

**DAISY M. HARTLEY**

*Dreams by the Fire*

*A Hollyhead Hearts Novella*



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*For those who moved through winter's quiet, hidden in mystery,  
only to find warmth in an unmasked heart.*



There is no greater happiness than  
love, and no sweeter love than one  
that arrives when you least expect it.

—Audrey Hepburn



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## One

### Chapter 1



#### *Sarah*

**O***ctober*

I've always been the kind of girl to look for silver linings. A thunderstorm ruins my day at the beach? It will wash up more sea glass to add to my collection! I'm stuck in traffic? At least my favorite song is on the radio! My boyfriend of over a year breaks up with me because he thinks my dreams are juvenile and impractical? One less person to miss once I uproot my cushy California life and make my dreams a reality in the charming small town of Hollyhead, Massachusetts!

Which is exactly what I did, in case that wasn't obvious.

At the time, it seemed like a great idea to drop everything and open my own dress shop. I even came up with a clever

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name—Frock & Roll—which was even harder than making the decision to move in the first place.

But now, with a grand total of zero customers on my opening day, I'm struggling to look on the bright side. I invested almost every penny from my savings account into buying this little shop and filling it with dresses, not to mention the countless hours I've spent making custom gowns to show off my abilities.

My grandmother taught me how to sew when I was just a little girl, and though my early attempts at anything more than a simple pillow were unimpressive, I eventually began making my own clothes. Over the years, my love of sewing has morphed from a wholesome hobby to a true passion—something that I want to pursue professionally.

Now, I lean against the counter with my head propped up in my hand, silently begging the passing townspeople to enter my shop.

Maybe Christopher was right, and my dream truly is unrealistic. Perhaps I should've listened to my family when they tried to tell me this was a huge mistake.

*No, enough of the doom and gloom. This is my dream, and I'm going to make it happen, even if I have to drag people in here!*

A sharp jingling sound pierces the empty air, startling me. A woman who can't be much older than me enters the shop, accompanied by a crisp October breeze. Her curly black bob bounces as she walks, and her features are sharp but friendly. She's only wearing a light jacket despite the chilly temperature, which has only dropped further since the sun dipped behind a large mass of clouds.

*Are my eyes deceiving me, or do I have my first ever customer?*

"Hi there!" I greet, wincing as my voice comes out as more of a yell than I intend. I round the counter and take a few tentative

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steps towards her, hoping I haven't scared her off. "Welcome to my shop—I'm Sarah."

Despite my awkwardness, she smiles eagerly at me. "Hi, I'm Margot. This shop is just adorable!"

*I like her already.*

"Thank you! Is there something I can help you find today?"

"Yes, actually. I need a dress for the masquerade ball, and I haven't found anything I like so far. I know it's just a few days away, but I was hoping maybe you'd have something."

"Oh, a masquerade ball?" This is the first I've heard of it, but my interest is piqued. "Don't worry, I'm sure we can find something here that will be just perfect for you. What style of dress are you looking for?"

Margot follows me to one of the nearby racks and starts sifting through them. "I'd like something form-fitting with lots of sparkle, and I'd love if it were a dark shade of red or orange to really go with the autumn theme."

"Any preferences on sleeves?"

"I wouldn't mind them, but I'm fine without them too," she shrugs, her eyes trained on a deep emerald gown on one of the mannequins. It's one of my original designs.

"You know, that shade would look great with your skin tone," I offer, gesturing to the dress.

Margot nods slightly, intrigue flashing behind her eyes. "On second thought, I might be open to green as well."

"Noted," I smile. After asking her size, I gather a handful of dresses that match her description and help her to one of my two fitting rooms. While she's changing into the first gown, I pull the emerald one from the mannequin and add that to the queue.

She steps out a moment later wearing a gorgeous silky dress

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the color of a rich pumpkin pie filling. It would be perfect, if not for the fact that the neckline dips a bit lower than most. She steps up on the podium and inspects herself in the floor length mirrors in front of her.

“What do you think?” I ask, though I can already sense the answer by the way she self consciously eyes her chest in the mirror.

“I think this might be showing a little too much skin,” she admits with a chuckle. “I do like the material though, even though there isn’t as much sparkle as I’d like.”

After helping her unzip the orange gown, I grab the red dress I picked out and hand it to her next. “Well, if you want sparkle, try this one!”

Her eyes light up when she sees it, but when she emerges a few minutes later, I can tell something is off.

“Thoughts on this one?” I inquire.

She sighs deeply. “I thought I’d love this one, but I don’t know . . . something about it just isn’t right. I don’t think I want all this sparkle after all.”

“That’s completely okay! We all have ideas of what we want in our heads, but it often takes a few tries to realize what you truly do and don’t like.” I push aside all of the other dresses we plucked from the rack, all of which have varying levels of sparkle, and hand her the dress from the mannequin.

Margot looks a little skeptical but gives me a single nod before taking the dress back into the fitting room. I have a good feeling about this one.

I was right—the rich emerald shade looks gorgeous against her tan skin, and the mermaid silhouette hugs her figure beautifully before flaring out right around her knees. The lace overlay on the bodice gives a layer of depth and illusion

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of intricacy without the sparkle she decided against, and the off-the-shoulder neckline looks like it was custom made for her. A plain belt accentuates the thinnest point of her waist, emphasizing her hourglass figure.

As soon as she catches sight of herself in the mirror, she's positively beaming. She can't take her eyes off the dress as she twirls around, swishing the fabric.

"I'm no expert, but I'm going to guess you like this one," I venture, my grin matching hers.

"It's perfect," she murmurs. "Garrett will drop dead when he sees me."

"Garrett? Is that your boyfriend?"

"Not yet," she says sheepishly, blush creeping onto her face. "But I want him to be. After he sees me in this. . ."

"How could he resist?" I finish for her. "You look stunning."

"Thank you so much," she smiles sweetly. "This is definitely the one."

She reaches around to the side of the dress and finds the price tag, pulling it closer to her face so she can read it. Her reaction is small, but not unnoticeable. Her eyes bulge slightly, and her smile tightens just a hair.

"Is everything okay?" I ask gently. I'm fairly certain I know what she's about to say, but I want to make sure before I assume anything.

"Oh, yeah. It's just—it's a little outside of my budget."

My heart drops for her, and once again, I am reminded of how fortunate I was to grow up in the comfort of my parents' wealth, never worrying about a price tag. That is, until I up and left everything behind.

*What a shame. This dress looks like it was made for her. . .*

A lightbulb goes off in my head. "Wait, did I forget to mark

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the sale price on that one?" I ask, lightly smacking my palm to my forehead as if chiding myself.

Margot perks up a little. "Sale price?"

I walk over and peer at the price tag, pretending to be appalled at my forgetfulness while I'm really trying to do some mental math. "Yeah, everything in the store is forty percent off for our opening day sale! Silly me, I thought I put new stickers on all the tags, but I must have missed this one since it was on the mannequin."

"Oh!" Pure delight has replaced the apprehension that was lurking behind her eyes. "In that case, I'll take it!"

"Perfect! You go ahead and change, and then we'll get it bagged up for you."

Margot is still glowing after she changes back into her own clothes and exits the fitting room with the green gown draped over her arm. I gingerly take it from her and lead her to the counter at the front of the store. "So, tell me more about this masquerade ball," I prompt as I slip a dress bag over the hanger.

"It's sponsored by the Hollyhead High home economics class, and all the proceeds go towards buying new sewing machines and kitchen equipment for the school," she explains as she pulls her wallet from her crossbody purse.

Home economics? Now that's a cause I can surely get behind, and not only because I'm so passionate about sewing. Cooking, budgeting, and home management are valuable tools that I believe all students should learn. It's one of the few courses that teaches practical skills that everyone should have.

Heaven knows I've made use of everything my home economics teacher taught me. Otherwise, I wouldn't be out here on my own.

"That's lovely. I always love a good dance, especially if it

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benefits the community.” I wait as Margot swipes her card, then I hand over the dress and the receipt.

“You should come! It’ll definitely be tons of fun,” she offers with a grin.

I’m about to politely decline, but my brain stops the words before they make it out my mouth.

*When’s the last time I did something entertaining?*

The last few months have been so hectic—consumed by arrangements to move out here and open the store. I would occasionally go out on the town with Christopher when we were together, but I quickly realize I haven’t done anything remotely social since he broke up with me. Honestly, it’s been nice to spend time with myself, but maybe it’s time I have a night of fun and make some friends in my new home.

“You know what? I think I will!”

“Awesome—it’s this Saturday at seven. I’ll see you there!” She gives me a little wave and steps out onto the sidewalk, the front door jingling shut behind her.

My mind races as the excitement of the masquerade ball sinks in. I’ll have to find the perfect dress for me too, of course. Or maybe I should make one. Something elaborate and attention—grabbing and—

*Wait, this Saturday? As in, four days from now?*

My stomach drops. How on earth am I going to make myself a dress so soon while managing the store?

I guess I’d better get to work.

\* \* \*

“Yes, Mom, I made myself a real dinner tonight,” I sigh as I hand-stitch a row of lavender ruffles. After I closed the shop

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for the day, I found an old gown I'd started for myself many months ago and decided it would be perfect for the ball. It's vibrant, grand, and already halfway done, which bodes well for my deadline.

"Good. You know, you could have a home cooked meal every night if you still lived at home," my mom reminds me from the other end of the phone. "Something more nutritious than takeout or instant ramen."

"I know, but I'm perfectly capable of making my own food. Besides, I like cooking."

A long silence stretches between us as I focus on not pricking my finger with the needle and my mom searches for what to say next. She chooses her words carefully. "I still don't understand why you turned down that perfectly good marketing job just to move across the country and struggle to get by."

"Mom, I don't enjoy marketing—this has always been my goal. I just wanted a fresh start." And a little space, but I don't say that part. "Besides, I'm not struggling. I'm just starting out."

"Well, your father and I miss you. So do your sisters."

"I miss you guys too." It's true, even if I can't deny I've been enjoying having my own space.

"And you know who else misses you?" She doesn't pause to let me venture a guess. "Christopher."

"Mom—"

"I ran into his mother, Angela, at the store yesterday, and she told me he is just devastated that you left."

"He broke up with me," I remind her.

His words echo in my head like he spoke them just yesterday, not almost three months ago: *You know I love you, Sarah. But this silly little dream of yours . . . it's not realistic. If you can't be mature enough to appreciate the opportunities in front of you, then*

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*maybe we aren't right for each other after all.*

"Yes, but he seems to be really regretting it."

*Good for him. Maybe he isn't as dumb as I thought.*

My mom continues, "You know what else? I hear his cryptography investments are really paying off."

"Cryptocurrency," I correct.

"Oh, whatever it is. All I know is that he's doing well for himself. *Very well.*"

I reach the end of the ruffle and tie off the thread before trimming off the remainder. "That's great, I'm happy for him. Now, I'm sorry mom, but I really should go to bed. You know, it's a whole three hours later here."

"Alright honey, get some rest. Goodnight, love you."

"I will. Love you too, Mom."

Once we hang up, I do the complete opposite of going to bed—I stay up another four hours, diligently working on my soon-to-be gorgeous gown and wondering if she's right.

*Is this the biggest mistake of my life?*

## Two

### Chapter 2



#### *Rhett*

“Let me give you a hand with that,” Dom calls from behind me.

“Nah, I’ve got it.” I single-handedly hoist another crate of fresh-picked apples onto the bed of the truck. Most of them are about the size of my fist, their skin a dusty shade of red mingling with gold. My mouth waters as I imagine their sweet, crisp, refreshing flavor.

*I’ll eat one later—we have work to do now.*

When I turn, I’m met with Dom’s scowl. “You’re going to hurt yourself—just let me help,” he insists. Even though he’s two years younger than me, he’s already much taller, though his muscles aren’t as developed as mine. He looks lanky compared to my stocky build.

“Rhett, you know I hate to say this, but Dom is right,” Dom’s

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dad, Frank Calloway, chimes in as he and my father carry a crate together.

The aching in my shoulder agrees with them, though I would never admit it. Even so, I am fully capable of carrying crates on my own, and we're losing daylight. We need to get these apples to the barn soon.

I merely grunt in disagreement and trudge over to the last crate waiting to be loaded onto the truck.

"Let the boy go. He can handle it," I hear my dad tell Frank from behind me.

"Ease up, Trevor," Frank replies.

Even though I agree with my dad, I feel an odd pang of frustration in my chest at his words. I *can* handle it, even if I shouldn't have to by myself. But if I'm going to take over the farm with Dom one day, I need to be ready.

Despite the chilly evening air, my body feels warm and slick with sweat. I roll the sleeves of my green and orange flannel up to my elbows and take a deep breath.

I stoop down to pick up the crate, but Dom rushes over before I can get both hands on it. We lock eyes, and part of me takes this as a challenge. As if I need to prove myself by doing this alone.

"Come on, Rhett," Dom murmurs. I notice that his dark brown skin is glistening with sweat too. In this moment, his face looks older—more mature—than it should be at just twenty-two years old.

Maybe it's my fatigued muscles or my tired brain, but I cave. I give him a curt nod and allow him to take hold of one side of the crate. I take the other, and we easily haul it to the truck and set it neatly beside the others.

Dom and I hop up into the bed and situate ourselves as our

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fathers slide into the cab, Frank sitting behind the wheel. He carefully steers the truck to the barn we store most of our produce in, moving slowly over the bumpy terrain so Dom and I don't get tossed out.

I take in the rolling acres of farmland surrounding us. Bordering the fields lies an endless sea of trees, all of them varying shades of yellow, orange, and red. A few remain green, but most of them have taken on their vibrant fall colors.

Once we get to the barn, we quickly unload all the crates—this time, I don't accept any help, and nobody protests my efforts. The air is growing icier by the minute, and I'm so hungry that I can hear my stomach growling angrily at me.

After my father and Frank give their approval, we head towards Dom's house, a beacon of warm light and delicious aromas. We stop on the porch to take off our boots before entering the neat, comfortable space.

Dom's mom, Cynthia, is pulling a large pot roast from the oven while his little sister sets the table in the dining room. Frank greets Cynthia with a peck to the cheek and a bear hug, which she playfully squirms out of, complaining that he smells like an actual bear. After pretending to be hurt, Frank and my father sink into the overstuffed couch in the living room and turn on a hockey game.

"Hey, boys!" Cynthia calls to Dom and me over her shoulder as she moves to stir something in a large pot on the stove.

"Hi, Mom," Dom says at the same time I say, "Hi, Mrs. Calloway." We each sit at one of the stools at the kitchen island.

"Dinner will be ready in ten minutes," she tells us. Then, turning to Dom's little sister, she says, "Jillian, the table looks great. Thank you, honey."

"You're welcome," she grins before hopping up onto the stool

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beside Dom, her thick box braids bouncing as she does. “You look like you just rolled down a hill,” she teases Dom.

He shoots a glare at her and elbows her lightly. “Rude.”

A low chuckle rises in my throat, despite my attempts to hold it back.

Jillian turns to me next. “What are you laughing at? You look more like a leprechaun everyday! For goodness sake, your beard is turning orange.”

This makes Dom howl with laughter. “She’s not wrong!” he agrees once he catches his breath. He reaches towards my face, but I swat his hand away before he can touch the coarse hair covering the bottom half of my face.

“It’s not orange,” I defend.

“It totally is!”

Okay, maybe it looks a *little* coppery. But the thick hair hidden under my ball cap is a light brown with no hint of orange unless the sun hits it just right.

“Whatever, at least I can grow a beard,” I grumble at Dom.

“Ouch.” He dramatically clutches his heart with a faux pained expression.

In all honesty, I don’t mind Jillian and Dom’s teasing. Actually, I really enjoy it. As an only child, they’re both like the younger siblings I never had but always wanted. And Cynthia . . . she basically took me in as a third child after my own mother passed away.

Jillian rolls her eyes and changes the subject. “You’re still taking me to the masquerade ball on Saturday, right Dom?”

“Oh, shoot, is that this weekend?” He lets out a small sigh. “Yeah, I’ll go with you. Guess I’d better find my old suit—hope it fits.”

Cynthia peers at us over her shoulder, an amused glint in her

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eyes. “Rhett, honey, are you going to the ball?”

“No, ma’am,” I reply without hesitation.

Her face falls a fraction. “Oh, why not?”

“It just doesn’t seem like my thing,” I shrug.

“Maybe you should give it a shot,” she encourages.

Dom spins around to fully face me. “Yeah, Rhett, you have to come with us!” he insists. “It’s for a really good cause, and your best friend in the whole world will be there.”

“Yeah, me,” Jillian chimes.

Dom rolls his eyes but doesn’t tear his gaze from me, as if he stares at me long enough, he’ll convince me to go.

“I don’t know . . .”

“Please? I could really use someone to hang out with all night,” Dom adds.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Why are you even going? It sounds like you don’t want to.”

“Well, Jilly really wants to go, and I can’t just send her off by herself. She’s only fifteen—I have to make sure none of those grubby little high-school boys get too close to her.” He shudders at the thought. “And regardless, she can’t drive herself.”

“Just a few more months,” she sighs wistfully.

“It’ll be fun though, especially if you come along too,” Dom assures me.

“Yeah, come with us! Please?” Jillian bats her long, dark eyelashes at me. She widens her eyes and sticks out her bottom lip, making her look even younger.

“Pretty please?” Dom adds, mimicking Jillian, though it doesn’t look nearly as cute when he does it. “Nobody will even know who you are since everyone will have masks on, so you don’t have to be fake-nice to anyone.”

My eyes flicker back and forth between the two as my mind

## Chapter 2

works. It *does* sound like it might be amusing, and I don't want Dom to be all by himself while he supervises Jillian, but I can't give in this easily. Besides, there's still one very important question on my mind.

"I'm not sure. . . will there be food?"

"Oh, yeah!" Jillian nods eagerly. "It's being catered by Bistro to Go!" One of my favorite local restaurants—there's no way I can resist.

"Fine," I grunt, "I'll go. But only because I'm hungry for apple cider roast chicken."

Jillian throws her arms around me in a quick hug of excitement, and Dom gives my shoulder a hearty slap, whispering, "Thanks, man. You're a lifesaver."

Yikes, what did I just sign myself up for?

\* \* \*

Pain. I've signed myself up for pain.

