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A
GETTING LUCKY
NOVEL



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Second
Chance

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*That
Second
Chance*

MEGHAN
QUINN



Montlake
Romance

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*To my parents and their little gift shop, Under the Nose, in
Upstate New York. Your dedication to your community and love
for fudge creations truly inspired me to create my own little
fictional world around your incredibly ambitious dream. I love
you both.*

CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PROLOGUE

GRIFFIN

“Arooooo woooo!” Brig howls, brandishing a Hand Grenade—New Orleans’s famous green tube drink. “Twenty-one. I am twenty”—he pauses and bends at the waist, bowing to my brothers and me—“one.” Breaking into the Running Man, my youngest brother shuffles along the grimy cobblestones, drunk off his ass, just like the rest of us.

“He’s twenty-one—buy this man a drink,” Reid, my second-youngest brother, shouts to no one in particular.

“Buy us all drinks.” Brig twirls in the middle of the narrow, deserted street, arms spread, face cast up to the dark sky. Neon signs advertising big boobs and beer illuminate the area around us, encouraging nothing but high-level debauchery on this densely humid summer night.

When we told our parents we were going to New Orleans to celebrate Brig, the last Knightly brother to turn twenty-one, they had their reservations. And now that I see Brig and Reid spinning in circles together while the usually uptight and silent Rogan takes video of them, I’m thinking they might have had a point.

Being the oldest brother, I was tasked with keeping everyone in line, but right about now, I’m seeing double, and all I can focus on is finding a giant soft pretzel with extra salt.

Corralling my brothers like a sheepdog, I say, “Let’s get pretzels.”

“But we weren’t done dancing. We were just finding our groove,” Brig complains.

“We need food. We haven’t eaten since the casino, and that was hours ago.”

Reid pats his stomach. “Best chicken fingers I’ve ever had, and that honey-mustard sauce, oooooeee, that was good. What I wouldn’t give for a tub of that as a souvenir.”

“Mom really enjoyed hearing about all the money you lost on roulette,” Rogan says, squinting past the hair that has fallen over his face as he taps away on his phone. As he’s one of the taller brothers, it’s funny seeing him hunched over, typing on his phone . . . talking to Mom. “Said she owes you a wallop to the head when we get home.”

“Dude,” Reid complains. “What the hell, man? Why are you reporting things back to Mom?”

He shrugs, which throws his balance askew and sends him off the sidewalk. He catches himself before falling to the ground and chuckles, a sound I haven’t heard from Rogan in a long time. “She slipped me one hundred bucks to give her all the details about this weekend.”

“What?” I ask, insulted. I attempt walking in a straight line next to Reid but fail miserably thanks to the uneven cobblestones. “She didn’t give me any money for making sure everyone came back alive.”

“That’s because you’re already the oldest brother. It’s in the job description,” Rogan says, walking past me in his tight, form-fitting clothes, still texting. Of the four of us, he’s the only one with any sort of fashion sense. I tend to stick with regular jeans and a T-shirt. It’s how I’m most comfortable.

“It’s true,” Brig cuts in, strolling—or more accurately, stumbling—ahead of me. “Being the oldest means you’re our designated voice of reason.”

“What about Jen? Technically, she’s the oldest,” I answer, speaking of our older and only sister, who was too busy taking her kids to their nonstop activities to come on this trip. Though honestly, I think she wanted to stay as far away from this weekend as possible. I don’t blame her. We’ve been hell on wheels since we arrived. “Shouldn’t she hold any kind of responsibilities?”

All three of my brothers exchange looks and then shake their heads, laughing. Brig and Reid link their arms through Rogan’s, and the three waltz off like they’re skipping their way down a yellow brick road rather than a derelict, alcohol-encrusted street. I traipse slowly behind them, really focusing on each step I take.

Do not trip. Do not trip.

One step at a—

My phone buzzes in my pocket, breaking my focus. With one faulty step, I fall to the side and stumble against a parked car as I reach for my phone in my pocket. Chuckling, I accept the call, my eyes too unfocused to even make out the name flashing across the screen.

“Hello, this is Griffin Knightly,” I answer. “I’m drunk and am prone to saying stupid things. How may I help you?”

There’s a soft chuckle at the other end, and my heart starts to race immediately.

Claire.

“Hey, you.”

“Wifeeeeeey!” I stop pursuing my brothers and lean back against the car. Honda Civics: very comfortable for drunk leaning.

My brothers’ obnoxiously loud laughter fades as my wife’s voice comes through the phone.

