

His to Unwrap

Chapter One

Madison

I never really thought I'd like a small town. I mean, sure, I've watched Hallmark Christmas movies, but I didn't think places like those cute little towns were *real*. Places with Christmas trees outside every shop, festivals, hot cocoa on every corner, and everyone smiling as they shop for loved ones.

White Falls is as picturesque as any fictional small town at Christmas. Black, wrought iron lamp posts are trimmed in red ribbon, wreaths hang from shop windows, and fluffy patches of snow gather in the crevices between buildings and on the sidewalks.

Even the inn I just checked into is a quaint little chalet, decked in enough Christmas lights to illuminate the entire town. It's magical. Santa must be nearby.

I draw a breath of frigid, cleansing air and release it in a tiny puff of white. New York City seems a million miles away and for the first time in two years, I feel like I can breathe. No matter what comes next for me, I can't stay there.

A car door slams and my best friend hobbles to me on crutches, her left foot in a thick black boot. My eyes prick with tears at the sight of her, and I pull her into a hug, breathing in her familiar cherry scent.

"I can't believe you're here!" Amanda says. "I wish you would have listened and stayed with us instead of at the inn."

"I didn't want to disturb you guys." Amanda and her husband Roland have only been married six months. That's still a honeymoon phase, right?

"You're not. We have plenty of room."

It's hard to ignore the slight pout in her tone. I just didn't think I could stay there, knowing that they'd be cuddling the entire week. I'm happy for Amanda. I am. Being around such affection just makes me feel like a third wheel. "Maybe in a couple of days? I thought the solitude might help me figure some things out."

She takes my hand and I know she understands. We've been best friends since we were

five years old. These last two years, I've only seen her once, at her wedding, and to be honest, I feel a little awkward. She's definitely been a better friend to me than I've been to her.

"Okay, but don't expect to spend the whole time in your room. I know things have been rough, but quitting was the right thing to do. I promise this week will be the best."

"It's already better," I whisper. There's no way to put into words how much I needed this vacation. "But you didn't tell me you hurt yourself! What happened?"

She rolls her eyes. "I fell in love with this gorgeous pair of high heel boots. First time I wore them, I found out they were not Montana winter approved. I slipped on some ice, fell down the stairs, and broke my ankle. I'm a fashion victim."

I wince. "Are you okay?"

She chuckles. "I'm fine. It's a pretty clean break. Plus, Roland gets to wait on me for a couple of weeks while it heals. The worst part is walking with these things." She waves a crutch, just as a man passes on the sidewalk. He makes an awkward duck to avoid being hit in the face. "Oh shit. Sorry!" she calls as he hurries away, looking back at her like she's dangerous.

The moment he turns a corner, I burst out laughing. The stress I've been feeling melts away and my shoulders relax. "I've missed you, 'Manda." My throat feels tight. It's a minute before I can breathe without a flood of emotion.

She wipes at her eyes. "Back at ya, babe. Come on. Let me show you why I love White Falls and why you should move here immediately."

"It is really pretty here. Cold though." A brisk winter wind slips under my coat, making me shiver. Not that I expected a heat wave. It's Montana in December and Main Street looks like it dead ends at a mountain.

Amanda laughs. "Come on. We'll warm you up with some coffee."

I perk up as we get into her SUV. "Peppermint mocha?"

"With whipped cream and Christmas sprinkles," Amanda says as she chucks her crutches into the backseat.

"I knew we were best friends for a reason."

She leans into my shoulder. "You can always count on me for your sugar fix. Sasha's mochas are literally the best thing I've ever had. She won't divulge her recipe, so half the town is competing to figure out the secret."

"Do you win something if you do?" The idea of dozens of people arguing mocha recipes

makes me smile. I've never even spoken to my current neighbor. This kind of community doesn't exist in my neighborhood.

"Besides bragging rights for life? Sasha said she'd have a special mug made just for the person who figures it out, and no one else would ever get to use it."

That's the silliest thing I've heard in ages and it makes me giggle. "Maybe I'll try my hand at it while I'm here."

"Oh, it's on girl. That custom mug is *mine*." She parks in front of a cute coffee shop two blocks down. A black and white striped awning covers the door and *Mainlined* is emblazoned in purple on the windows.