Dom and I are sitting on his living room couch as comfortably as we can in our slightly-too-tight suits, waiting for Jillian to finish getting ready. I forgot how restrictive fancy clothes are—much more so than my usual jeans and a flannel. I feel borderline claustrophobic, making my skin feel too warm despite the cool autumn breeze that's floating in through the window.

I self-consciously run my hand through my unruly hair, which generally stays hidden under a ball cap. Tonight, however, I managed to make it look somewhat presentable with the help of some gel.

Beside me, Dom impatiently checks his watch. He cups his hands around his mouth and turns toward the stairs. "If you

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don't hurry up, we're leaving without you!" he calls to Jillian.

"One more minute! Jeez, could you be any more impatient?" she yells.

One minute turns into ten, but eventually, she makes her grand descent down the stairs in a bright fuchsia gown covered in sparkles, complete with a matching fuchsia masquerade mask.

"How do I look?" she asks.

"Great," I reply as Dom offers her a shrug.

"Ugh, boys." With a huff, she storms out to the truck.

"What does she expect me to say? She's my little sister," Dom defends as we follow her outside and slide into Dom's truck.

We let Jillian have control of the radio tonight, and she takes the opportunity to blare obnoxious pop music sung by another one of those cookie-cutter boy bands. It's no Rush or Deep Purple, that's for sure.

Thankfully, it doesn't take long to get to the recreation hall, which is hosting the masquerade ball. We find a parking spot, don our masks, and hustle inside as the icy night air seeps through our clothes. The line to get in moves quickly, and once the three of us pay the entry fee, we're in.

It's been over six years since my senior prom, but those same awkward feelings are rearing up again tonight as I shuffle into the event space filled with masked townspeople in elaborate dresses and fancy suits.

My stomach churns as I follow Dom and Jillian to an empty little table towards the back of the room. Jillian spots a few of her friends across the dance floor and immediately takes off in their direction. Dom calls after her, but she just waves him off.

I expected most of the people here to be young—closer to Jillian's age—but I'm surprised to see a mix of townspeople

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ranging from four years old to eighty-four. And it seems the majority of folks here are actually my age or older.

I sink into one of the chairs at our table and scan the room, taking in everyone's opulent outfits. To be perfectly honest, I wouldn't mind staying on the outskirts all night.

But, of course, Dom can't let me just sit in peace.

"Come on, let's get a drink." He hauls me up from my seat and tugs me in the direction of the bar.

I'm pleasantly surprised to see they're serving alcohol, but the line is frustratingly long. We make it even longer as we tack ourselves onto the end.

A couple of women join the line behind us, chattering so loudly that I can't help but overhear their conversation. The giddiness in their voices is so intense in contrast to the anxiety and discomfort twisting in my gut, that it sets me on edge.

"Do you see Garrett anywhere?" one of them asks. Her voice is high-pitched, sharp, and slightly nasal.

"I don't know," the other one replies with a soft laugh. Her voice is much more soothing than the first, but still too cheery to be tolerable right now. "I have no idea what he looks like, and everyone has masks on anyway."

"Oh, duh! He's super tall—like, ridiculously tall—and he said he'll be wearing a dark gray suit," the first one describes.

I try to stifle my sigh as the two keep yapping. Odds are, I know one or both of them, and I don't want to be rude.

*Then again, would they even recognize me with this mask on?*

I'm tempted to turn around and ask them if they ever stop talking long enough to catch their breath when Dom and I are suddenly next in line.

I'm about to order a beer when Dom interrupts me, instead ordering us each a glass of champagne, earning him a strange

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look from me. We flash the bartender our IDs and wait as he pours the nearly clear, bubbly drink.

“Champagne? Since when do either of us drink champagne?” I demand in a harsh whisper.

He raises his shoulder in a shrug, and one corner of his mouth lifts in a lopsided grin. “It’s a fancy event, we might as well act the part.”

The bartender hands me my glass first, so I take a small sip while I wait for Dom to get his drink. Okay, as much as I don’t want to admit it, the champagne is really good. It’s light and refreshing with a slight citrus flavor.

“Oh my gosh, there he is!” one of the women standing behind me shrieks, startling me out of my brief moment of bliss.

I roll my eyes and motion for Dom to follow me back to our table, turning around to face the two women.

The first woman is tall and athletically built, wearing a rich green dress. Half of her short hair is pinned back, and she’s eagerly peering at someone across the room.

The other woman steals the air right out of my lungs as my eyes lock onto hers.

She looks ethereal. Her dress is the most gorgeous shade of purple, and it hugs her full, curvy figure down to her waist before it flares out into a big cloud of ruffles. Her light brown curls frame her round face, and her mask is so delicate yet intricate—like someone stuck two butterfly wings over her eyes, which are a deep shade of brown.

*Like dirt.*

No, not like dirt! Well, *exactly* like dirt—the kind you have to dig deep for, full of nutrients and life—but I don’t think she’d appreciate that comparison. She might not understand that it is a compliment.

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In fact, she's so beautiful that my brain short circuits, but my feet keep moving. My body collides with hers, making me spill champagne all over her in the process.

## Three

### Chapter 3



#### *Sarah*

**T**he coldness of the champagne seeps through my dress, sending a chill down my spine as I stand in shock.  
*My dress.*

The one I've spent the last few nights staying up way too late to finish in time for the ball. Now, it's dripping with the sweet, sticky liquid.

I could burst into tears right now.

I force myself to take a few deep breaths and assess the situation before I freak out. Champagne is almost clear, so I doubt it will noticeably stain—it's not like it's red wine or barbecue sauce. I've gotten much worse stains out of fabric before.

I tear my gaze from my dress and look up at the man responsible. His expression is one of pure horror, which makes

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me feel a little bit better. The man standing beside him looks equally appalled.

“I’m so sorry,” he stammers.

My mouth hangs open as I’m not sure what to say. Thankfully, Margot takes me by the elbow and leads me to our table. I sit, and she grabs a paper napkin and begins lightly dabbing the spots of champagne, but it doesn’t do a great job of soaking up the liquid.

“Ugh, this isn’t working. Let me go find something else,” she says before disappearing into the crowd.

To my surprise, the champagne-spiller has followed us to the table. He appears in front of me and pulls a red handkerchief out of his pocket.

“Oh. Um, thank you,” I murmur, taking the piece of fabric and dabbing at the champagne.

I expect him to leave, but he doesn’t. He pulls out the seat beside mine and turns it so it’s facing me before taking a seat. His eyes, which I now notice are bright blue, are swimming with concern.

“I’m so sorry,” he says again.

I want to be mad at him, I really do. But the sincerity in his voice catches me off guard, tugging at my heartstrings. The people-pleaser in me wants to do everything in my power to keep him from feeling guilty.

I let out a small sigh as I finish cleaning up my dress. “It’s okay, accidents happen. I’ll just treat the stain when I get home.”

“If it helps, it’s not noticeable.”

I give him a small smile. “Yeah, that kind of does help.”

He glances down at his shoes. “I hope I haven’t ruined your night. Or your dress. You—it’s really beautiful by the way.”

Heat creeps up my neck, settling in my cheeks. Thank

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goodness for my mask hiding my glowing blush.

*Is he complimenting me or the dress? Either way, it's a win.*

I study him for a moment, taking note of his bronze beard and the slight red undertone of his brown hair. His compact frame looks sturdy, with broad shoulders and thick arms. His rosy cheeks just barely peek out from behind his dark blue mask and his facial hair—I wonder if he's blushing or if his face always carries that pink tint.

His navy jacket and slacks look nice on him, but it doesn't seem to *suit* him well—pun intended. He's handsome, but I get the feeling his usual attire is less James Bond and more Paul Bunyan. There's something almost magnetic about him.

"Thank you," I finally respond. "One of the girls in the high school's home economics class told me she wants to make one just like it. I hope she's able to with a nice sewing machine after tonight."

"With such good turnout, they should be able to afford lots of new supplies. It's really nice to see the community support its students beyond sports and academics." It's like he pulled the thoughts right from my brain.

"Every class deserves enough funding, even if they don't teach conventional material, like math or science," I agree.

"Yeah, it's so important for kids to learn all kinds of practical skills, like cooking."

"And sewing," I chime in.

"Financial literacy."

"Child development,"

"Maintaining their homes . . ." He trails off, his eyes focused on something in the distance. I turn and see his friend from the bar giving him an enthusiastic thumbs-up. I have to bite back my smirk.

### Chapter 3

“Besides, it’s fun,” I add, bringing his attention back to me. He gives me a funny look, making me giggle.

“Not so much the housekeeping, but cooking and sewing,” I elaborate.

He nods in understanding, and an awkward silence begins to settle over us. I turn my gaze towards the crowd on the dance floor as they jump around to an upbeat pop tune. I tap my toes along with the beat until the song comes to an end.

The first few notes of the next song ring out, and I recognize the tune at once. “I love this song,” I say softly, more to myself than to the man sitting across from me. I realize I don’t even know his name, but it feels wrong to ask. Like it’ll ruin the mystery of the evening.

“You like Aerosmith?”

“I do. ‘I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing’ is my favorite song of theirs,” I reply, still not looking at him. “It’s a classic for a reason.”

“It’s mine too.” One, two, three heartbeats pass. “Would you—uh—do you want to dance with me?”

Every cell in my body lights up as nervousness and excitement wrestle in my stomach. I haven’t danced with a man in a long time—come to think of it, I don’t think I ever danced with Christopher. And here I am, considering dancing with a stranger.

No, not considering. I’m agreeing.

I think I’ve found the silver lining to this dress-soiling, champagne-spilling mess: The man in front of me.

“I’d love to.”

Looking surprised, he abruptly stands to his feet and extends his hand out to me. I take it, relishing the warmth that spreads from his fingers to mine, then throughout my whole body as I

## *Dreams by the Fire*

follow him to the dance floor.

Suddenly, I'm sixteen again and this is my first school dance. I have no idea what I'm doing, but it seems we're in the same boat. We both hesitate as we try to remember how we're supposed to hold onto each other.

Finally, he places both hands firmly on my waist, just above my hips, and steps closer, pulling me against him. His movements are commanding, yet gentle.

I suck in a breath of anticipation before tentatively draping my arms over his shoulders and drawing closer. I leave just a few inches of space between our bodies. His shoulders feel solid beneath my skin, like they're pure muscle, dense muscle.

His large hands hold me with a gentle pressure, anchoring me. I become aware of the fact that only a few layers of fabric separate my skin from his—they do little to prevent waves of warmth from coursing through me at his touch.

I feel lightheaded from being so close to him. Have I forgotten to breathe? I inhale deeply, and my lungs are filled with the woody, spiced scent of him. Is that his cologne? Aftershave? Whatever it is, I could bathe in it.

We sway gently as the song goes on, neither of us knowing what to say, but both of us unable to look away from each other. As the seconds pass, our bodies creep closer and closer until we're pressed against one another.

My heart is as light as a feather in my chest, beating along to the rhythm of one of my favorite songs. All my worries—the stains on my dress, the lingering heartbreak Christopher left me with, the fear of failing to achieve my dreams—melt away in his embrace.

The bliss is harshly interrupted by a phone ringing, and it takes me a moment to realize it's coming from my mystery

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man's pocket. Nobody else around us seems to notice.

He removes one hand to retrieve it, keeping the other on my waist, and frowns when he reads the screen. Fully releasing me, he steps back to answer the call, the crease in his forehead growing as he listens.

"Hold on, one second," he tells the person on the phone, his face falling completely as he looks at me. "I'm so sorry—I—it's an emergency. I have to. . ."

"Leave," I finish with a sad smile as my heart deflates.

"You have no idea how sorry I am."

All I can do is nod.

For a moment, as he's hurrying away with the phone once again pressed to the side of his face, I believe him. In fact, I feel bad for him—something must be really wrong.

But then, as I stand alone in the middle of the dance floor, I catch a glimpse of his friend from the bar. He's on the phone too.

All the feelings I thought I felt for the man come crashing down. My stomach drops to my feet as I watch his friend and come to the awful realization that there was no emergency after all. His friend called him with a fake emergency to give him an excuse to get away from me.

He felt nothing for me. He wanted to leave.

*So much for silver linings.*

## Four

# Chapter 4



## *Rhett*

**S**tupid cows.

Stupid cows with their stupid free will and desire to roam. They're constantly finding ways to get out of their pasture, and it's always at the most inconvenient times.

Like right now, when I'm trying to dance with an impossibly gorgeous woman.

When my father calls me, I'm tempted to tell him to deal with it on his own. Or to ask if Dom's help is enough. But the urgency in my father's voice makes me panic, so I'm forced to put a pause on one of the best nights I've had in a long time and book it back to the farm.

Dom and I both burst into the cold night air at the same time, though I notice Jillian isn't behind him. He's still on the phone with his dad. I bounce on my toes as I wait for him to hang up,

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sucking in an icy breath and watching a cloud of steam float from my mouth as I exhale. It's not unbearably cold, but it's clear that winter is coming soon.

I dread it.

It makes taking care of the animals more of a challenge, and it's not a particularly productive time of year for us. With the ice, snow, and freezing temperatures, how can it be? Plus, the backroads surrounding our farm can get pretty dangerous when snowstorms hit.

"I'll just come back and get Jillian later," Dom says into the phone. "I don't want to make her leave for something she can't help with."

I hear some muffled gibberish from the other line, and after brief goodbyes, Dom and I race back to his truck. We don't say a word until we're well on our way back to the farm.

"So, that girl you were dancing with . . ." Dom starts.

I'm staring straight ahead, though I can hear the smirk in his voice. I feel my face flush, but I try to keep my tone even and nonchalant. "What about her?"

"It looked like you two were really hitting it off."

"Yeah, we were," I murmur dreamily, but then my face morphs into a grimace. "Until the cows got loose."

"What did you tell her?"

I mentally run through the few words I spit out before leaving. "Not much," I realize with horror. "I just said I was sorry but there was an emergency. She didn't really say anything back."

Dom snorts. "Real smooth."

"About as smooth as spilling my drink on her in the first place." I manage a dry chuckle. "She was really sweet about it though. I was expecting a meltdown, but she got over it quickly."

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“That’s the kind of woman you need. One who will be patient and understanding when you stick your foot in your mouth or do something boneheaded.”

I shoot him a glare. “I didn’t do anything boneheaded.”

“What do you call leaving her on the dance floor all by herself with barely an explanation?”

I pause for a beat, guilt blooming in my chest. “That’s a fair point.”

We drive in silence for a few minutes, my embarrassment growing the further we get from the ball. If I could go back and redo my exit, I’d explain the situation to her. I’d tell her how much I loved dancing with her, and how she turned my night from an uncomfortable pain in my rear end to the most fun I’ve had in quite some time.

The pure bliss I felt with her in my arms . . . I can’t even begin to explain how magical that moment was for me. For a few minutes, I forgot about everything. About my father’s high expectations, about my growing list of responsibilities with running the farm, about the pressure I put on myself to handle everything.

“Oh no,” I groan, coming to an awful realization.

“What’s wrong?”

I almost don’t want to admit my own stupidity out loud, but there’s no hiding it. “I never asked her name,” I say sheepishly. “I didn’t tell her mine either. And I barely know anything about her.”

I brace myself for Dom to tease me, to wonder how I could possibly forget such important details, but he doesn’t. He’s silent for a moment as the gears in his brain turn. “The night is young,” he finally says. “If we’re able to get the cows back to their pasture quickly, we can go back to the ball with plenty of

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time left. I have to go back to get Jillian either way.”

“Dom, I don’t say this often, so don’t get a big head about it—”

“I would never.”

“—but you’re a genius!”

“I know,” he says smugly, earning him a smack to the shoulder.

“What did I just say?” I sigh, but I don’t mind. Dom can be as arrogant as he wants after coming up with that perfect solution.

We reach the farm and run to where our fathers are starting to drive the cows into a loose cluster. We help them lead the few remaining stragglers into the group before we slowly herd them in the direction of the pasture.

The cows are painstakingly slow, making me want to rip my hair out as I impatiently corral them. But as if they can sense my demeanor, they grow stubborn. My father and Frank can sense my hurry too. I force myself to take a breath and be patient.

My fingers and toes are numb by the time we get the cows contained, but I don’t care. I need to get back to the ball.

“Can you two fix the fence? We need to get Jillian,” Dom asks our dads. I’m thankful he’s using his sister as our excuse to leave rather than telling them about my mystery woman. They nod in agreement, and Dom and I are speeding towards the ball as quickly as we left it.

The cows took longer than I hoped, but we should have enough time. The ball doesn’t end until eleven, and it’s not even ten thirty. I tell myself she’ll be there. I’ll have another chance to talk to her and make up for leaving her.

My leg bounces anxiously as we drive into town. Each time we hit a red light or get stuck behind a slow driver, my heart deflates more and more.

I’m relieved when we pull up to the recreation hall and see

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that the parking lot is still mostly full.

This definitely bodes well for me.

I try to unbuckle my seatbelt and get so caught up in my rush to get out of the car, that I end up wrestling with it for nearly a full minute. It's almost like it's trying to keep me trapped in here. Dom does little to help, too busy laughing at my struggle.

I finally break free and stumble down from the truck, nearly losing my footing as I land. There's a group of eight or nine high school kids crowded around the entrance, and I plow my way through them as politely as I can.

"Sorry," I hear Dom tell them from behind me. "It's an emergency."

*It's an emergency.*

Those are the exact words I told the woman. I can only hope she believes me and understands. And that she's somewhere in the still-dense crowd.

I'm relieved to see the room still so full, but that also poses a challenge as I try desperately to spot her. Her petite stature will make it even more difficult, but not many girls have dresses the same color as hers.

Unsure where to begin, I push my way over to the tables in the back and look at every single one. First, I'm just looking for her. But then, I remember her friend and start searching for her as well.

Even if I don't find my mystery dance partner, at least her friend could give me her name.

I go to every single table and come up empty. She isn't by the bar either, or in any of the groups huddled along the wall. The only place I haven't checked: the dance floor, which is still terribly crowded.

I really don't want to submerge myself in the mass of sweaty,

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jumping bodies—most of whom are teenagers—but I don't see any other choice. If she's in there and I don't find her, I'll always regret it. I grit my teeth and plunge into the crowd.