Soft and sweet, just like her skin.

“Mmm, you sound like you’re having a good time.”

I lean my head against the roof, not caring about who its owner might be. “I am. We had Huge Ass Beers—that’s what they call them—and then made our way through some Grenades, and I also had some white frozen drink at the casino that tickled my fancy.”

She chuckles. “Oh, you’re really drunk. I can always tell because you start adding a little bit of a British accent in your voice.”

“Is that so? Cheerio, mate, and good day to you.” I dip my head as a greeting even though she can’t see me.

“Oh, I miss you. Have you started calling people wankers yet?”

“No.” I sigh, the liquid mixing around in my stomach. Oh boy. “Not yet, but I can feel it coming on.”

“Are you going to remember to get on your flight home tomorrow?”

“Yeah, no problem. We’ve got this.” I yawn and shut my eyes briefly, the ground spinning beneath me. “The white drink was really good.”

“And how were the cocktail waitresses at the casino?”

“Not as pretty as you on a Saturday night with that old-lady turtleneck thing you like to wear.”

She laughs some more. “Good answer. I’ll let you go—I just wanted to make sure you’re still alive.”

“Yup, totally alive, and so are my brothers. Brig, though . . . not sure how much longer he’s going to last. He’s starting to really belt those Disney songs.”

“I can only imagine what he must sound like.”

“Not good, babe, not good.”

“Okay, well, maybe you guys call it a night soon. You don’t want to get into any trouble. New Orleans can be a shifty place if you’re not paying attention.”

“Don’t worry, babe; we got this under control. I love you.”

“I love you too, Griffin. Be careful.”

“Always.” I hang up the phone and put it back in my pocket before staggering after my brothers, who didn’t get very far.

While unsteadily jogging after them, I trip over a protruding cobblestone and accidentally hurtle myself onto Rogan’s back. He stumbles beneath my weight and tips into Reid, and just like a domino, he slams into Brig, who falls to the ground with a giant crack . . . of wood?

And sure enough, Brig is sprawled out on a rickety pile of broken wood. My foggy brain strains to comprehend the picture.

“Oh fuck, my back.” Brig rolls off the wood and clutches himself in pain. “What *is* that? There are splinters everywhere. I can feel them.”

“Dude, you broke a table,” Reid points out while I bend down in a clumsy attempt to check Brig’s vitals.

“Shit, did I?” He sits up, and a giant smile stretches across his face as he swats me away, his sandy-brown hair tousled from his fall, those blue eyes we all share wild with excitement. “Alcohol has given me Hulklike superpowers. Look at that thing—I smashed it to smithereens.”

We all take in what’s left of the table, and I have to admit he really did a number on it.

“That’s not from Hulklike superpowers,” Reid points out. “That’s straight up from your fat ass eating twelve beignets this morning.”

“Excuse me.” A thin voice breaks up our banter, and we turn to see an elderly woman step out from a shadowy alleyway. She’s draped in velvet robes, and her face is twisted in anger. “That was my table you smashed.” Her hands are covered with henna tattoos and shake slightly as she points to what’s left of the table.

Once again, we take in the damage, really trying to give it a good once-over, our alcohol-soaked brains attempting to comprehend what we

just did. “Oh shit, that was *your* table?” Brig asks. “Was it important to you?”

“It was where I conducted my work.”

I feel a stab of guilt at her words. “Yeah, it’s where she conducts her work, dumbass.” Reid falls to the ground and tries to put the table back together but fails miserably. “Uh”—he glances over his shoulder, two table legs in his hand—“what do you do exactly?”

“I’m a palm reader.”

I groan inwardly as my guilt quickly dissipates. A palm reader? More like a professional con artist. I mean, how could they possibly be legitimate? *Oh, look at that line; it means you will live a long, happy life. And this line right here—you’re going to be married. Oh, and right here, this says you’re going to have a pool.*

Talk about the most evasive “storytelling” you’ll ever witness.

“Really?” Brig looks a little too excited, still sitting in the gutter, covered in New Orleans’s finest sewer water. “Will you read my palm? I feel bad I broke your little table, and I want to make it up to you.” Pulling a twenty from his wallet, he waves it in the air as if to say, *Come and get it.*

“Dude, she’s not going to tell you anything you don’t already know. You’re a nitwit who can’t see past his own damn feet,” Rogan interjects with an eye roll, voicing what no one else will say.

With a smack to his stomach and a sharp eye, I step in front of him so he can’t make the situation any more awkward than it is.

