn’t push, just waited, his hand warm and steady on my shoulder.

“It’s just,” I began, taking a shaky breath, “sometimes I think about how close I came to losing this. To losing you.” The words came out rough, and I felt something tighten in my chest. “And it scares me. Even now.”

Milo’s expression softened, and he moved closer, so close I could feel his warmth, the steady rhythm of his breathing. “You didn’t lose me,” he said softly. “And you won’t.”

I closed my eyes, letting his words settle. He always knew what to say. He always knew how to make me feel like I belonged, not just here but in my own skin, in this life we’d built together.

When I opened my eyes, he was still watching me, a soft smile on his lips. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling a laugh rise in my chest. “More than okay.”

And I was. I was more than okay.

“Good.” He leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips, and in that moment, everything felt right. It didn’t matter that we had a whole town to win over, that there were nights we’d go to bed tired and worn-out from work. It didn’t matter that we didn’t have everything figured out, that some days would still feel hard. It didn’t

matter that we hadn't figured out where to live since his studio was too small for both of us, and I dreaded to imagine us moving in with my parents. It would come in its own time.

What mattered was here, was now, was the weight of his hand in mine, the warmth of his smile, the quiet promise in his eyes that this was ours. And that was enough.

As we pulled apart, Milo reached up and untangled a strand of lights from my hair, laughing softly. "There," he said, "all set."

"Yeah." I smiled, taking his hand in mine. "All set."

Together, we stood at the window, watching the town come alive under the glow of Christmas lights, the snow settling softly over everything. And for the first time, I didn't feel like I was waiting for something to go wrong. I didn't feel like I was holding my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I was home.

Did you enjoy Mingle All The Way? Follow Hayden Hall on Amazon for more heartfelt love stories and revisit Christmas Falls in No Elfing Way if you haven't read James and Ezra's story.

The End.