I'm absorbed instantly, and get thoroughly tossed around for half of a song before I regain my footing. Then, I search with purpose, looking at every single person on the entire dance floor.

She's nowhere to be found.

I finally make my way back to the entrance, where Dom lingers. "Any luck?" he asks as I approach him.

I shake my head grimly.

"Well, the ball is set to wrap up in ten minutes. Let's just hang out here and watch as everyone leaves."

His idea lifts my spirits just enough to keep me from throwing in the towel. "You're full of good ideas tonight."

"I usually am—you should listen to me more."

"Not gonna happen," I chuckle.

We settle into our spots against the wall, paying close attention as the crowd filters outside little by little, until the DJ has to tell the remaining people to leave. Jillian, who looks like she had the time of her life despite appearing exhausted, stands beside us while we wait.

We stay there, even after all the attendees have gone, and it's just the volunteers. "In case she was in the bathroom. Or in case she's helping clean up," I say to Dom. He nods in response, but his hopeless expression mirrors how I feel as I struggle to come to terms with the truth.

She's gone.

## Five

### Chapter 5



#### *Sarah*

**J***anuary*

Christopher's name and picture appear on my phone screen for the third time in the last ten minutes. I send his call to voicemail, just like I did with all the others. Even if I wanted to talk to him—which I don't—I quite frankly do not have time. Not for him, and not for the mystery masquerade man, even though I find my mind wandering in his direction more often than I'd like to admit.

Over the past few months, Frock & Roll went from concerningly slow to overwhelmingly busy. I was just barely able to carve out enough time to fly home and see my family for the holidays, and since arriving back in Hollyhead a couple of weeks ago, I've been working nonstop.

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The Hollyhead High winter formal is this weekend, and even though most of the dresses I've sold have been off-the-rack, I've had a few custom gowns to work on as well.

The one I'm stitching now is a breathtaking shade of periwinkle, with lace as beautiful and delicate as actual snowflakes covering the bodice and extending through the sleeves. It's the last custom dress on my to-do list, and I'm almost done. I'm attaching the sleeves now, which takes a great deal of focus and—

*Ring, ring, ring!*

Ugh.

I sigh and pause mid-stitch, easing my foot off the sewing machine's pedal. For the sake of making the obnoxious sound end, I answer the phone.

"Hi, Christopher."

"Sarah, finally! I've been trying to get a hold of you. Didn't you get my calls?"

"Yes, I've just been very busy," I snip. "You know, running my business and all."

"Oh, yeah, I know all about that," he commiserates. "I'm sure you've heard about my recent endeavors with crypto . . . it's even more exhausting than your normal nine-to-five, especially—"

"Christopher, why did you call me?"

He clears his throat. "I miss you, Sare Bear. The holidays weren't the same without you on my arm. I didn't realize how lonely it would be—watching Christmas movies alone, shopping for my family alone, baking cookies alone. And you should've heard what I had to endure from my mother."

*Thank God I didn't have to.*

I steel myself for what I'm about to say. "Well, I'm sorry you

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had to deal with that, but you were the one who ended things between us,” I reply firmly.

“I know, and I regret it every day.”

He sounds genuinely remorseful, and for a moment, my guard drops. Maybe I’m being harsh on him. After all, we were together for over a year, and I thought we were happy, until he broke it off. And he has a lot of really great qualities.

None come to mind right now, but I’m sure they exist.

His plea interrupts my thoughts. “Come back to California.”

*Excuse me?*

Guard = back up.

“I’m not moving back. I love Hollyhead, my business is here and it’s doing great.”

There’s a long pause while I wait for him to reply with a million reasons why I should move back home, but he doesn’t. “What if I come to visit you in Hollyhead? Just for a few days—maybe a week. To see if I might want to . . . move there.” It sounds like it physically pains him to say it.

My heart stills in my chest.

“Really?”

“Yes, if it means *you’ll* consider taking me back.”

Our time apart led me to the realization that, throughout our relationship, Christopher never put in much effort to show his love for me. Hardly any romantic gestures—big or small. No thoughtful gifts or attempts to truly do something *for me*. Absolutely zero conversations to understand *why* my dream is so important to me.

It’s also led me to realize that I really appreciate that kind of effort—it’s what makes me feel loved. And even though I’ve explained that to Christopher, it’s as if he never heard me.

But taking a trip out to Hollyhead? Considering moving

## Chapter 5

here? That feels like a massive romantic gesture, which is part of the reason why I'm so surprised.

*He's manipulating you. He'll never actually move here.*

The tiny voice in my head is probably right, but my naive heart insists he means it, and something deep inside me misses him.

Even if he's skeptical, maybe I could convince him if I could just get him out here and show him how wonderful this town is. How wonderful our life here could be. And I'd never forgive myself for turning him away if he really means it.

*I need to know.*

"Okay. Sure, why not?" I reply.

"Great! How about I fly out tomorrow?"

I nearly choke. "Tomorrow? No. This week is too busy for me. Can you wait until this weekend is over?" I've been looking forward to having a break once the winter formal is out of the way, but I suppose hosting Christopher is worth missing out on some self-care and solo relaxation.

He sighs like my request is a huge inconvenience, but doesn't argue. "Of course. I'll be there first thing Monday morning," he promises.

"Sounds good."

I make a silent promise not to get ahead of myself. I'll be careful with my heart. I won't let the excitement of seeing him again sweep me off my feet or make me jump back into a relationship with him.

"Oh, one more thing before I go," he says.

"What is it?"

"I love you."

My whole body freezes as pure, ice-cold panic courses through my veins. There's no way I can say it back, right?

## *Dreams by the Fire*

I mean, I did love him at one time. I suppose I still do. But we're not together, so it just feels weird.

"Sarah?" he prompts after I've been quiet for too long.

I've never hung up faster in my life.

\* \* \*

Despite Christopher's promise that he'd arrive Monday morning, he texts me on Sunday to tell me his plane will land Tuesday night.

I try not to let the disappointment get to me, but really? He isn't even here yet and he's already letting me down.

"Wow, he's off to a great start," Margot scoffed when I filled her in. She's not a fan of Christopher, to say the least, but she's trying to be a supportive friend—we've gotten very close since the masquerade ball—as I give him a chance.

The sun has already set when I leave my little, overpriced apartment to drive to the airport on Tuesday evening. His plane isn't scheduled to land for another three hours, but the airport is well over an hour away, and it's starting to snow.

The weather forecaster has called for some pretty heavy snowfall, but when I checked again this morning, he said the worst of it would not come through until after midnight. I am relieved that we will make it back to Hollyhead before it gets bad.

*At least, that's what I thought.*

I'm not even fifteen minutes away from my apartment when the light flurries turn into fat flakes, falling faster and faster.

"Come on, Gus," I coax my old, beat-up sedan as the road in front of me becomes completely covered in snow. Gus was a tank in his younger days, but now, he is definitely not built to

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drive through heavy snow.

For a few heart-stopping seconds, I feel the car slide. My headlights just barely illuminate a mailbox along the side of the road. Normally, it wouldn't be of concern, but it's directly in my path as Gus slides closer and closer. My breath stalls in my lungs as I brace for impact.

I regain traction in the nick of time and swerve away from the mailbox.

*Okay, that was just a little scare. I won't let it happen again.*

My hands grip the steering wheel tighter, my knuckles turning white. I crank up the speed on the windshield wipers, but the snow is falling faster than they can wipe it away.

My heart goes from still to rapidly pounding in my chest as Gus begins to fishtail. I do my best to course correct, but the car continues sliding.

*I'm losing control.*

Thank goodness I'm the only vehicle out on the road right now—I can't see the yellow lines, but I'm almost certain I'm taking up both lanes. If there was any oncoming traffic, I would've caused a crash.

I feel a shift below me and realize we've gone off the road entirely. Tall, dark trees that seem to stretch upward for miles loom in front of me, and at the rate Gus is sliding, we're going to collide with them. Hard.

I try to steer the wheel.

Nothing.

I slam on the brakes.

Nothing.

Everything feels like it's happening in slow motion, the trees coming closer and closer until . . .

I close my eyes and prepare for the crash.

*Dreams by the Fire*

It doesn't come. Just a soft bump—so subtle I almost don't notice it.

It takes me a few seconds to realize the car is no longer moving. When I open my eyes, I see nothing but the trees in front of me. The snow, combined with the slight incline of the ground and the resistance from the lush grass barely peeking out above the white blanket, must've slowed our momentum just enough.

I force myself to take a few deep breaths and realize I'm safe. I still can't wrap my head around the last several minutes. My whole body feels numb, and not from the cold.

I look down at my hands and realize they're shaking. My mind races a mile a minute, but I can't process a single thought. I reach forward to turn up the heat, but only a weak stream of cool air flows out of the vents. I quickly shut the air off.

*Dang it, I knew I should've gotten the heater core fixed when the mechanic told me about it.*

But that was when the shop was still struggling, and I just haven't had time since then.

With a sigh, I tuck my hands under my legs and lean back in my seat. Snow piles up around me at an alarming rate. If I don't figure out what to do soon, Gus and I are going to be buried.

I fish my phone out of my purse and try to call Margot. Her new boyfriend, Garrett, has a truck—surely, he could pick me up. But when I press the little telephone icon, I'm met with a monotone beeping.

No signal.

I'm really struggling to find the silver lining this time.

## Six

# Chapter 6



### *Rhett*

**I**t's officially been one whole decade since my mom passed away. Today marks the ten-year anniversary. I can't help but wonder if that's why my dad has been avoiding me.

He stayed in the garage all morning and afternoon, only coming into the house for the occasional snack.

In fact, he's said exactly five words to me all day. "Gonna fix your grandma's stove," he muttered, not meeting my eyes. And with that, he took off for my maternal grandmother's house. That was at two o'clock, and it's been over four hours.

Of course, it's not unlike him to help my grandma. Even before my mom passed, it seemed he was always fixing something for her. But over the last ten years, he's been extra attentive.

With him gone and the Calloways on a winter vacation, I'm all alone at the farm. Maybe that's why I'm a little spooked

## *Dreams by the Fire*

when I notice an eerie light shining through the trees by my house.

I shake it off and tell myself it'll go away, but twenty minutes later, it's still there. I want to ignore it, but a small voice in the back of my mind urges me to investigate.

*What if it's someone in trouble?*

I suit up in my thick winter pants, jacket, and boots—grumbling the entire time—and grab a flashlight. When I open my front door, I'm hit in the face with a blast of frigid air, and some snow piled up against the door tumbles in. I kick it back onto the porch and begin my long trek towards the light.

Normally, this distance would take me just a minute or two to cross, but with several inches of snow already covering the ground, my speed is seriously hindered.

I finally creep close enough to see that the source of the light is a car pressed tight against a handful of pine trees, its headlights casting odd shadows through the needles. Snow is piling up all around it, but the windshield wipers move every now and then to clear the glass. Through it, I see a woman who appears to be crying. Her shoulders are shaking—though I suppose she might just be shivering—and her face is covered by her hands.

When I get a little closer, I holler in her direction, “Hey, are you okay?” and wave one of my arms.

Slowly, she pries her hands from her face and lifts her eyes. When she sees me, they widen in horror. Her car, which was softly purring before, now roars to life as she tries to hit the gas. I jump back out of the way as her tires spin furiously, but her car doesn't budge.

She tries again, accelerating gently this time, and her car cooperates. It lurches forward, but instead of turning toward the road, it continues to slide further into the field. Further

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towards me.

“Hey, stop!” I yell. Her car doesn’t look damaged, but at this rate, it easily could be. It slides towards a deceptively deep ditch, though not very quickly. I jump in front of the car, dig my heels in, and put all my weight into pressing against it to stop it from toppling front-first into the snowy ditch.

*She probably thinks I’m crazy.*

I hear her muffled shriek from inside the car as it pushes me along with it, though I can feel its momentum slowing.

*Yup, she definitely does.*

“Hit the brakes very slowly!” I shout, hoping she can hear me. It’s nearly stopped now, but we’re just a few feet from the edge of the ditch, and I’d rather not end the night with her car on top of me.

She must have heard, because the car comes to a standstill just as my right heel finds the edge of the ditch. Satisfied with the woman’s safety and thoroughly exhausted, I take a few labored steps to the right of the car and flop into the snow, letting out a long sigh.

Her car quiets as she kills the engine, leaving me submerged in the still silence of the night. Snow continues to fall, seeming to pick up speed by the minute. We shouldn’t stay out here long, but the walk back to my house feels impossible right now. I close my eyes and let the large flakes land on my face, melting on my warm skin.

A snuffle cuts through the quiet, followed by a delicate, feminine voice.

“Thank you.”

I look up and take in the woman standing in front of me. She appears to be about my age, maybe a little younger. She’s short and curvy, with dark eyes and soft features. Her light brown

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curls catch falling snowflakes, and her fair skin is tinged pink from the cold. If I weren't distracted by my fingers and toes going numb, I might notice how pretty she is.

One thing I do notice: her tennis shoes, which are barely visible under the snow. They're probably soaked through and freezing cold already.

"You're welcome." I scramble to my feet and glance back at her car. "You shouldn't have been driving that thing. Not on these roads."

She grimaces. "I didn't expect it to start snowing this heavy so early.

"You can't drive home in this." I say matter-of-factly. "Your car will have to stay here until the storm lets up. Come on, let's head up to my house—I can drive you home in my truck after you warm up."

I turn and start walking, but I quickly realize she isn't following me.

"How do I know you aren't luring me to my death?" she asks.

"Excuse me?"

"Frankly, I don't know you. A strange man just happens to find me out in the middle of nowhere and invites me back to his house. . . sounds like the plot of a horror movie."

I reach out to shake her hand. "My name is Rhett. There, I'm not a stranger anymore."

She levels me with an unamused glare. "I'm Sarah. But you telling me your name doesn't mean you aren't a serial killer. Rhett might not even be your real name."

"Fine, stay out here." I resume my journey with a huff, ignoring how nice my name sounds falling from her plump lips.

For a few seconds, the only sound is that of my heavy boots

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stomping through the snow.

“Wait!” she calls.

I turn around once again and stare at her expectantly.

“I, um, can’t feel my feet,” she says sheepishly. “I can’t walk all that way in these shoes.”

Something in her tone thaws my heart. I trudge back over to her and scoop her up in my arms without warning. She lets out a little yelp but doesn’t protest. Her body radiates a heat that permeates through my thick jacket. It warms my chest and spreads through my body, fighting away the chill.

*Something about her feels . . . familiar.*

“What were you doing out in this storm anyway?”

“I was supposed to pick up my ex-boyfriend from the airport—he’s staying in town for the week.”

“Your ex?”

“Yeah, it’s complicated,” she sighs.

I don’t press for details. “Your car doesn’t look like it’s cut out for this kind of weather,” I observe.

“Hey, don’t disrespect Gus! He did his best out there.”

*Gus? What kind of weirdo names their car?*

Suddenly, her phone rings from deep inside her pocket. She squirms around to fish it out, looking relieved. She stares at it for a few seconds as it rings, almost like she’s frozen.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?” I ask, amused by the oddity of the situation—especially since I’m still carrying her through the woods.

“Oh, right—yeah. I’m just shocked I have a signal out here.” She clears her throat and presses the green button. “Christopher?”

I’m close enough to hear his voice with surprising clarity. “Sarah, you won’t believe this! My flight is delayed,” he says in

*Dreams by the Fire*

lieu of a greeting. “Apparently there’s some big storm going through.”

“Yeah, I know. I was—”

“They’re saying it’ll be six hours at least,” he interrupts with a dramatic sigh. “I’m waiting in line at the customer service station now. I mean, honestly, do they expect us to just sit around here and wait?”

“Aren’t you still in California? Can’t you just go home?”

“No, I have a layover in Philadelphia,” he snaps. “Don’t you remember me telling you that?”

“Sorry, the flight you were *originally* supposed to book was a non-stop flight,” she bites back with a false sweetness. “You know, the one that was scheduled to arrive *yesterday morning*. Like you promised.”

“At least you aren’t stuck somewhere completely foreign.”

“Actually—”

“Hold on, I’m next in line. I’ll text you or something after I figure this out.” And with that, he hangs up.

She doesn’t say anything the rest of the way.

When we finally reach my house, I set her down on the front porch and grab a few chunks of firewood from the large stack before letting us both inside. We kick off our shoes and relax as the warmth of the living room envelops us. I shed my heavy-duty jacket and pants, leaving me in jeans and a hoodie. Sarah takes off her puffy jacket to reveal a flowery blouse that hugs her waist nicely.

The fire I started earlier is barely burning, so I toss a few more pieces of wood on it. Sarah hurries over to the growing flame, stretching her hands towards it. I disappear into my bedroom for a minute and come back with a thick pair of wool socks. Her brows knit together as I hand them to her.

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“Your feet are probably wet and freezing.” I pull an armchair out of the corner of the room and place it in front of the fire, motioning for her to sit. “I’m sure you’re fond of all ten toes.”

“Who said I only have ten?” she teases.

I chuckle and pull up a chair for myself. “Regardless, I doubt you want to lose any.”

“You’d be right,” she smiles as she takes the socks. “And, by the way, I don’t even know how to begin to thank you for everything.”

The fire crackles loudly, the logs adjusting as they burn. I return her smile as I kick my feet out towards the warmth of the fire and lean my head back in the cushiony chair, closing my eyes. If I get too comfortable here, I might just fall asleep.

“So, your boyfriend sounds like a real gem,” I remark.

“Ex-boyfriend. And he’s not normally like that—he’s just stressed,” she defends half-heartedly.

“I take it he was supposed to arrive earlier than tonight.”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “He promised me Monday morning, but he had some excuse about having too much work to do. I closed my shop for the whole week to host him, and I feel like he doesn’t even respect my time.”

“Your shop?”

“I own Frock & Roll—the dress shop in town.”

*Ahh, so that’s why she seemed familiar. I’ve probably seen her around town a time or two.*

“It doesn’t sound like he respects you at all.” It comes out harsher than I intend. Sarah winces, her little nose scrunching up.

“He does.” But she doesn’t sound so sure. “I just wish he would have flown out yesterday as planned—we could’ve avoided this whole mess.”

## *Dreams by the Fire*

We're quiet for a long time. She must be either too tired to speak or too busy thinking. For me, it's both at once.