The palm reader eyes the bill quizzically and then snatches it from Brig’s fingertips and sits next to him on the street. I stifle a sigh as Reid, Rogan, and I step closer, our broad shoulders forming a brotherly barricade. A part of me wants to stop this, to pick Brig off the scum-laden streets of New Orleans and drag him to the pretzel joint, but with how invested he looks, I know he’s going to be unmovable.

Brig holds up his hand. “Take a picture, Rogan, and send it to Mom. Tell her she’s about to find out if I’m going to give her any grandkids.”

Rogan rolls his eyes and takes a picture while the palm reader gently takes Brig’s hand in hers. Eyes closed, head tilted to the sky as if looking for answers, her fingers dance across Brig’s skin.

“Oh, that tickles,” he whispers.

Silently we stare at her, watching her lightly sway with the wind breezing through the narrow streets of the French Quarter.

She takes a deep breath in through her mouth, eyes still shut, fingers now pressing deeply into Brig's palm.

"I see . . . brothers."

Oh, for Christ's sake. Right there, see what I was talking about? Professional con artists, stating the absolute obvious.

"I have three of them," Brig says, getting into it.

"Hell, I'm not drunk enough to watch this," Rogan comments with a long groan and irritated stance. The palm reader flashes an eerie glare in his direction, sharp and calculating, before returning to Brig's hand.

"They're protective, with big hearts."

"You betcha!"

I roll my eyes. How long is this going to take?

"They're going to get you into trouble one day."

Brig turns his attention on all of us. "You motherfuckers. I knew you would double-cross me eventually."

The palm reader spouts off a few more generic things, Brig interjecting with his commentary the whole time, though I block the rest of the reading out. From what I can tell, it's all bullshit. The lady is clearly just trying to make a few bucks off of drunk tourists.

When she opens her eyes, they settle on the three of us watching over our little brother. "Who's next?"

Like the moron he is, Reid holds his hand out excitedly. "Please, for the love of all bare boobs on Mardi Gras, tell me I'm going to run my own restaurant again someday. I really need a break here, lady. Give Daddy the good news." He bounces on his feet, pumping himself up for what I can only imagine is going to be one massive fabrication from this professional liar.

Rogan scoffs, the most outspoken among us, and presses his hand against Reid's chest, backing him away from the palm reader. "You're kidding, right? You didn't tell Brig anything we didn't already know. Why would we want to pay you another twenty dollars to hear about how we're . . . I don't know . . . wearing shoes, when we could be spending that money on soft pretzels with extra salt?"

Can't agree with him more. "Yeah, we're not interested. I'm sorry my brother smashed your table, though. I'll keep a better eye on him." I nod my head toward the lit-up street behind us. "Come on, dude, let's go get a pretzel."

“What I speak is the truth,” the palm reader insists, standing up and squaring her shoulders.

“Yeah, we know, because you said the obvious. He has brothers who are going to get him into trouble.” I roll my eyes again. “Pretty sure our three-year-old nephew could have predicted that.”

“Yeah. Sorry, lady.” Rogan helps Brig to his feet. “You’re a hoax.”

“Here.” I reach into my pocket, wanting to solve the problem quickly and get the hell away from this lady. “Here’s forty more dollars for a new table. I’m sorry Brig’s beignet butt smashed it.”

Looking irritated, the lady comes closer. “What I do is not a hoax. It’s sent to me straight from the cosmic forces above.”

A strangely chilly gust of wind whips by us as we all take a moment to glance around, silently communicating about the batshit crazy woman in front of us. And almost in unison, we throw our drunk heads back and guffaw.

Midchuckle, Rogan holds on to Brig for support and gasps, “Cosmic forces! Shit, that’s good.” He wipes at his eye.

She shoots a venomous glare in our direction, spending at least five seconds apiece on each of us, never wavering her stare, only letting it grow more and more intense. We fall silent, our laughter blowing away with the wind.

Sheesh, she’s fucking scary.

“You’ll regret this,” she sneers.

Okay, this is getting to be a little too intense. Time to get out of here. But Reid seems to have other plans, his anger taking over. Classic Reid. I can see it in his shaking shoulders, in his clenched jaw: the anger he harbors for other reasons has surfaced and is about to come out.

“Oh surrrre.” His voice drips with sarcasm. Typical Reid. Placing my hand on his stiff chest to calm him down, I start to guide him away.

But not quickly enough . . .

Another gust of wind blows past us, this one stronger than the other, pushing me back a step as street trash whips around us. When I turn to the lady again, she’s standing with her arms spread, head tilted toward the dark sky. Her velvet robes blow angrily in the strengthening wind.