"These things are a pain," Amanda grumbles as we get out of the car. She shakes a crutch for emphasis and almost hits her car with it.

"You'll be off them soon." Hopefully, Roland has good insurance until then. I love the woman, but she creates disaster. Not intentionally. She's just gifted.

The coffee shop door opens as we near, and a behemoth of a man steps out. He's easily six foot four with auburn hair cut short on the sides, but long and messy on top. A dark beard covers his jaw and his shoulders are so broad, I swear he has to turn sideways to get through the door. His faded brown jacket hangs open, revealing a blue flannel shirt that hugs his chest and flat stomach, hinting at the heavy muscles beneath, while dark jeans cover his thick thighs and long legs.

Holy hell. He's hot.

He holds the door open, glancing at Amanda, before those golden eyes land on me.

I feel the weight of his gaze as his eyes sweep over my curves, lingering like a slow caress on my hips and breasts as they travel up to my mouth. I lick my lips and press them together as a blush heats my cheeks.

"Oh thanks," Amanda chirps, oblivious to my sudden fascination with this man.

He shifts closer to me and the scent of pine and clean male skin hits me. Has anyone ever smelled so good? I want to bury my nose in his neck and breathe for days until his scent is so imprinted that I'll never be without it. It's an insane thought. Who does that?

The man rumbles something in a deep voice that sends a delicious shiver through me that makes my nipples hard.

Amanda hobbles inside the coffee shop.

I haven't moved. This man is radiating strength and power just standing there, holding the door for me. There's a presence about him that I can't quite define.

His lips quirk in the barest smile as he waits. Then he leans toward me until I feel the warmth of his breath tickle the shell of my ear.

"Better get inside, angel. Don't want you to get too cold."

My hands snag onto his flannel shirt as he speaks, because I'm swaying into him like some swoony romance heroine. Dear god, could I be more cringe in front of this man? No. Can I help myself? Obviously not, or I wouldn't be making such a scene. He just smells *so good*.

A large, warm hand lands on the small of my back, breaking me out of his wicked spell. I meet his deep, golden gaze.

One corner of his mouth tugs up before he pries my fingers out of his shirt and gently nudges me toward the door.

The entire encounter probably only lasted a minute, but it felt like a lifetime. A lifetime of melting over a stranger on the street when I still have a full week to spend here. Nope. Not mortifying at all.

"Uh... thank you," I stammer as I get to the threshold.

His eyes glitter down at me and his chin lifts in acknowledgment, then the door shuts behind me. I turn back to the window and search the street outside for his big, rugged frame, but he's gone.

Who was he? Will I see him again before I leave?

The thought that I might not makes me feel hollow. I shove the weird feeling down and meet Amanda at the counter. Jet lag. It's the only explanation.

"Girl, you need to be bubble wrapped before you leave the house," the woman behind the counter says, pointing to Amanda's crutches.

"Probably," she replies. "Sasha, this is my best friend Madison I was telling you about."

Sasha extends her hand over the counter to shake mine, a wide smile on her face. She's about our age, I think, with beautiful bronze skin and black eyes. "From *Spiced* right? I love that TV show. Although how you deal with Chef Alastair is anyone's guess. That man would scare a saint."

My boss... or rather, my ex-boss, is a tornado in the kitchen. If a person's movements were out of sync with his, they were destroyed verbally. Usually in front of an audience of

millions. Most people think he's the worst part of the show, but he never had a harsh word for me.

Before I can reply, Sasha turns to Amanda. "Did you ask her?"

"No. Not yet."

"Ask me what?"

Amanda's face scrunches. "I know you just got here, but I need a big favor."

"Sure."

"A really big favor. The town's charity gala is in a few days. I volunteered for it before I fell."

"We've been friends since the second day of kindergarten. Of course I'll help."

"The second day?" Sasha asks.

"That first day was a little rough," Amanda replies.

"She spilled chocolate milk on my brand new dress." I was not happy. But when she burst into tears, it didn't take me long to forgive her.

Sasha cackles. "Yeah, I can definitely see that."

Amanda fiddles with one of her crutches.

"I better get a couple of mochas for you. I think you'll need them," Sasha says as they exchange a look.

My stomach makes an uncomfortable flop. "What do you need me to do for the gala?"

"Auction yourself to the highest bidder."