I feel a small hand on my shoulder, shaking me. I pry my eyes open to see Sarah's face right in front of mine.

*Shoot, I must've fallen asleep.*

"How long was I out," I mumble.

"I'm not sure. I, uh, sort of dozed off myself." Her cheeks are tinged pink with embarrassment. "I'd check my phone, but it's dead."

I check the watch on my wrist. "Nearly eleven. Well, let's see about getting you home." With a groan, I push myself up to my feet and draw the blinds of the window looking out over the porch. It's so dark that I can't see anything, though I can vaguely make out snow still falling fast.

I reach to my left and flick the light switch, illuminating the porch. I'm alarmed to see how much snow has accumulated over the last couple of hours. There must be at least seven or eight inches, and it doesn't show signs of letting up.

"I don't think we're leaving anytime soon." I turn to look at her, startled to see she's already right beside me. How did I not hear her walk over?

"Maybe it isn't as bad as it looks."

"No, I think it's probably worse. I know you won't want to do this—on account of me being a potential serial killer and all—but it looks like you'll have to stay the night."

She lets out a dry laugh. "I was afraid you were gonna say that."

"At least we still have power. Usually, the electricity goes out in a storm this bad."

As if on cue, the lights go out, and I hear the HVAC system turn off, leaving us with the fire as our only source of heat and

## Chapter 6

light.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I murmur incredulously.

Sarah shuffles nervously beside me, though it’s hard to see her in the dark. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to snuggle in front of the fire for warmth.”

*Suddenly, I’m not sure what to think.*

## Seven

### Chapter 7



#### *Sarah*

**W**hen I wake up, it takes me a few minutes to remember I'm not in my bed in my apartment—or slumped over on my sewing table at the shop, which happens more often than I'd like to admit.

I'm in the rustic guest bedroom of a complete stranger. Scratch that. Not a complete stranger, since I know his name—Rhett. There was something about him that felt so familiar, like he never was a stranger to begin with.

The memory of him scooping me up so effortlessly in his arms and holding me close as he carried me to his house sends a chill of excitement down my spine, despite the five blankets on top of me. His big, thick hands grasping me so tightly, leaving me grateful for my poor choice of footwear. It's almost enough to make me forget about Christopher.

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*Almost.*

I fish around for the charger Rhett gave me and plug it into my phone, feeling both disappointed and slightly relieved when nothing happens. I guess the power hasn't come back on yet.

Poor Christopher. . . he's probably been trying to reach me nonstop. I bet he's worried sick since he hasn't been able to get ahold of me.

Concern turns to frustration bubbling in my gut as I replay my last conversation with him. He was so fixated on his own problems that he didn't even try to listen to mine. If he would've, maybe he would understand how absolutely terrifying last night was for me.

He doesn't even know I nearly crashed my car and ended up stranded with a stranger in the middle of the countryside.

*If he did, would he care?*

Of course he would care. I tell myself I'm not actually upset with Christopher, just with all of my ruined plans, but I'm not very convincing.

*If he would've stuck to what he originally told me . . .*

I cut off the thought and haul myself out of bed, my stomach rumbling. I pause in front of the mirror on the dresser and take a moment to assess myself.

My hair is a frizzy, tangled mess, and my eyes are still puffy from sleeping. A pair of Rhett's pajamas—green and black flannel—hangs loosely on me, and I'm still wearing his socks. The clothes smell strongly of his laundry detergent—fresh and clean with an underlying hint of spice. It's comforting on every level.

After a quick detour to freshen up, I pad out to the kitchen, noticing the house is quiet, aside from a muffled thumping every twenty or thirty seconds, but the kitchen is empty. The

## *Dreams by the Fire*

sun is fully risen at this point, so I'd expect Rhett to be awake by now.

I peer out the window, my jaw dropping when I see how much snow we've gotten overnight. There must be at least eighteen inches! Another pang of disappointment ripples through me.

There's no way I'm getting out of here anytime soon. And even if Christopher manages to get to Hollyhead on his own, I'll be stuck here.

I see movement just out of my line of sight and press my face to the glass to get a better look. It seems Rhett cleared a circle out around a large stump, and he has a pile of logs stacked nearby. I realize the source of the occasional thumping is him as he picks up a log, sets it on the stump, and chops it right down the middle. He then splits those pieces in half again before getting a new log.

There's something mesmerizing—almost hypnotic—about his motions. I watch him place the log, set his stance, lift his ax, and bring it down hard on the wood, sending the pieces flying over and over again. I've never seen something so masculine, so physical, so primal—he's like a real-life lumberjack.

He's wearing his heavy outerwear from last night, but underneath that, I can almost picture his muscles straining and rippling with each movement. Witnessing his pure, raw strength makes my heart skip more than a few beats.

*He's doing this to keep us warm—to keep me warm.*

The thought catches me off guard, helping some of the residual frustration gripping my heart melt away.

Eventually, the intense growling of my stomach forces me to tear my gaze away from him and focus on breakfast. I don't know why I'm surprised to see the fridge is empty since there's no electricity keeping it cool, but I have no clue where all the

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food could be.

I hear a door open and close somewhere behind me, followed by heavy trudging.

“Hey!” I call out over my shoulder. “Where’s all the food?”

His voice is closer than I expected. “In the cellar. There’s a room attached to the basement that stays cold during the winter—cold enough to keep food from spoiling.”

“Of course,” I mumble. “It seems everyone except me was prepared for this storm.”

He shrugs. “It’s just something we always have to be ready for out here, especially on a big farm tucked out of the way. I imagine you don’t get many blizzards out in California.”

“No, not where I lived.” I turn toward what I assume is the basement door, but I hesitate as I reach for the handle. “How’d you know I’m from California?”

“Your phone call with Cameron—”

“Christopher.”

“Whatever. The boyfriend.” I open my mouth to correct him, he does it himself. “Sorry, ex-boyfriend. Who is for some reason visiting you for a week.”

Before I can correct myself, he walks off in the direction of the bathroom. A minute or two later, I hear the shower turn on. Whatever frustration I felt earlier is now multiplied, though it wars with a little flame of satisfaction that he remembered such a small detail from my call with Christopher. He actually listened to me and remembered what I said.

I find the cellar easily, shivering as I enter the cramped space. I grab a few ingredients as fast as I can and hurry back to the warmth of the kitchen.

I quickly dice up an onion and some mushrooms and cook them with some butter in a pan over the gas stove—after

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struggling to light the pilot flame with a match. The sweet, earthy aroma of the veggies cooking makes my mouth water. I season them and crack four eggs, all various pastel colors, into the pan.

Once the eggs are almost cooked, I spread a generous amount of cheddar cheese over the top and divide the omelet into two portions. Then, since the toaster is out of the question, I butter a few slices of bread and quickly toast them in the pan.

Rhett emerges from his bedroom a moment later, his bushy brows drawn together with curiosity. “You made breakfast?” His surprise almost comes across as an accusation.

“Yeah, you split wood,” I reply, propping my hands up on my hips.

“I don’t want us to freeze to death.”

“And I don’t want us to starve.”

“Fair enough.”

I motion for him to sit at the table across from me, and we fall into a comfortable silence as we devour our breakfast.

“So, I’m going to hazard a guess and say the snow is too bad for you to drive me home.”

He snorts. “Bad is an understatement. The whole area will be shut down for days, I bet. We haven’t had a storm this intense since . . . well, before I was born, I suppose.”

“Great. Of all the weeks to get a record snowstorm, it just had to be right now.” I push the few remaining morsels around on my plate to avoid looking at Rhett, my annoyance building in my core. “I was supposed to spend today showing Christopher around town. I had the whole week planned out for the two of us, and everything is ruined. Closing my shop, making dinner reservations, rearranging my whole schedule—all for nothing.”

I sense Rhett stiffening slightly in his seat. “Why would you

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go to all that trouble if you two aren't together?"

The boldness of his question makes me pause as I consider how much to tell him. "He's going to consider moving out here in the hopes that I'll want to get back together with him. But I doubt he'll want to after this whole mess."

*Do I even want him to?*

"I see. You're trying to work things out."

"Yes, something like that. But I have no way of contacting him, no way of knowing if his flight ever came in. He could be waiting for me at the airport, or wandering around town trying to find me."

After a moment of quiet contemplation, Rhett says gruffly. "Well, maybe this is some sort of sign."

He gets up to clean our dishes without another word, leaving me sitting at the table. I watch him wash my plate for me and set it carefully on a drying rack.

*Maybe it is.*

\* \* \*

An hour later, Rhett and I brave the snow and make a path towards the chicken coop. I'm wearing one of his fleecelined flannels under an extra snowsuit and boots. We're both carrying large shovels and clearing the way as we go.

When Rhett mentioned all the chores he had to do around the farm, I jumped at the chance to help him after all he has done for me. Hopefully, keeping busy will take my mind off this crummy situation with Christopher.

I have to admit, though, there's something magical about being out in the snow. I never saw snow in person until moving to Hollyhead, and the few snowfalls we've had since October

## *Dreams by the Fire*

are nothing compared to this blizzard. It takes all my willpower not to dive into every big, fluffy snowdrift I come across.

A layer of white clings to every surface, even the smallest tree branch. It's like someone frosted the whole farm with vanilla buttercream and tossed on some glitter.

I almost don't realize when we reach the chicken coop—the snow has almost buried it, and even the parts of it that do peek out are nearly invisible due to the light beige paint. At this point, my whole body is sweating and freezing at the same time, but I put all my energy into helping Rhett clear the snow away from the coop.

I hear the occasional muffled cluck of a chicken as we work, but when he opens the door to check on them, it's as if every chicken has something to say. Rhett ducks down to enter the cramped space, and I follow suit.

"Quiet down, ladies. I know you missed me," Rhett jokes as he takes note of their food and water levels.

I roll my eyes and bite back a grin as I watch. There are probably a dozen or so chickens in here, all varying in color from pure white to heavily speckled to vibrant orange-brown. I notice a couple of roosters with their large, bright red—what are those called?

I gently elbow Rhett. "Those red things on their heads and hanging from their chins. . . what are those?"

"The ones on their heads are called combs," he explains patiently. "And the ones on their chins are called wattles."

"Oh, wattles." I'd never heard that word before.

"See how the hens have them too, but they're much more pronounced on the males."

He's right, the roosters' combs and wattles are big and bulbous. I tiptoe over to one of them and gently reach my

## Chapter 7

gloved hand towards it. It eyes me curiously for a moment before jutting its neck out and pecking my finger.

“Ow!” I scream, but it’s out of surprise rather than pain. I didn’t feel a thing through these thick, waterproof gloves.

Rhett chuckles beside me. “That’s Blaze.” His name is fitting—while his neck is a deep shade of rust—not unlike Rhett’s beard—the rest of him is a blend of a dark blue-green and black. “He’s not the friendliest, but he’s all bark and no bite.”

“Kinda like you.”

He shoots me a playful glare, and then, to prove his point, Rhett bends down and grabs Blaze with both hands. The rooster squawks in protest, but other than that, he doesn’t seem to mind it. I reach out and softly stroke its feathers for a moment.

Rhett sets Blaze on the ground and motions an invitation for me to try it. I shrug and creep up behind the rooster.

*How hard can it be?*

Blaze dodges me in my first attempt to catch him, leaving me stumbling around the small space. He dodges a few more times before I manage to get my hands on him. I carefully scoop him up by his body, but he begins wildly flapping his wings in protest, so I drop him immediately.

It takes a few more tries—and endless ridicule from Rhett—before I’m able to hold Blaze in a position that’s comfortable for both of us.

“Finally!” My triumphant yell startles some of the hens, but I don’t care. I’m feeling victorious for the first time in a while.

Rhett grins and moves closer to pet Blaze—maybe a little too close. The narrow structure of the coop forces him to stand with his chest pressed to my shoulder. My breath hitches, and I look up at him in surprise, but his eyes stay locked on Blaze.

## *Dreams by the Fire*

Despite all the layers of clothes we are wearing, I swear I can feel his heart thumping. It speeds up as he seems to realize how close we are. He lets out a long exhale, his warm breath skimming my cheek.

His eyes finally wander upward, landing somewhere near my lips and slowly working their way up until his gaze meets mine. His eyes are a vibrant cornflower blue with darker streaks near the outer edge. Despite the coolness of the color, there's a warmth oozing out of them, lighting my insides on fire.

*I should make a dress that color—it would be stunning.*

I feel my body drift closer, leaning against his. His nearness feels familiar and comforting in an unexplainable way. He's so solid, so sturdy—I'm reminded of his strength as he carried me from my car to his house, all so that my feet wouldn't go numb from the snow. I wonder what would happen if—

Blaze's ear-piercing crow rattles me out of my trance. He begins flapping his wings again, and I let him go.

"He gets a little confused, being stuck inside and all," Rhett explains, averting his eyes and stepping out of the coop. "We should grab a basket to gather their eggs and get them some food and water."

*I'd like a drink too, after that.*

## Eight

### Chapter 8



#### *Rhett*

**A**fter my mom passed away, I had to learn how to cook. Nothing fancy, of course, but simple recipes to keep me and my dad alive. One of my favorites is a white bean and Italian sausage soup—it's flavorful, hearty, and comforting on a cold winter's day full of hard work and numb fingers, like today.

It also keeps my mind busy, so I don't dwell on all of my shortcomings, like I'm doing now.

I push the thoughts to the back burner and throw some sausage and chopped up bacon into my cast iron Dutch oven. The rich aroma quickly overtakes the kitchen as they sizzle.

Once the fat has rendered, I scoop up the meat and set it off to the side for now so I can sauté the onion and garlic. The sweetness of the cooking onion mixes with the pungent, savory

## *Dreams by the Fire*

aroma of the garlic and makes my stomach rumble.

After that's softened, I mix in the beans, chicken broth, and seasonings, and I use my immersion blender to turn the soup thick and creamy, leaving some whole beans for texture.

It takes an incredible amount of willpower not to snack on the perfectly cooked bits of sausage and bacon before adding them back to the soup, along with a few chopped carrots and a couple of handfuls of spinach.

I'm so focused on making this soup perfect that I don't realize Sarah is watching me until she clears her throat from right beside me. She smells fresh and flowery, like an early-morning meadow still coated in dew. She smells almost as intoxicating as my soup.

"You're cooking dinner." It's not a question, but she sounds uncertain, almost wary.

"Yes."

"For both of us? Including me?"

"Of course." I finally turn away from the stove to look at her, and the sight makes my train of thought stop in its tracks. Her hair is wrapped in a light blue towel on top of her head, the pale color complimenting her warm, cocoa eyes.

She's wearing one of my old t-shirts, which has no business looking so good on her, and a pair of my sweatpants hugs her hips and thighs. The sight of her standing in my kitchen, fresh out of the shower, looking so comfortable in my clothes . . . it tangles up my insides.

I can't feel this way about her. She has a boyfriend—well, ex-boyfriend—but they're probably going to get back together.

"It smells amazing," she gushes.

*Yeah, you do too.*

"It's done—we can eat now," I say gruffly. I get us each a big

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bowl and fill them with soup, grabbing some crackers out of the cupboard as we make our way to the small dining room table.

We eat in silence for a while, my thoughts taking over once again. Sarah eyes me curiously over her bowl, almost as if she wants to say something.

“It’s really good,” she comments with a smile.

I grunt in response.

“What’s your deal?” She doesn’t sound angry, but her tone is curious.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re being all grumpy and mopey and just generally no fun. What’s on your mind?” she presses. “And you can’t say it’s nothing—that’s clearly not true.”

I let out a long breath, contemplating whether or not it’s worth talking about. “Two eggs froze. I should’ve gotten to them earlier—first thing this morning. I should’ve been quicker.” The rest of the day’s chores went well despite the thick layer of snow covering everything, but I didn’t get to all of the eggs in time to keep them from freezing.

“We still got the other nine eggs,” she counters gently. “And all of the chickens and cows are safe. Isn’t that worth being happy about?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts.” She reaches across the table and rests her hand carefully on top of mine. It looks so small, so dainty in comparison. Her touch sends tingles shimmying up my arm, making it hard to focus on her words. “You did a good job today. Especially since you didn’t have any other farmers helping you, and you had to deal with me tagging along.”

“But—”

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Her warning glare makes the words freeze in my mouth.

"You did a good job," she repeats. Her words make some of the heaviness in my chest dissipate. I'm not sure what's more comforting—the soup or her reassurance.

*She already has a man in her life. Don't get too attached.*

"Thanks," I murmur so quietly that it's a wonder she hears me.

"You know, that snow seemed just perfect for making a snowman, don't you think?"

"I guess so," I shrug. "I wouldn't know."

Her brows draw together. "Do you mean to tell me that you've never made a snowman? Seriously?"

"Oh, and you have? You grew up in California."

"I'll have you know that I *did* make a snowman last month. Remember the first snow of the season?"

A chuckle bursts out of my mouth. "With only a couple of inches of snow? It must've been some puny snowman."

She gasps and clutches her heart as if I've horribly offended her. "Samson was not puny! He may have been a little on the small side, but you should've seen him."

"I'm sure there wasn't much to see," I joke.

"Whatever. You wanna talk smack? You're on. You. Me. Snowman. Tomorrow." She declares it as if I have no say in the matter, and I'm starting to think I don't.

"Deal," I grin.

We eat the rest of the meal quietly, and when we're done, Sarah helps me with the few dishes we've accumulated. She washes as I dry and put them away. The sun is almost set, and the only light in the room, aside from the fading daylight, is from the fireplace. The dancing flames cast a warm glow on everything, including her.

## Chapter 8

It makes me almost thankful for the lack of electricity, though I'm sure she wishes she could use her phone to call Christopher. Even in my head, his name drips with pretentiousness. My phone died earlier today, but at least I have a backup power bank I can plug it into. Sarah's phone is different from mine, so the battery wouldn't be compatible with hers.

I pause in the middle of drying the ladle as an idea occurs to me.

"I think I might know how you can charge your phone."

"Really? That would be—"

I take off before she can finish her sentence, sliding into my boots and slipping on my coat before hurrying along the path from my house to Calloway's house. Thank goodness I cleared the path earlier, otherwise my jeans would be caked with snow.

The fast-approaching night creates a stillness on the farm, making my loud, crunching footsteps feel like an interruption.

I clamber up the front porch and easily locate the spare key hidden inside of the porcelain cow. When I fling open the door, I'm surprised at how cold and dark the house is. I'm so used to it overflowing with warmth and light.

I try to flick on the lights, only to remember the lack of electricity, which is why I'm here in the first place.

*Mental facepalm.*

Not my finest moment, though I can't say I'm thinking straight. I seem to have trouble doing that when it comes to Sarah. My mind flashes back to our moment in the chicken coop—her sweet, wide eyes gazing up at me like an invitation. To what, I'm not sure.

*But I so desperately wanted to take it.*

*Why didn't I take it?*

I scale the stairs and make a mental note to apologize to Jillian

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for what I'm about to do. I throw open her door, snickering at the startlingly large number of boy band posters defacing her walls.

I ignore the way their lifeless eyes bore into me, as if asking why I'm intruding, and focus on the task at hand. It doesn't take long for me to find her power bank stashed in the top drawer of her desk.

I'm suddenly grateful she didn't have the forethought to take it with her on vacation—otherwise, I'd *really* look like a fool.

Triumphant, I basically sprint back to my house, the icy air seeping through my clothes. I tell myself that's why I'm hurrying so much—to get out of the cold.

Sarah is right where I left her in the kitchen, a deep crease of confusion between her eyebrows, the corners of her perfect lips turned down into a frown. Then, realization begins to set in.

This is my moment. She'll look at me like I'm her hero, she'll be so grateful.

And she does. She is. But I hardly give her a second to show it. I shed my outerwear and cross the space in several long strides only to set the power bank on the counter in front of her and promptly retreat to my room.

I flop onto my bed, chest heaving as I try to catch my breath. The air feels too hot, too heavy. Like every time I try to breathe it in, it manages to escape my grasp.

*I should really run more often. I'm out of shape.*

But I know my pounding heart is from more than just a brief jog.

The room spins around me for a few moments before slowly coming into focus. My head begins clearing.

I just ran the whole way to Dom's house, ransacked his sister's

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room for her power bank, and ran back just so Sarah could use her phone to talk to Christopher. It seems I can't stop doing things for her.

*What is wrong with me?*

## Nine

### Chapter 9



#### *Sarah*

**M**y phone is finally charged, thanks to Rhett. He's . . . confusing, but so sweet that he might give me a toothache. My heart warms at the memory of him braving the storm to go find me a power bank—yet another sweet gesture to add to the growing list. Even if he's not great at expressing himself, I know he's doing it out of kindness.

But now that my phone isn't dead and I'm able to talk to Christopher, I find myself hesitating. I expected to have a dozen calls from him and even more messages, but there have only been three, and in all of them, he's only focused on himself. They make me wish my phone was still dead. Once again, my expectations for him have fallen flat.

**Christopher:** Can you believe I have to stay at the airport all

## Chapter 9

night? Ugh, this is miserable.

**Christopher:** They finally announced we'll be getting vouchers to stay at a hotel nearby. I can't believe this is happening to me!

**Christopher:** Do you even care what I'm going through right now?

Margot, however, has been blowing up my phone. Her texts and voicemails ooze concern, and I realize how fortunate I am to have a friend like her. I purposely ignore all of Christopher's messages and call Margot.

She answers on the first ring. "Sarah? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," I assure her.

"Thank goodness." I hear her tone shift from panicked to relieved.

"I'm sorry I haven't responded—it's kind of a long story."

"Well, I've got nowhere to be. Tell me!"

So, I do. I tell her all about my near-crash, Rhett coming to my rescue, Christopher showing no remorse for causing all of this and letting me down—all of it.

"I honestly don't even know how to respond to Christopher. Should I even bother telling him what's been going on here? Should I figure out a way to get him here or try to reschedule for another week?" I tell her about how disappointed I am in Christopher, and how pleasantly surprised I am with Rhett. The way he takes care of me is unlike anything I've ever experienced with Christopher, even if Rhett sees me as nothing more than a temporary roommate.

Even though I know Margot is biased in her opinion of Christopher, she fully hears me out before giving me her opinion. "Sarah, honey, I think that man has wasted enough of

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your time already, don't you?"

Her words cause a heaviness that I didn't realize I was carrying to lift off of me. "You think I should just let him go?"

"Honestly, yeah. You've seemed so happy over the last few months without him in the picture, and now that he wants back in, all that's done is cause stress and pain for you. And the worst part is that he either doesn't realize or just doesn't care."

"You're right," I mutter, more to myself than to her.

"Maybe you should go back to enjoying the life that you're building instead of letting some goofball from your past get in the way."

Her passionate use of the word "goofball" makes me chuckle. She fills my head with more and more reassurance and support as we chat, and she fills me in on her time being snowed in, which includes lots of binge-reading and video chatting with Graham.

We talk until Margot is barely able to stay awake, and we promise to talk the next day before hanging up.

Feeling confident and empowered after my conversation with Margot, I type out a quick text to Christopher and hit send before I can think about it.

**Sarah:** *Save yourself the trouble and fly back to California. Your invitation to visit is officially revoked.*

\* \* \*

Rhett was right—the snowman I built last month was pretty wimpy. But with all this snow to work with, I'm ready to prove myself.

I should be tuckered out from this morning's round of farm

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chores, but I feel invigorated as Rhett and I each begin rolling a ball of snow near the house. He's much faster than I am, and in no time, his snowball is half his height. Meanwhile, mine is barely up to my knees.

"I thought you'd never made a snowman before, but you seem to know what you're doing!" I have to raise my voice, so he hears me over the slight wind whistling through the trees.

I take a second to pause and watch him work. He's pushing the huge snowball around like it's nothing, like he's not even trying that hard. In contrast, I'm over here sweating and heaving.

His grin overtakes his face as he looks back at me. "I haven't, but we might as well go big or go home!" he hollers back.

"And how big, exactly, do you plan on making this thing?"

His grin widens, but he doesn't answer. He just keeps rolling and rolling and rolling, until the snowball almost reaches his shoulder. I continue to roll mine until it's as high as my hips, and Rhett has to take over to make it another six inches taller while I start on the third snowball. I'm seriously doubting our ability to stack it on top of his *and* add the head.

At some point while I'm rolling the last snowball, Rhett disappears. When he comes back a few minutes later, he's driving a big green tractor with a front loader attachment. I can't help but laugh at the boyish smirk plastered on his face as he drives it up to where our massive snowballs sit.

"You gonna help me or not?" he calls.

I get to my feet and help him push the second-largest snowball onto the front loader, trying hard not to damage it. Once it's in place, he lifts it up and carefully drives forward until the edge of the front loader hovers above the largest snowball. Then, he slowly tilts it until the middle ball slides off the metal and

## *Dreams by the Fire*

settles on top of the bottom ball.

I help stabilize the structure and scoop up some snow to fill in any dents before helping Rhett load up the top snowball to repeat the process.

We stand back and gaze up at our masterpiece, both of us beaming in pride. “We did a pretty great job,” he says, reaching his hand up to give me a high-five.

“You say that like we’re done!”

“Aren’t we?”

“No!” I playfully smack his shoulder. “He can’t be naked.”

“Right, silly me,” he deadpans.

I roll my eyes and follow him back to the house to look for some accessories. A half hour later, our snowman is complete with two arms (of very different lengths) with gloves on the ends, a table runner for a scarf, coasters for its eyes, the traditional carrot nose, an assortment of buttons for the mouth, and a stainless-steel pot for a hat.

At this point, my hands and feet are growing numb from the cold, and snow has found its way inside of my jacket somehow, but I don’t even care. We’ve just made the most perfect snowman ever.

“Now we just have to name him,” I declare.

“Is Frosty too predictable?”

I give him an unamused glare. “Do you even have to ask? It has to be something unique. Something classy and sophisticated.”

We’re quiet for a moment as we contemplate. “How about Bernard?”

“Yes, that’s perfect! Bernard it is.”

“Oh no, do his eyes look crooked to you?” Rhett asks with a worried expression.

## Chapter 9

I take a few steps closer and climb up on the tractor to get a better look. “No, I think they look normal.”

Instead of a response, I feel something soft collide with my back, shattering on contact. I turn around and see Rhett wearing a mischievous look as he lobbs another snowball at me. This one hits my thigh, leaving a splattering of flakes on the dark snow pants I borrowed from Rhett.

“Oh, it is so on!” I shriek. I jump down behind the tractor, using it as cover while I build up my arsenal. Rhett launches snowballs my way, most of them sailing over my head or smashing into the tractor, though a few reach their intended target—me.

When I peek my head out to find Rhett, I see he’s in the middle of assembling a makeshift snow fort. I carefully toss one of my snowballs his way, watching it fly high in the air and begin its slow descent, gaining speed until . . .

“Ah! What the heck?”

Bullseye.

My snowball hits him right in the face. The white flakes stand out clearly against the dark bronze of his beard. I scramble behind the tractor and melt into a puddle of giggles.

The most intense and entertaining snowball fight ensues, with plenty of casualties on both sides. I’m pretty sure I dislocate my shoulder from throwing so hard, and Rhett takes a tumble more than once, but it’s so worth it. By the end, my face is sore from laughing and smiling so much. I honestly can’t remember the last time I had this much fun.

And even though I’m certain I have some nasty messages from Christopher waiting for me, I honestly don’t care.

## Ten

### Chapter 10



#### *Rhett*

**W**hen we finally return to the house, it's almost time for dinner, but Sarah insists I let her cook with me this time.

There's just one problem: Sarah is taking much longer to get cleaned up than me, so I find myself waiting around for her. Not that I mind, but I'd prefer to do something more productive with my time. There are a million things I should be doing right now.

I have an unread message from my dad, asking how things are going at the farm. He's still stuck at my grandmother's house, which I'm thankful for. It's like Sarah and I are in this perfect little snow globe, separate from the rest of the world, and I'd like to keep it that way.

As I'm texting my dad back, I hear an odd sound coming from

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Sarah's room—a sound I haven't heard in years.

Crying.

I tiptoe to her closed door and press my ear against it to be sure. Yup, she's definitely crying.

*Probably because she's stuck here with me instead of gallivanting around town with her boyfriend. I bet she wishes she could leave.*

I feel almost cruel, like I'm trapping her here, but I have to remind myself that's not the case. She and I are both stuck here due to forces outside of our control.

Still, it puts a sour taste in my mouth.

When the crying doesn't stop, I wonder if I should go inside and comfort her. I'm not sure if I could handle hearing her sob over how much she misses Christopher, but I'd try if it would help.

*She won't want that. She doesn't want me.*

I hear movement from her room and hurry back to my seat. When she appears a few minutes later, I pretend to be oblivious. I pretend not to notice her red, puffy eyes and the blankness of her expression.

Is it my imagination, or does she perk up just a little when she sees me?

She claps her hands together once. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving! Let's get cooking."

"Sure thing, chef. What are we making?"

"How does lasagna sound?"

"Amazing."

Her mouth breaks into a slow smile, but she doesn't say anything.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Nothing. It's just that you sorta bear some resemblance to Garfield, and you like lasagna, so . . ."

## *Dreams by the Fire*

“Woah, hold on. How do I look like Garfield?”

She giggles and reaches out to touch my beard. I freeze, as if any sudden movements will scare her away.

“You’re. . . fuzzy. You’ve got all this hair, and it’s a little orange. You have whiskers. And your gut sticks out a little, like his.” She pokes at my stomach playfully, making me smile. I’m not ashamed of my husky build, and I know she isn’t pointing it out to be rude. “You’re mischievous and a little sarcastic—you probably hate Mondays too.”

“Nope, I love them,” I say just to be contrary.

I feel a little flame of victory as she laughs. “I don’t believe you. But enough talking, let’s start cooking.”

“Wait, how are we supposed to make lasagna if we can’t use the oven?”

“Don’t worry, I have an idea for that,” she assures me.

We gather the ingredients, and she instructs me to brown the ground meat in a pan on the stove. Meanwhile, she puts a large pot of water on to boil and mixes some seasonings and Parmesan cheese. She also chops an onion, and though it makes her cry for a different reason, it tugs on my heartstrings as I remember what I heard earlier.

Once the meat is cooked, she stands beside me to add the onions and some garlic, her shoulder grazing mine just a little as she pushes the ingredients off the cutting board. I’m so tempted to lean closer, but I don’t. Once again, I freeze as she gracefully maneuvers around me, taking the wooden spoon right out of my hand to stir the mixture.

She boils the large, flat noodles while I add pasta sauce to the meat mixture and bring it to a simmer. It smells so good; I could get a spoon and eat it right out of the pan. When I try, Sarah smacks my hand away with an incredulous look.

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“Were you raised in a barn?” she asks dramatically.

“Basically, yeah,” I smirk.

“Well, you’ll just have to keep your animalistic tendencies under control until we’re done,” she scolds.

I begrudgingly oblige and help her layer the dish. I scoop a ladle or two full of sauce into the large skillet, and she adds the cooked noodles and the cheese mixture. As a final touch, we sprinkle more cheese over the top, along with a little basil.

“My grandmother never did it this way,” Sarah mumbles as she covers the skillet and sets it on the stove. “But I think it’ll work well enough if we cook it on the stove for a few minutes.”

“Your grandmother? Is this her recipe?”

Sarah nods and smiles fondly. “Yeah, she would make this for me and my sisters all the time when we were little. She was the best. She gave me the recipe a few years before she died.”

“Grandmas always have the best recipes. Mine on my mom’s side would make chicken and biscuits from scratch after every harvest. She’s a really good cook.”

“Doesn’t she make it anymore?”

“No, she hasn’t visited the farm much since my mom died. And she has a hard time getting around lately. My dad is actually with her now—he went out to fix something at her place.” I don’t mention the ten-year anniversary of my mom’s death as his motivator for leaving me alone.

“Oh.” She’s silent for a moment as we both avert our gazes to watch the skillet. “I’m sorry about your mom.”

“It’s okay.” It’s not, but what else would I even say in response? That I miss her every day? That I’ve had a hole in my heart ever since we lost her? Something about Sarah makes me feel like I could though. Which is crazy—I barely know the woman.

“My mom thinks it was a mistake for me to move here,” Sarah

## *Dreams by the Fire*

says softly, seemingly more to herself than to me.

“Why *did* you move out here?”

She leans against the kitchen counter, facing me but still not meeting my eyes. “I’ve always wanted my own dress shop. To help girls find gorgeous dresses that make them feel beautiful, and to make custom ones too. I love sewing—it was another thing my grandmother was passionate about and passed on to me.”

“That’s really awesome. But still, why Hollyhead?”

“Partially because I wanted to live somewhere with all four seasons. I looked at so many properties online, but when I found the one in town, I felt so drawn to it. I know it’s far from home, but I just needed to have a fresh start and prove I can reach my dreams on my own. I’m the youngest of four sisters, so I was always babied, and I needed my own space. Besides, my parents have . . . different goals for me.”

“Goals like getting a conventional office job?”

“With my marketing degree—that I only got because they wanted me to. And goals like marrying Christopher and living close to them forever.”

The mention of Christopher makes me stiffen, but I try not to let it show. She doesn’t seem to be against that idea, but she doesn’t sound happy about it either. But if her parents want it to happen, he wants it to happen, and she has put so much effort into his visit, then it seems inevitable.

She seems as eager to change the subject as I am. “You know, it was actually really nice not having my phone—being forced to disconnect from the internet and connect with the real world. But I did miss listening to music.”

“I have a million CDs—you could’ve played any of them.”

She snorts. “Yeah, right. I doubt we have the same taste in

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music. The fact that you even have CDs says enough—you probably like old jazz.”

“Take a look and see for yourself. You might find something you like.” I shrug and point in the direction of my shelves of CDs and the portable CD player tucked into one corner of the living room.

She skeptically inspects my collection, her eyes narrow as she reads until they pop wide open. “You have Rush’s entire discography?”

“Yeah, you like Rush?”

“Are you kidding? I *love* Rush! My dad is a huge fan of rock from the 70s and 80s—hence the name of my shop, Frock & Roll—so I grew up listening to all kinds of old rock bands.”

“Same here, except my mom was into rock, not my dad.”

She pulls the CD of their debut album off the shelf. “Not my mom—she hates rock. I would blare this album when I was a teen, and she would get so annoyed.”

We’re quiet for a moment as we reminisce about our mothers in different ways. “We could play it- it’s battery-powered after all,” I offer.

Sarah eagerly takes the CD from its case and inserts it into the player. She skips to “Working Man,” the last song on the album. “This is one of my favorites,” she grins.

The opening chords fill the quiet space around us, instantly stirring up excitement in my chest. I love this song too—I know every word, but I don’t plan on singing in front of her. On the other hand, it’s clear that Sarah has no shame. She grabs a nearby remote and holds it like a microphone as she begins belting out the words.

She dances around the living room too, almost as if she forgot I’m here. But when it’s time for the first guitar solo, she points

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at me.

I hesitate for just a second, but the glimmer in her eyes and the flush in her cheeks is irresistible. I play the meanest air guitar the world has ever seen.

We go back and forth for the rest of the song—Sarah singing while I take the guitar solos, and both of us dancing around the room. For all seven minutes and six seconds.

As the final note fades, we both collapse side-by-side onto the couch, our chests heaving in unison as a content silence settles over us. Her shoulder is lightly pressed to mine as we catch our breath, and the satisfaction in my chest grows as she tentatively leans further into me.

My pulse speeds faster and faster as she rests her head on the top of my shoulder, and we half-sit half-lay together. Her skin is so warm pressed to mine, like she's on fire and it's spreading over to me. The sensation is completely nerve-wracking, but it also feels right. Like we've done this a hundred times before, and we'll do it a thousand more.

"You know what that song makes me crave?" she half-whispers.

We both quote the song in unison. "An ice-cold beer."

"I couldn't agree more," I add, but I make no attempt to move from this position. I want to stay just like this for as long as I can. My heart hasn't felt so full in over a decade, and I'm not ready to let this go.

## Eleven

### Chapter 11



#### *Sarah*

I take a long sip from my beer—which is, in fact, ice cold. We just finished eating our makeshift lasagna, and Rhett is sprawled out on the couch with his third beer half-full and abandoned on the coffee table. This is only my second, but my insides already feel light and bubbly.

*Maybe it's not just from the beer.*

I have to admit, this evening with Rhett is exactly what I needed. I returned from our snowball fight to find ten missed calls and a slew of texts from Christopher ranging from desperate to angry. Against my better judgment, I called him. He was furious, of course, because he had already flown across the country, and it was “all for nothing.”

I wanted to tell Christopher that Rhett treats me better than he ever did when we dated, and Rhett hardly knows me. I

## *Dreams by the Fire*

wanted to say that Rhett is encouraging and respectful and constantly doing sweet things to take care of me. He saved me from the snowstorm and took me—no, literally carried me—into his home, for goodness sake! Christopher has been so busy obsessing over his own situation that he doesn't even know I'm stranded.

I wanted to tell him that Rhett already knows me better than he ever could because Rhett actually cares about who I am, not what I can provide for him.

But I didn't—I calmly explained my thoughts and feelings to him, but he only continued to erupt. He bashed my dreams all over again, telling me how irresponsible and naive I am.

And to add insult to injury, he said, "Whatever. I was never seriously considering moving to Hollyhead anyway."

*Yeah, ouch.*

I quickly ended our conversation—even though he was still furious—and spent the next half hour crying. Honestly, I'm relieved to finally close that chapter of my life, but between the stress of it all and his harsh words, I couldn't stop the tears. I gave myself time to mourn our relationship and the effort I put into trying to make this week a success, and now that it's all behind me, I feel lighter than ever.

Margot's words echo in my head, grounding me despite the lingering feeling of loss. *Enjoy the life you're building.*

Right now, I'm *really* enjoying it. I make a mental note to call Margot later and tell her all about it.

I'm lazily walking around the living room inspecting all the pictures, decorations, and knick-knacks by the light of the fire. There are a few photos of Rhett from his younger years, and one of him with his parents. This is the one I stare at the longest.

He can't be more than eight or nine, and they're all working

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on the farm, harvesting what look like green beans. Rhett's mom and dad are both filling a basket, but Rhett is filling his mouth with the bright green veggies.

There are several other pictures in frames on the mantle and hung on the walls—all scenic shots of the farm. Sunrises and sunsets, bountiful crops, changing leaves, and light dustings of snow.

They're gorgeous. They look like they could be on postcards or in nature magazines. I wonder if they had them professionally taken or if Rhett's mom had a knack for photography.

"These pictures are beautiful," I prod gently, pointing at a photo of a bunch of cows. One of the cows is very close to the camera—close enough to clearly make out the black curves of its eyelashes—and it's the only one in focus. The rest are a dark blur of motion behind it.

Rhett sits up to glance at the one I'm referencing. "Thank you." I don't miss the blend of pride and embarrassment in his tone.

"Did you take these?"

His eyes widen slightly, as if realizing he gave something away. He doesn't answer.

"You did."

Again, no answer.

"You know, you're just full of surprises tonight. First, I discover you like the same music I like. Next, I learn you're some kind of professional photographer. What's next? Are you secretly an Olympic snowboarder?"

"I'm not a professional," he protests quietly.

"Snowboarder?" I joke, though I know he's referencing the pictures.

"Photographer."

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“Aha! So, you admit you took these. You *are* a photographer! A really good one, honestly.”

“Thanks,” he grumbles as he adjusts his position on the couch. I get the sense he doesn’t like talking about his talent, but it’s clearly something he’s passionate about. Maybe I can get him to open up a little.

“So, when did you start?”

“I don’t know.”

I give him an unamused stare. “Yes, you do.”

He sighs. “I was twelve when my parents first got me a camera for Christmas. It was my mom’s idea—she always gave the best gifts.”

“So, you’ve been taking pictures for, what, half your life?”

“Just about.”

I cross the room and sit on the opposite end of the couch, facing him. “Have you ever thought about entering your work in any contests or submitting them for magazines?”

Rhett scoffs dismissively. “No way. It’s just a silly little hobby.”

I pause for a second. “But it isn’t. It obviously means something to you. You should take yourself more seriously. Maybe even pursue it as more than a hobby.”

He stares at me in a silent protest, but his expression softens just a little—barely noticeable behind his thick facial hair. I take it as a win.

\* \* \*

“Are you sure about this?” I try to keep the nerves out of my voice.

“Of course! We used to sled down these hills all the time when we were kids,” Rhett insists. I watch from outside as

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he rummages around the garage, searching for sleds. It hasn't snowed much since the initial snowfall—maybe a couple of more inches—but the extremely frigid temperatures ensure none of it melts.

“Fine, but I’m holding you responsible for any physical injuries.”

He emerges with only one. “Looks like we’ll have to take turns.”

*Or share.*

The thought pops into my head without warning, making my cheeks heat up despite the icy wind. He must be able to see my expression, even from behind my scarf and bobble hat, because he gives me an odd look.

I clear my throat and turn abruptly towards the large hill nearest to us. “Alright, let’s get going. We’re burning daylight!” I fall into step beside him as we scale the steep hill.

After another morning of farm chores, Rhett came up with this idea for how to spend the afternoon. I’ve never gone sledding, and I generally dislike adrenaline-fueled activities—roller coasters, rafting, ziplining . . . even the feeling you get when you drive up and down a hilly road makes me want to throw up.

When we get to the top of the hill, I’m amazed. The view of the farm from up here is incredible, and I swear I can see for miles. However, when I look down at the slope ahead of us, my insides writhe.

“You go first,” I order Rhett.

He lets out a low laugh. “What, are you scared or something?”

“Or something,” I mutter.

I expect him to make fun of me more, but he obliges, grabbing either side of the long toboggan-style plastic sled with both

## *Dreams by the Fire*

hands and diving head-first down the hill with his stomach on the sled. He basically flies down the hill, going so fast that I'm not sure how he's going to stop. It makes my stomach turn.

When he reaches the bottom of the hill and the ground begins flattening out, he finally loses momentum until he skids to a stop. He hops to his feet and races up the hill, his face glowing as he grins like a kid.

"That was awesome!" His pure happiness settles my insides just enough for me to agree to give it a shot.

But unlike Rhett, I don't plan on belly-sliding down the hill, I carefully position the sled and sit with my legs stretched in front of me, my hands gripping the rope tightly. He kneels in the snow and rests his hands on the back of the sled, ready to push me down the hill.

"Not too fast," I say firmly.

He chuckles and nods once in agreement before gently shoving me forward. I move slowly at first as the sled just barely begins tilting forward, and then it's like I'm going full speed all at once.

The wind whips at my face as I hurtle down the hill, a blur of white and blue. Laughter bubbles up in my throat, a sound lost in the rush of air. I drop the rope and cling to the sides of the sled, my heart pounding with exhilaration.

The wind howls in my ears, and the snow flies up all around me, glittering in the sunshine. I close my eyes, feeling the rush of adrenaline. To my surprise, there's no accompanying nausea or anxiety. Maybe it's because I know Rhett is up on the hill, looking after me. The cold air stings my cheeks, but I don't mind.

It's over too soon. I reach the bottom, turn to look at Rhett, and wave, almost laughing out loud once again when I see how

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far I've gone—how high up he looks.

I try to run up the hill, but the deep snow makes it difficult, even with the little path Rhett cleared already.

Rhett meets me when I'm halfway up and carries the sled for me. "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Bad? That was incredible!" I practically scream.

We take turns sledding for a while. I expect the novelty to wear off, but if anything, it just keeps getting better.

"We should sled together," Rhett suggests after we've been switching back and forth for at least half an hour.

I eye him curiously—not in protest, but because his idea sounds suspiciously similar to my thought from earlier. "Should we?"

"Yeah, well, we'd go way faster if we're both on the sled," he says excitedly. "And then we wouldn't have to wait on each other every time."

I pretend to be considering it, though my heart is already racing in excitement at the idea. "Sure, I guess we can try it. Maybe you can block all the wind for me."

"No way, you're sitting in the front."

"Fine," I huff, as if the thought of his arms around me doesn't sound like the best thing ever. He sits on the sled first, taking up the back half. His legs are on either side, leaving the front open for me.

I flop down on my butt with the grace of a newborn giraffe, my back colliding hard with Rhett's chest, but he doesn't flinch. Thank goodness he can't see my face, which is red with embarrassment. I awkwardly squirm around in the sled, drawing my legs up to my stomach and grabbing the rope. Rhett's legs lift from the ground and settle in on either side of me, making me feel secure.

## *Dreams by the Fire*

He uses his arms to launch us forward, then wraps them around my waist just as we begin our descent. My stomach does somersaults.

Rhett was right—we're much faster when we're together. Everything whizzes past us in a blur, and my pulse thrums at light speed as Rhett's strong arms tighten around me, pulling me closer. I lean into him, enjoying the ride.

As we near the bottom of the hill, the sled is thrown suddenly out of balance. It sends us tumbling into the snow in a tangle of limbs and laughter.

I feel the warmth of Rhett's body leave mine, so I scramble to sit up, brushing snow from my face. Rhett is already on his feet, reaching out a hand to help me up. As his fingers wrap around my hand, electricity jumps from his body to mine, lighting up my whole being. He pulls me to my feet in one swift movement.

"That was fun," he says, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Very fun," I reply, my voice barely a whisper.

"Oh, your scarf!"

My hand goes to my neck to touch it, only to discover it isn't there. It must've come loose when we were falling off the sled. I turn and see it strewn across the ground a few feet away. Rhett automatically walks over to it, stoops to pick it up, shakes off the snow, and brings it over to me.

He doesn't just hand it to me though—he gingerly loops the scarf around my neck, and I can't help but notice the way his eyes linger on me. There's something in his gaze, a tenderness that makes my heart flutter.

"What is it?"

Rhett visibly gulps. "Nothing. It's just—with the snow and everything. . ."

"Yeah?"

## *Chapter 11*

“I want to take your picture.”

## Twelve

# Chapter 12



### *Sarah*

**Y**ou . . . what?”

“Sorry, that probably sounds weird.” He takes a step back and lifts his hands in surrender. “I didn’t mean to—”

“No, that’s okay.” I suddenly feel like I can’t catch my breath. I force myself to inhale deeply. “I mean, I would love it if you took my picture. I’d be honored, really.”

“Really?”

I nod, my grin spreading in time with his.

“Okay, cool! I mean—um—wait right here. Let me go get my camera.” He hurries off toward the house, pulling off his gloves as he does, and returns moments later with a small but professional-looking camera.

He peers through it and presses some buttons to adjust the

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settings. And then he twists the lens to focus it on me. I can see the moment my image becomes clear to him—a small smile lifts his face.

“Should I pose, or . . .”

“No, you’re perfect just like that.”

His words stir something deep in my core and make my pulse jump. Heat rises up my chest and neck, settling in my face. My mind goes hazy.

*Does that mean he thinks I’m perfect?*

Before I have time to fully process what he said, he snaps my picture.

Suddenly embarrassed, I cover my face. “Wait, can we do that again? I wasn’t ready.” I realize I have no idea what kind of face I was making when he took the picture. Whatever it was, I was purely reacting to what he said.

“Nope, that was the one. That was exactly what I wanted to capture.” He moves the camera down from his face and pulls up the picture on its screen, turning it so I can see. I move close to him so we can both look at it.

In it, there are snowflakes falling all around me, and a whole army of trees behind me—an intricately woven mess of dark limbs frosted with white. The land rises and falls in the background, and I can just barely make out one of the barns in the distance.

My hair looks a little wild in it—with curls springing out in various directions from under my hat and snowflakes decorating it, but I don’t even mind. My cheeks and nose are pink, and my eyes are bright, swimming with the same curiosity and awe I felt just a moment ago. My mouth hangs open just a little, and the corners of it are turned up into a soft smile.

It’s the best picture anyone has ever taken of me.

*Dreams by the Fire*

“See, I told you that you’re a talented photographer.” My voice comes out a little hoarse, softer than I intend it to be.

“All credit goes to the subject of the photo,” he replies, bumping his shoulder against mine lightly. I can hear the smile in his voice. It almost throws me off balance—not his motion, but his words. I want to lean into him.

But then the memory of Christopher and our conversation from yesterday fills my head, trying to push out my thoughts of Rhett. Everything is still so fresh, my emotions so raw. I can’t really be feeling this way for Rhett already, can I? I can’t think about it right now.

*I need to talk to Margot.*

\* \* \*

“I think I might be going crazy.”

“Well, hello to you too,” Margot chuckles from the other line.

“I’m serious!” I flop onto my bed, still wearing my snow gear. After Rhett returned my scarf, I declared I was getting frostbite and insisted we go inside to take a break from the cold. I all but ran into the house and slammed the door of the spare bedroom before calling Margot.

“Calm down, Sarah. What’s going on?”

I take a deep breath and open my mouth, but the words don’t come out. I try again. “I think I have feelings for Rhett,” I whisper-yell.

I’m met with silence. The panic in my chest only builds.

“Margot?”

I look at my phone only to see the screen has gone black and it’s unresponsive. Great, dead again. I plug it into the power bank and pace around my room as I impatiently wait for it to

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turn back on.

At least I'm not missing out on any business this week. I doubt anyone in town is leaving their house in this storm. Maybe that's the silver lining of this mess of a week—I got a little break from the chaos.

I hear a muffled voice from somewhere else in the house. I peek my head out the door, but I don't see Rhett in the kitchen. I check the living room too, but he's not there. Then, I notice the door to his bedroom is closed, but light peeks out from the slight gap beneath it.

I creep closer, his voice getting clearer as I do. Once I'm right outside it, I can finally hear what he's saying. He must be on the phone, like I was just a minute ago—unless he's talking to himself. I tentatively press my ear to the door.

"I know that it's nuts," I hear him say. "But I think there's something . . . happening between us."

There's a pause as I imagine whoever he's on the phone with says something.

"No, I know. But I'm pretty sure this is what it's supposed to feel like. I mean, you've been in love before. What's it like?"

*In love?*

I don't stick around to hear the rest of the conversation. I fall back from the door and make a mad dash for my room as quietly as I can. My mind is whirling as I try to make sense of everything.

My phone is back on, so I quickly call Margot. "I'm definitely going crazy. I just overheard Rhett say he thinks he's in love with me."

I can practically hear her jaw drop. "Woah."

"I know."

"How do you feel about him?"

*Dreams by the Fire*

I pause. “I don’t know. I mean, I think I have feelings for him, but I can’t tell if they’re real or if I’m just trying to move on from Christopher. I just can’t sort through everything I’m feeling.”

“It’s okay to be overwhelmed—it’s a lot.”

“No kidding.”

“But if I’m not mistaken, you’ve been over Christopher for quite a while now—like, a few months.”

My mind settles down a little. “Oh. But what if part of me was a little excited to see Christopher again? Does that mean I still had feelings for him?”

“I think it’s normal that a small piece of you missed him because you used to have feelings for him, and you miss the good things from your relationship. That doesn’t mean you were totally in love with him and ready to jump back into a relationship with him.”

“So, you don’t think my heart is just using Rhett to move on from Christopher?”

“Sarah, I think you’ve moved on a long time ago.”

The realization hits me hard—it feels like I had a chain wrapped around my chest, and the chain just crumbled. Like I can breathe again.

“So, my feelings for Rhett?”

“Totally real.”

“Wow. . . I like Rhett.”

“And he likes you too. Maybe you should drive in snowstorms more often.”

I think back over the last few days—how frustrated I was at first, like all my plans had been ruined. I was so negative, and then Rhett turned everything around. Even through my brutal discussions with Christopher, Rhett made the decision to let

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him go even easier. He made Christopher's words sting just a little less.

Rhett has been consistent this entire time. He's been my bright spot when I was on the verge of spiraling.

*Rhett is my silver lining.*

## Thirteen

### Chapter 13



#### *Rhett*

**W**ow—you really *are* in love. Or at least falling,” Dom concludes.

“I know,” I grumble. “It’s the worst.”

“What do you mean? It’s supposed to be the best.”

“Maybe if she wasn’t dead set on getting back together with her rotten ex . . . I’m pretty sure she’s over there talking to him right now. Probably going on and on about how she wishes she got to spend this week with him instead of me.”

Dom clucks from the other end of the phone. “You don’t know that—you shouldn’t assume anything. Besides, I thought you said she seemed interested in you.”

“I don’t know,” I huff. “It seems like she is, but what if she’s just messing with me to kill time?”

“Do you really think she’s the kind of person to do that?”

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“No. But I don’t know her very well.”

*Even though it feels like I’ve known her for years.*

The memory of her from just an hour ago flashes in my mind—her joyful glow, the wild curls poking out from under her hat, the feeling of her in my arms. And then the memory from last night. I chuckle in spite of myself as I recall her dancing on top of the couch.

I amend, “I will say, she did know all the words to ‘Working Man.’ I don’t think that could be faked.”

“See, I’m telling you, there’s something there. Stop getting in your own way!”

“Maybe you’re right.”

\* \* \*

Dom was definitely wrong. Ever since Sarah came out of her room, she’s been skittish, as if she’s nervous to be around me.

*She was probably just telling Christopher how she can’t wait to be out of here.*

The silence was borderline awkward over dinner, until she suggests, “How about we play a game to pass the time? Do you have a deck of cards somewhere around here?”

“Sure, let me go look.” I get up and look around my room for a while until I finally find an old deck of cards in one of my desk drawers. When I return, Sarah is sitting cross-legged on the couch with a bowl of pretzels in her hand and a package of sour candies on the coffee table.

“Sorry, I raided your snack stash,” she says through a mouthful of pretzels.

I grin down at her. “No worries, I’m just surprised you found it.”

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“Come on—hidden behind a wall of cereal boxes at the back of the pantry? Pretty obvious if you ask me.” She reaches forward to grab a candy and pops it in her mouth, her perfect lips puckering instantly, her kind eyes squinting as the sourness overtakes her. Her joking eases the tension, making the atmosphere feel more like what I’ve grown used to over the last few days.

I sit beside her on the couch but turn so I’m facing her. “So, what are we gonna play?”

“Poker. Standard five-card draw.” Her tone is so serious, like she really means business, that I have to bite back my smile. She grabs two napkins and gives us each a portion of candies and pretzels. “We’ll bet with these.”

“Yes ma’am. Are you dealing?”

“Yeah, I’ll start. We can alternate.” I watch her small fingers swiftly shuffle the deck of cards. She tries to do the fancy riffle and bridge shuffle and fails spectacularly, sending cards flying in all directions. Her face reddens immediately, but she laughs as we gather the cards.

“Nice job, dealer.”

“I’d like to see you do better” she challenges with a confident grin.

I shrug. “Okay.” She gently sets the deck in my hands, her fingers lightly brushing my palm enough to send a tingle up my arm. I shake it off and begin shuffling the cards, warming up my fingers before I split the deck in half and execute a perfect riffle and bridge shuffle.

Her mouth hangs open. “How did you do that?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets.”

She playfully scowls. “Oh, whatever, just deal the cards. They’d better be good ones too.”

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"I'll save the good ones for myself," I chuckle, as if I have any control over the hands we're dealt.

Sarah puts a pretzel on the napkin between us as the ante, and I follow suit. I deal us each five cards, face-down. I watch her expression shift from excitement to confusion as she inspects her cards.

I pick up my own hand to see what I'm working with: queen of diamonds, queen of hearts, jack of spades, seven of spades, and two of spades. At least I have a few options here—try to get more queens or risk the pair to try for a flush.

"What do you wanna bet?" I ask Sarah.

She reluctantly tosses another pretzel in the middle, and I do the same.

"How many cards?" I ask after another moment.

"Three, please."

She slides the three cards she wants to discard toward me, and I deal her three new ones face-down from the deck. She perks up when she looks at them.

"I'll get two," I announce, deciding to make the riskier move and go for the flush. I just need . . .

Bingo—two spades. I try to keep my expression blank, so I don't give myself away. Sarah, on the other hand, does not have a great poker face. Her confidence is evident.

"Final bet?" I ask.

Sarah adds two pretzels to the pile with a satisfied smile. I do the same, but then I raise the bet by a sour candy. After a moment of pondering, Sarah matches my bet,

"Okay, let's see what you've got," she prompts.

"Ladies first."

She lays down her cards to reveal three aces, a four, and a seven. "Three of a kind."

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I pretend to be intimidated. “That’s a pretty good hand. But not as good as a flush.” I show her my cards and collect my winnings.

“Dang it, I should’ve gone for the straight!”

“I still would’ve won. Flush beats straight, you know.”

She sighs dramatically, then picks up the cards and shuffles wildly. “You totally cheated! I’m dealing next, and I’m gonna win!”

Sarah doesn’t win the next hand. Or the one after that. We play seven hands, and she loses every one, leaving her with just three pretzels by the middle of our eighth hand.

Her brows are drawn together as she contemplates her next bet. “I feel like the dodo birds in *Ice Age*,” she mutters.

“What?”

“You know, the big group of dodo birds that are trying desperately to defend their stockpile of food, even though it’s just three little watermelons.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell—I haven’t seen *Ice Age*.”

“Wait, what? That’s such a childhood staple! Everyone our age has seen it.”

“Not everyone.” Not the ones who were too busy tending to their family farm, harvesting crops or caring for livestock.

Her eyes soften. “Well, it looks like we just have to change that. Right now. Do you have a laptop that’s charged?”

“You just want to get out of losing more,” I tease instead of answering.

“Nuh uh!” She pauses for a moment. “Okay, maybe a little. But this is serious! You can’t go another day without watching *Ice Age*. I’m sure it’s online somewhere.”

I get my half-charged laptop and use my mobile hotspot to search for the movie while Sarah makes us hot chocolate on

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the stove. She even adds marshmallows and a candy cane, just the way my mom used to make it. The memory is bittersweet, but I push down the sadness it stirs up.

We settle in on the couch, each of us claiming a blanket and sitting close together so we can see the laptop sitting on the coffee table. She's close enough that her warmth seeps into me, steady and undeniable.

We're quiet as we watch the movie, sipping our cocoa and munching on our snacks (which I share with Sarah, even though I won them fair and square). This feels so natural and comfortable that something deep inside me is put at ease.

I'm so relaxed that I doze off during the movie. I feel myself drift in and out of consciousness for a while, and I become vaguely aware of something soft tickling the side of my face. It smells fresh and flowery.

I open my eyes slowly, my vision blurry. A soft snore reaches my ears. The room is barely lit by the fireplace, but as my eyes adjust, I see Sarah's face resting on my shoulder. Her mouth is slightly open, but her eyes are fully closed, and her face is smushed against me. The earlier tickling sensation is from her hair—wild curls stick out at all angles, some of them reaching up and grazing my face.

Somehow, I've gone from sitting beside Sarah on the couch to laying across it with her sleeping half on top of me. One of her arms is draped over my chest, and I'm a little alarmed when I realize that I'm holding her securely against me.

*Did she do this? Did I?*

I know I should wake her up so we can go to our own separate beds. We aren't romantically involved—my feelings for her don't change the fact that she doesn't feel the same. She has Christopher, and as soon as the roads are cleared, she'll be gone.

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My brain is screaming at me to get up and distance myself before I get more attached than I already am. But I can't remember the last time I was so . . . content.

*A few more hours can't hurt, right?*

## Fourteen

### Chapter 14



#### *Sarah*

I wake up to the sound of a man and a woman speaking, though it seems distant. My brain is too foggy to make out what they're saying, but I can tell that I don't recognize either voice.

I force myself to sit up and rub the sleep from my eyes, immediately realizing I'm not in a bed—I'm on the living room couch. And those voices—they're coming from the TV.

The electricity is on!

The lamp closest to me is lit, and I hear a coffee machine percolating from the kitchen. Something smells amazing—bacon, eggs, maybe toast too? I focus on the TV and see it's set to the local news channel. The meteorologist is saying something about the storm passing and the roads finally being plowed in rural areas, but I can't seem to process what they're

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saying.

“Hey, sleepyhead.” Rhett’s low voice comes from behind me, but he doesn’t sound as happy as I would expect. If anything, he sounds glum.

I move my legs so he can sit beside me on the couch. He hands me a cup of coffee, and I take a long sip. “Mmm, perfect. How’d you know I like cream and sugar in my coffee?”

His beard almost seems to glow as his face flushes. “You mentioned it the other day—we were talking about the cafe in town.”

“Oh, I guess I did. I barely even remember saying it.” I bring the mug to my mouth again, but this time, it’s only to hide my giddy smile.

*He remembered some offhand comment I made days ago?*

My heart swells.

He clears his throat awkwardly. “So, I guess you’ll be leaving soon.”

My heart comes to a screeching halt.

“What do you mean?”

“The snow.” He gestures to the TV, where news anchors are still chatting. “They were finally able to clear off the roads around here. And the electricity is back on.”

“Oh. So, I can go home. That’s . . . good.”

*Why don’t I feel excited?*

He studies me for a moment, as if assessing my reaction. And then something in his expression hardens. If I weren’t staring at him so intently, I wouldn’t see it, but there’s a clear shift. It’s like a thin veil just went over his eyes.

*What’s going on in his mind?*

I open my mouth to ask, but he speaks before I’m able to. “Well, I hope you’re hungry, because I made a big breakfast.”

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He braces his hands on his knees and stands, walking to the kitchen without looking back at me.

I scramble to my feet and smooth down my frizzy bed head as I take a seat at the small table. He sets a plate full of food down in front of me, but he doesn't sit across from me with a plate of his own.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Oh, I ate already." He turns to do the dishes while I pick at my food. Everything is delicious, but my appetite is suddenly waning.

I watch his back as he scrubs at a pan, my eyes tracing the movements of his muscles under his flannel. "Sorry, I guess I fell asleep during the movie. Did you like it?"

His muscles stiffen a little. "Yeah, it was good."

Part of me wants to press—to see why he's so closed off this morning. But the other part of me just feels defeated. I thought after everything we've experienced over these last few days, and especially last night, there was something real blooming between us.

For goodness sake, the man said he was in love with me less than twenty-four hours ago! What could have possibly changed his feelings so suddenly?

I finish my breakfast and quietly head to the spare bedroom to gather my few belongings. Aside from my phone, my small purse, and the clothes I had on when Rhett found me, all that's left are my shoes. It doesn't take long to put the few items in a little pile on the desk, so I slowly tidy up the bedroom.

I know I'm dragging my feet, but I don't feel ready to leave yet. Does Rhett really want me gone? Doesn't he want me to stay?

Even if he did, I know I need to go eventually. I have a

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business to run, after all. The thought of going back to my beloved Frock & Roll takes away the sting of Rhett's distance just a little. I'm still living out my dream, regardless of who comes in and out of my life.

Still, a big part of me hopes that Rhett will ask me to stay longer.

There's a gentle knock at my door. "Hey, let me know when you're ready. I'll help you clear off your car and get it back onto the road," Rhett says.

I put on my jacket, scoop up my belongings, and steel myself to face him. I fling open the door, catching him off guard. There's a split second where he looks like the same Rhett from last night, but then the veil is back.

"I'm ready," I say quietly.

I follow him to the front door and slip on my sneakers, not caring if my feet get cold this time. We head outside, the bright sun reflecting off the snow and making it hard to see. He still opens the passenger-side door of his truck for me and helps me climb inside, but his touch is lacking its usual warmth.

He drives slowly and silently to my car, which is almost totally buried in snow.

*Poor Gus.*

I watch from the warmth of the truck's cab as Rhett works tirelessly. He clears all the snow and ice off of Gus, then attaches his heavy-duty chain tow to the front of the car. Once the connection is secure, he slides into the driver's seat and starts the engine. With a powerful pull, he maneuvers the truck forward, freeing Gus from the deep snow and guiding him to the road, which has been thoroughly plowed and salted.

Rhett puts the truck in park and gets out to detach the chain tow, so I hop out onto the ground and inspect Gus. He's still

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got a bit of snow and ice on him, but other than that, he looks fine.

I turn to talk to Rhett, but when I do, he's a lot closer than I expect. I instinctively take a small step back. "Thank you," I say quietly.

"It was no problem. The truck did all the heavy lifting."

"No, thank you for *everything*."

The air around us grows tense, thick with words unspoken and feelings unresolved. His gaze holds mine for a long while, and I hope he can read everything I'm trying to tell him through my eyes.

"You're welcome," he finally says. Then he opens Gus's driver side door for me.

*I guess this is it.*

I slide in and set my belongings on the passenger seat before putting the key in the ignition and turning it. For a second, I don't think the engine will start, and a flicker of hope lights in my chest. But then it roars to life, and with a nod, Rhett closes my door.

He leans against his truck and watches as I shift the car into drive and slowly accelerate. As Rhett grows smaller and smaller in my rearview mirror, I realize I'm still wearing his sweatpants and long-sleeved tee. His clothes carry the clean smell of his laundry detergent mingling with a slight woody, masculine scent.

Surely, he won't miss the clothes—he would've said something. I decide they're mine now. A souvenir from the most fun and bizarre and bittersweet week of my life.

As I drive towards my apartment, I can't help but wonder how everything between us shifted. He must've changed his mind about me. Now that we can go back to our normal lives, he

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probably realized he wants nothing to do with me. Maybe this was all just a winter fantasy to him, but now it's over. Reality has set in, and it's time to move on.

I mean, come on, who falls in love after just a few days?

## Fifteen

### Chapter 15



#### *Rhett*

**I** don't understand why you didn't just ask her about Christopher. At least you would've known for sure," Dom reasons.

We're lounging on his couch with mugs of hot cocoa, and I just filled him in on everything that happened a couple days ago. He and his family got back from their vacation mere hours ago, and though it probably would've been polite to give him more time to relax and unpack, I couldn't wait any longer to talk to him.

"I don't know—part of me didn't want to bring him up. Besides, you should've heard how upset she was that all her perfect plans fell apart. I just felt like she was set on getting back together with him."

"But you didn't know that for certain."

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I hesitate and take a sip from my mug. “I guess not.”

“So maybe you should go find out. You know where she works—go talk to her.”

“No way.”

“Why not? What’s the worst thing that could happen—she tells you she’s with Christopher and she doesn’t have feelings for you?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Dom rubs his temples with one hand. “Rhett, I know you don’t have a ton of experience with romance and... love”—I cringe inadvertently at the word—“but sometimes, you need to lay it all out there.”

*Is it really possible for me to feel that way so soon?*

I’ve never heard of something so far outside of my comfort zone. I like to keep everything contained and under my control, safe from where others can interfere.

“What if I don’t want to?”

“If you don’t let your feelings out, you’ll never let anything – or anyone—in. If you want real love, you have to be vulnerable.”

I mull over his words, letting them take root in my mind.

A sharp, feminine voice cuts into my thoughts, “You said she owns Frock & Roll?” Jillian pops up from behind the couch, jump-scaring me and Dom so much that we nearly spill our hot chocolate.

“Geez, Jillian!” Dom scolds. “If you’re going to eavesdrop on us, you should announce yourself a little better.”

She shrugs. “Where’s the fun in that? You should just always expect me to be eavesdropping. It’s your fault for being such a scaredy cat in the first place.” She rounds the couch and sinks onto the cushion on the other side of me.

I lean over and whisper to Dom, “She has a point—this isn’t

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the first time.”

“And it won’t be the last,” she adds with a pointed look.

Dom scrubs his hand down his face. “I swear little sisters aren’t supposed to be this nosy.”

“Well, you should be glad I am. At least this time,” she remarks.

“Why’s that?” Dom asks.

“Because I just so happen to have a piece of very valuable information about your precious Sarah.”

My heart leaps and my stomach lurches at the same time. I want to be hopeful, but I mentally prepare myself for the worst—she’s engaged to Christopher, she’s already married, her name isn’t even Sarah and everything she told me was a lie.

“Okay, are you gonna tell us?” Dom prompts.

“I don’t know, I guess that depends on what I get out of it.”

Dom and I exchange a look. “What do you want?” I ask. I don’t really care if it’s good news or bad news—I just need to know what Jillian discovered.

She must be able to sense the desperation in my voice. “I want you two to do all my chores for two weeks,” she requests smugly.

“Farm chores or house chores?”

“Both.”

“Yeah, right,” Dom scoffs, glares at Jillian, and crosses his arms over his chest. “In your dreams.”

“Okay, I guess you’ll just never know. . . That’s too bad—it’s pretty juicy information. It might change your whole outlook on everything.”

I sigh. “I’ll do it, just tell me,”

She taps her finger on her chin and considers my offer. “Well, my price just increased—it’s now three weeks. “

“Fine, whatever, we’ll do it,” I reply.

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“Woah, *we?*” Dom looks at me like I’m crazy.

Jillian ignores his outburst and reaches her hand out to give me a firm handshake. “Deal. So, obviously, I overheard you two talking about Sarah, and I decided to look her up. Her personal profiles didn’t have anything too interesting, but then I found the Instagram account she has for Frock & Roll.”

She holds her phone close to her chest and pauses for dramatic effect.

“Just spit it out, Jilly.”

Jillian turns the phone around, and Dom and I move closer to peer at the screen. It’s a picture of a beautiful, intricate purple dress—but not just any purple dress.

Dom blinks in confusion. “Wait, is that . . .”

“The dress that my mystery masquerade woman wore,” I finish, understanding dawning on me.

“The caption says Sarah custom-made this dress, so that means she must know who your mystery lady is. I mean, surely she would remember who she made the dress for, or at least have a receipt with the name,” Jillian reasons.

“No,” is all I can say.

“What?”

But I can’t speak right away—I’m reeling. The puzzle pieces in my brain are all clicking into place. Her hair, her eyes, her voice, her laugh, her smell. Her love of old rock music and her passion for making beautiful dresses. Her sweet, fun personality and her caring heart. The feeling of her in my arms—there’s a reason it all felt so familiar.

“Sarah *is* my mystery woman.”

## Sixteen

# Chapter 16



### *Sarah*

**I**t's another busy day at the shop, but I don't mind it—it keeps my brain occupied. Ever since I left the farm three days ago, I've had a hard time keeping Rhett off my mind. I often find myself wondering if I should go back to the farm, but what would I say?

Thankfully, I don't have to think about that right now. I just have to help this sweet middle-aged woman named Doris find a dress for her daughter's wedding, and then I can close the shop for the day.

The sun has been set for a few hours now, with only streetlights and sparse moonlight filtering in through the large windows at the front of the store.

Doris settles on a lovely burgundy gown covered in sequins and embellishments—it looks like it was made for her, and

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her love for it is written all over her face. Seeing her light up with confidence in that dress makes me proud of what I am accomplishing at Frock & Roll.

I bag her dress and help her check out at the register, sending her on her way with a warm smile. Thoroughly exhausted, yet satisfied with the day, I close out the register.

The bell above the front door rings, but I don't bother looking up. "Sorry, we're just about to close for the day. We'll reopen at ten tomorrow morning!"

The person doesn't respond, but a moment later, a familiar tune starts playing from out of nowhere: Aerosmith's "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing." The song from the masquerade ball.

I whip my head up and see Rhett standing right there in the middle of my shop. My heart takes flight in my chest, threatening to soar right out of my body.

*Am I hallucinating?*

I close my eyes and pinch myself, but when I reopen them, he's still standing there. And he's wearing a navy suit. A *very familiar* navy suit, at that. He holds a mask in one hand and a speaker in the other.

Clarity hits me like a lightning bolt.

"Care to dance?" he asks, his voice a low rumble.

"You're the man from the dance?"

His eyes are sparkling, but the rest of his expression and his body language exude nervousness. "Yes." His confirmation, at first, only amps up my feelings for him, but then it ignites a sharp frustration I can't shake.

I round the counter and walk towards him, stopping with a few feet of space between us, and cross my arms over my chest. "You left me there." It's more of a question than an accusation, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't wonder why my mystery man

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had abandoned me. I still felt a sting at the memory.

“I didn’t want to.” His tone is so sincere that I believe him. And he came all the way out here in his suit, playing our song from the dance, trying to make amends, I assume. The thoughtfulness of the gesture isn’t lost on me. Coupled with what I know about how easily Rhett shows vulnerability, I can tell this is a big step for him.

I don’t know if it’s the emotional relief of the revelation or because I’ve missed him so much over the last few days, but it takes all my willpower not to launch myself into his arms. I keep my feelings contained—there’s still something I need to know.

I take a few steps closer until we’re just inches apart and ask, “Then why did you?”

He lets out a long breath as if trying to find the right words, but they all come out in a jumble. “The cows—they got out. And my dad called me to help get them back. Dom too— not my dad, his dad. So, we put them all back and . . . and I went back to the dance to find you, but you were already—”

I cut him off by pressing my lips firmly to his, and I can tell he’s as surprised as I am. He hesitates for a second before he responds—and oh boy, does he respond. He kisses me back with urgency, like he can’t breathe and I’m his oxygen supply. His facial hair brushes roughly against my face, but I don’t mind it at all—I love it.

His hands grasp me firmly by my waist, and he pulls me tight against him. My sweater rides up just a little, leaving a strip of exposed skin. His fingers are warm against me, his palms rough and calloused.

I bring my hands to his face as if we could possibly get any closer, cherishing the feel of his coarse beard under my fingers.

## *Dreams by the Fire*

I suddenly can't get enough of him, and I can tell he feels the same way. It's as if our mouths are communicating through kisses rather than words.

The world around us melts away and time stands still—it feels like we're the only two people in the universe. Eventually, he pulls away, our foreheads pressed together as we come up for air.

"I can't believe I just did that," I mutter. I'm not sure what possessed me to kiss Rhett, but I definitely don't regret it.

"That *we* just did that," he corrects, grinning from ear to ear.

"Yeah, we," I chuckle softly.

"Well, we're about to do it again."

He dips his head and his lips meet mine. This kiss is more delicate, though it lacks none of the passion from earlier. It starts with a soft brush of his lips against mine, so gentle that it sends a shiver down my spine.

He tips my head back and deepens the kiss, still moving slowly as we savor the sensation, neither of us in any rush. While our first kiss was like a volcanic eruption, this is the heavy flow of molten lava, devouring everything in its wake with the same intensity. It's an all-consuming need I've never felt before.

"Hey girl! I just picked up some ice cream and—OH MY GOSH!"

Rhett and I break apart with a start as Margot bursts into the shop with a grocery bag hanging from her arm. Her jaw is fully dropped.

"Oh, hey," is all I manage.

Rhett awkwardly sticks his hand out towards her. "Hi, I'm Rhett."

She shakes it firmly, grinning like the Cheshire cat. "Oh, I've heard all about you. Nice to finally put a face to the

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name.” Margot pauses and takes in his outfit. “Wait, you’re the champagne spiller!”

Rhett rubs the back of his neck, embarrassment creeping up his face. “I suppose I am.”

“Margot, how about we chat later, yeah?” I not-so-discreetly gesture for her to get the heck out of here.

“Right, of course—I’ll just . . .” She backs out of the shop and disappears into the dark of the night. Once she’s gone, I lock the front door of the shop and turn back to face Rhett. A silence brimming with desire and anticipation grows between us.

“So, um, you never answered my question from earlier,” he says softly. “Would you like to dance?”

I beam up at him. “Absolutely.”

He restarts the song, which has long since ended, and envelopes me in his embrace, his strong arms wrapping around me. I think back to the masquerade ball—the way he held me so close, the spark that ignited between us. That same spark now burns brighter, a steady flame that has been growing and growing over the last week.

*I take back what I said earlier—this is so much more than a silver lining.*



## About the Author



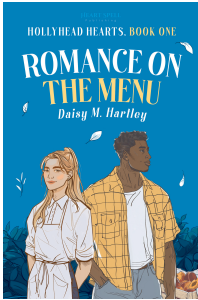
***Daisy M. Hartley** is a Massachusetts-based author whose love for storytelling blossomed from an early age. Raised in the charming landscapes of New England and armed with a vivid imagination, Daisy embarked on her writing career. Crafting heartwarming tales set against the backdrop of picturesque small towns; Daisy invites readers to journey into a world where love conquers all.*

*When she's not penning her next novel, Daisy enjoys traveling, spending time with her husband John and her two girls, and, of course, summers at the beach. She is always drawing inspiration from the beauty of her surroundings. With her passion for romance and her deep connection to her roots, Daisy is poised to capture the hearts of readers everywhere with her enchanting stories.*

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## Romance on the Menu: A Hollyhead Hearts Novel

Continue the Series

Willa Fairfax is only one semester away from graduating culinary school when she learns that she has inherited a restaurant. Well, not a restaurant exactly, but a small-town diner with a loyal following. The Bent Spoon, however, serves uninspired food in an equally uninspired setting. Willa agrees to work with her twin brother, Daniel, to flip the restaurant and sell it as quickly as possible, but they soon find themselves in over their heads.

Dom Calloway is a handsome farmer who delivers organic produce to the restaurant. He is passionate about his hometown and continuing the farming legacy his family has started in Hollyhead. The intense and overbearing Willa soon has Dom's world on end. While Willa is transforming the restaurant, Dom learns that she is set on returning to the glamorous big-city life she left behind. Their disagreements soon threaten their friendship and the feelings that are blossoming between them.

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Enjoy a sample chapter of *Romance on the Menu*:

I'd consider myself a positive person. I don't complain often, even when things don't go my way, and I always try to make

the best out of any situation. However, the last few weeks have made it incredibly hard for me to maintain my optimism. Still, I've refused to break down.

Until now.

I just got off my train from New York to Massachusetts, my whole life in a few suitcases at my side. At least, it *was* in the suitcases. As I was pushing my way through the crowded train station, one of my bags burst open of its own accord, scattering one third of my life all over the filthy cement floor.

Somehow, I managed to keep it together as I scooped my belongings haphazardly back into the suitcase, even when I accidentally stuck my hand in what I felt like old Jell-O. I scrambled to get to the bathroom and didn't even cry as I scrubbed my hands clean. But when I realized there were no paper towels in the bathroom—only hand dryers—I lost it.

If there is one thing I hate in this world, it's those awful, noisy, automatic hand dryers that can't stay on for more than three seconds and don't even dry your hands. That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Now, I'm borderline sobbing as I call my twin brother Daniel's phone repeatedly, praying he's here to pick me up. I'm so upset that I've started sweating through my red crewneck and black leggings. My strawberry-blonde ponytail is slick with sweat, and my face feels sticky. I can't spend another second in this disgusting station. If he's not here, I'm walking.

*Well, I would walk, if I had any idea where I was going.*

I'm in the middle of leaving Daniel a third voicemail when I burst outside, embracing the warm sunlight and chilly breeze. It's then that I notice his old SUV waiting for me. I exhale all the tension trapped in my body, though the tears don't stop.

He gets out of his car when he sees me and rushes to take my

bags, not noticing my emotional state.

“Careful with that one,” I choke out, pointing to the bag that betrayed me. He chuckles and tosses everything into the back of his car.

He slams the door shut and turns his attention back to me. Concern flashes across his face when he sees the tears still flowing from my eyes. I’m taken by surprise as he wraps me in a hug.

“Hey, it’s okay, Willa. I know it’s a lot—I mean, it’s not every day your estranged father dies and leaves you and your sibling the very restaurant he abandoned your family to start. But we’ll figure it out.” His attempt at sympathy is sweet, albeit misguided.

“No, it’s not that,” I wail. “It’s the stupid hand dryers.”

He breaks the embrace and pulls back to study my face. “What?”

“The hand dryers,” I explain with watery eyes. “There were no paper towels in the bathroom.”

I watch him struggle to contain his laughter as he offers me a comforting pat on the shoulder. “So that’s why you’re crying?” He walks around the car, opens his door, and slides into the driver’s seat. I follow suit, slumping into the passenger seat.

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” I sigh. “This is just a lot. Today was my dream interview with Luca —”

“Right. Loser Burnside.”

“Fernside!” I correct him. He smiles sheepishly.

“The guy’s a snob, Willa. Do you really want to work for him? What do you have to spend your days making? Candied chicken beak? Blueberry wonton curry?”

“Daniel!”

The smirk on his face is replaced by a compassionate glance.

“Look on the bright side. You haven’t even graduated culinary school and you already have your own restaurant. How—”

“It’s not the same,” I interrupt him.

He takes a deep breath and nods before starting the car. “Yeah, I know.” I’m aware he isn’t exactly happy about the situation either, though at least he’s able to work from home as a web developer.

Since Daniel told me the news about our father a few days ago, I’ve had to put my whole future on hold. Thankfully, I was allowed to postpone my final semester of culinary school while I sort this mess out. Luca Fernside, however, was not as gracious.

Apparently, inheriting a run-down diner from your money-grubbing father who left your family twenty years ago, is not a good enough reason to postpone an interview. There goes that dream.

“I don’t understand why Dad left us his restaurant in the first place,” I lament as Daniel starts the car and begins driving. “Didn’t he cause enough chaos by leaving when we were six years old to pursue his stupid, selfish dream? Now he’s forced us to rearrange our lives to take over the restaurant he apparently wasn’t even that passionate about.”

“I know, I don’t get it either,” Daniel agrees, keeping his eyes trained on the road. “But we’ll just take over long enough to fix it up and sell it. It’ll be out of our hands in no time.”

I huff in frustration.

“It’ll be okay,” he consoles. “You’ll see. It’s really not that bad—the restaurant, that is. And the silver lining is that we have a reason to see each other. It’s been over a year now, hasn’t it?”

I feel a pang of guilt at the reminder. I know he isn’t trying to

make me feel bad, but we both know it's my fault I haven't been home since last Christmas. I've just been so busy with culinary school and applying for jobs . . .

"Yeah, it's nice to see you. And I'm excited to see Mom, I miss her." My weekly phone calls with my mom aren't enough for either of us. She's the most important person in my life next to Daniel. I feel awful for neglecting them for so long, but this is not the reunion I had in mind.

Daniel has stayed close to my mom while I've been away. His apartment isn't far from her house. At least, it wasn't – everything is changing now. Daniel and I will be moving into the two-bedroom apartment above the restaurant while we renovate it, and my mom is temporarily staying with a friend who lives in . . . wait, what's the town's name again?

"Hollyhead seems like a nice place," Daniel says as if reading my mind.

I nod and stare out the window, too overwhelmed to reply. Instead, I focus on the beautiful scenery of rural Massachusetts. The thick trees and quaint homes are much more welcoming than the sharp, towering skyscrapers of New York.

Everything feels slower here, and I've noticed the air is fresher too. It's nothing like the busy, polluted, harsh city I've called home for the last few years. Although, it's not as grand, diverse, or vivacious either.

Both locations possess a different kind of beauty, and as a small-town native, I'm not sure which I prefer. This is a beauty that requires patience, that invites you to slow down, take a breath, and truly see.

I admire the sunlight as it shines through the canopy of maple and oak overhead, leaving speckles of brightness on the asphalt. The relentless hum of traffic I've grown so accustomed to is

replaced with birds chirping and wind softly rustling through the leaves.

I roll down the window and let the cool air wash over me, carrying the scent of pine needles and freshly turned earth. I feel my heart slow to a steady rhythm, no longer in a hurry, but enjoying each beat.

I take a moment to study Daniel. Even though we're fraternal twins, we barely look alike. His hair is a dark brown compared to my strawberry blonde locks, and my hazel eyes are much darker than his green ones. He has sharp, angular features and a large, sloping nose in contrast to my soft face and small nose.

Other than our fair skin, the biggest similarity is his birthmark. It's almost identical to the one on my jaw, though his is on his temple.

We drive for what feels like hours, though the clock on the dashboard tells me only forty-five minutes have passed, when we come to a stop in what must be the town of Hollyhead. I know we're a good fifty or so miles from the small town I grew up in, but it looks almost identical.

*So, he left us for this, and he didn't even go that far. He couldn't have opened a restaurant in Harmony Falls?*

My stomach drops at the thought. It makes me wonder why he never came back to see us, or why we never went to see him. I knew he'd stayed in Massachusetts, but we can't be more than two hours away from the house Daniel and I grew up in, the one my mom still lives in. Why couldn't he come back? Why couldn't he have stayed in the first place?

Resentment burns in my stomach as my eyes land on the outdated restaurant on the corner. A large wooden sign with peeling paint and rusty chains reads "The Bent Spoon."

Daniel leaps out of the car and starts taking my bags out of

the back, but I'm frozen in place. I can't get out. I can't go in there and fix the thing my dad left us for. Of course, Daniel doesn't give me a choice. He yanks my door open and hauls me up out of the car.

"Come on, let's get situated." He pulls a single key from his pocket and approaches the door, but not the one leading into the restaurant.

"Aren't we going in there?" I gesture to the dining area, filled with cracked-leather booths and wobbly-looking tables.

He shakes his head and unlocks the other door, which leads to a narrow staircase. "I don't have the key yet, just this one. The manager is bringing a copy of the restaurant key tomorrow morning. Apparently, she's the only worker who hasn't quit since dad died." He picks up two of my three bags and begins to lug them up the wooden stairs.

Arms crossed, I stand on the sidewalk, taking in the surroundings. The street is lined with businesses: a bookshop, a candy shop, a drug store, and even a dress shop.

Daniel turns to look at me from the top of the stairs. "You coming or what?" he hollers.

A chilly breeze floats over me as I consider my options. Dusk is on its way, and the fading sunlight leaves me cold and uncertain. Part of me wants to stay put and refuse to take part in this disaster. A smaller but stronger part of me wants to be optimistic, to make the most of this fork in the road, just like I always do.

I look up to meet Daniel's eyes. "Only if I get the bigger bedroom."

"My stuff's already in there," he counters, narrowing his eyes.

"Fine," I give an exaggerated sigh and pick up the third bag—the traitor. I lock the door behind me and hustle up the stairs

to catch up to Daniel. When I get to the top, I'm in the old-fashioned living room. It contains a ragged couch, a small, worn coffee table, and a medium-sized TV. I notice the carpet under my boots—a horrible shade of orange—is fraying.

The living room connects to a hallway, which I'm assuming is where Daniel disappeared to. In the hallway, I find three doors, and I spot Daniel through the only open door.

"Voila," he says in his best French accent as I step into the bedroom. It's surprisingly large, especially compared to my tiny New York space.

"Not too shabby," I manage a smile. Maybe this won't be so bad.

Delete Created with Sketch.

I was wrong, it's awful.

Daniel and I are standing in the restaurant with Olivia Wyman, the manager of The Bent Spoon. She's sweet and bubbly, albeit a little awkward—especially around Daniel. Still, I can see why my father hired her. Even though she's a year younger than me, she has a certain maturity that I admire, and she's easy to get along with.

She came over at the crack of dawn to give us our keys to the space and show us around, though there isn't much to show. The worn furniture I noticed last night is just the tip of the iceberg. The paint in the dining room is beginning to chip and peel, the decor is terribly outdated, and the counter is covered in nasty stains.

"Like I said, this place has a lot of . . . personality," Olivia says brightly.

"Not a very good personality," I mumble to myself, though

Daniel somehow hears me and shoots me a glare.

“We just didn’t realize there was so much work to do,” Daniel explains to Olivia, leaning on the counter across from her and locking eyes. He can’t seem to go more than a minute without looking at her, as if she can solve all our problems.

“Well, there is a reason why it hasn’t sold after months on the market,” Olivia remarks. “But look at it this way,” she continues cheerily, “you have lots of opportunities to make it your own. And you’re welcome to adjust the menu as you—”

“The menu! Yes, let’s see it,” I interrupt. If there is one thing that can save this place, it’s the menu.

Olivia is initially caught off guard by my outburst but recovers quickly. “Of course,” she reaches under the counter and pulls out two laminated menus.

I feel myself deflate as my eyes skim over what might be the most generic assortment of diner food I’ve ever seen.

“Egg & Bacon Sandwich, Pancake Stack,” I read a few breakfast items out loud before looking at the dinner options. “Burger—served with cheese, lettuce, tomato, and onion. Meatloaf—served with mashed potatoes and broccoli.”

“Calm down, Ratatouille,” Daniel puts his hand up to stop me. “You can make whatever changes you want.”

“Okay, first of all, this whole menu needs to be scrapped,” I assess. “Second of all, Ratatouille is the name of the dish, not the rat. His name is Remy.”

“Alright, Remy, let’s go see what we’re working with,” he gestures in the direction of the kitchen. Olivia eagerly leads the way through the large, swinging double doors. Compared to the dining room, the kitchen is a welcome change. Sure, it’s a bit tight and outdated, but I can work with this.

I’m appalled to discover there’s almost no fresh food. Aside

from a couple dozen eggs, a loaf of bread, and a few fruits and vegetables, the fridges and shelves are bare.

“How did the chef make anything with this?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“Most of the food is, uh. . .” Olivia trails off and points at the large freezer in the corner. When I open it, I see where the majority of the menu items are from.

“First thing’s first,” I declare. “We need more produce than this.”

“I can take care of that,” Olivia chimes in with a smile.

I nod, trying to hide the fact that I’m in way over my head and struggling to stay above water. Speaking of, some fresh air might help calm my mind a little. I say my goodbyes and head out the front door. The doorbell rings out as I step down onto the sidewalk.

The sun is starting to sink, and the day is melting into an apricot-orange evening. Little blue birds sit up on the lamp post, finishing their songs for the day. I press my hands into my pockets and take a deep breath. I want to trust Daniel. I want to believe him when he says that we can work this all out, but that doesn’t stop the anxiety from bubbling up in my chest like a whistling tea kettle.

I head down the sidewalk, looking at my off-white sneakers as they navigate the uneven pavement. I turn the corner by the bookstore, when I’m met with a sharp impact. I gasp, stumbling back, jumping as peaches rain down on my feet. I pause, looking at them in confusion before I lift my chin.

The man says something, but his words are lost on me as my eyes lock onto his. They’re a deep shade of brown, filled with a glimmer of amusement and something else that I can’t quite place.

I shake my head. "What?" But before I can get the word out, he's already crouched to the sidewalk, inspecting the peaches for bruises. I drop down with him and help him collect them.

"Just said, I'm sorry," he grunts.

"No, I'm sorry?"

He looks up at me. His complexion is dark with a deep reddish blush creeping up his high cheekbones. He chuckles. "Is that a question?"

"No," I shake my head, mentally kicking myself for how awkward I'm being in front of the most handsome man I've ever encountered. "No," I repeat, handing him the last fallen peach.

He stands up, shaking his head. "Keep it, because *I'm* sorry."

I stand up, watching as he's already walking away, looking over his shoulder at me with a grin. I stare at the peach and then back up at him. "No, *I'm* the sorry one!"

"Sorry!" he calls back, disappearing around the corner, lifting his hand as if to wave goodbye. I stare back down at the fuzzy pink peach, blinking away my confusion.

*Who was that?*

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