With bone-chilling conviction, her words pour forth:

“Those who belittle and make others feel worse will feel the ungodly wrath of my curse.” Snapping her head forward, she eerily points to all of

us, and we draw close together as the wind blasts us from behind. “*Listen to me, to the words I have spoken.*” Her voice grows stronger, louder, more sinister. “*From this day on, your love will be broken. It isn’t until your minds have matured that the weight of this curse will forever be cured.*”

She slams her arms down to her sides, and the wicked winds die down, the litter that was whirling around us like some kind of tornado feathering down to the street. The palm reader stands idly, eyes lasering in on us.

What the fuck just happened?

Reid and Brig are gripping tightly to my arms; Rogan’s knuckles are white as they clutch Brig’s shoulder. I scan each of my brothers, making sure no one has turned into a rooster head or any crazy shit like that. Together, we take a deep breath, and—

Reid starts laughing again, but nervously this time. “Okay, lady, thanks for the ‘curse.’” He uses air quotes and then nods in the opposite direction. “Pretzels, here we come.”

I cast one last glance at the palm reader, eyes boring in on our backs, a chill running up and down my spine.

Rogan and I follow close behind as Brig brings up the rear. “Hey, wait up,” he calls out. “You guys, I think she was serious back there. She actually cursed us with *broken love.*”

I bite my tongue as we round a corner, not wanting to project my niggling, alcohol-induced fears on my younger brother, but honestly, that entire situation back there was pretty alarming. Where the hell did all that wind come from?

But being the protective older brother, I wrap my arm around Brig’s neck and pull him close to me. “There is no way you’re going to believe that, are you?”

“I mean, there was wind and shit.” *Yeah, the wind got me too, bud.*

Rogan rolls his eyes. “It’s called coincidental timing. There’s no way she controlled the wind and set some crazy curse on us. That just doesn’t happen in real life.”

“But what if she really did?”

Wanting to ease the anxiety in my very gullible little brother, I shake my head. “Brig, I can promise you, that palm reader gets her jollies from scaring tourists. Believe me, there is no broken-love curse. Okay?”



Five days later . . .

“You’re such a good boy, Griffin.”

Mrs. Davenport looks up at me as she perches on her mauve wingback chair. Hands steeped under her chin, gratefulness shining brightly in her eyes. It might not seem like much, but this right here is why I wanted to become a volunteer firefighter: to help out the people of my small town.

I twist the cover back onto the smoke detector, pocket the old battery, and hop down from the chair I borrowed from Mrs. Davenport’s little kitchenette set. She lives in a quaint brick apartment building known in Port Snow, Maine, as Senior Row. It’s where all the singles over the age of seventy go to live. It isn’t very big, but they have their fun during the day in the courtyard, hit up the early bird specials out on Main Street, and turn out the lights by eight.

“Anytime, Mrs. Davenport. You know I’m here to help.”

I pack up my things quickly, trying to not give Mrs. Davenport an opening for her usual long conversations.

“Am I your last stop for the day?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, lovely.” She moves some old crossword puzzles clipped from newspapers off the chair beside her wingback and pats the seat. “Why don’t you stay for a bit? Tell me about your wild adventure in New Orleans.”

I knew that was coming. Happens every time. A week ago, she held down Jim Bryan for over two hours, going into detail about her arthritic hip. Poor guy. He missed dinner and bedtime with his kids. And instead of kissing their little cherub faces good night, he wound up helping Mrs. Davenport into her room after she conked out midsentence.

I’m not going to let that happen to me.

No way in hell.

Wincing, I close my small toolbox and straighten up. “Oh man, I would love to, Mrs. Davenport, but I have a few houses on the way back to the station I have to check up on, or else I would stay.”

Eyeing me suspiciously, she shakes her finger in my direction. “Griffin Knightly, how dare you lie to an old lady? You just want to go see

that wife of yours, don't you?"

Desperately.

Since I've gotten back, she's been on the night shift at the hospital, and our paths have only crossed for a few short, stolen moments. I want nothing more than to lie in bed, snuggle up next to my wife, and watch a movie.

"You got me, Mrs. Davenport. The missus is waiting. Do you mind? Maybe we can catch up another time."

Shakily, she stands, using her cane for assistance. Patting me gently on the forearm, she says, "That sounds nice. I'll walk you to the door."

"No need. I can see myself out. Thank you, though, and if you need anything, let me know."

She smiles sweetly and sits back in her chair. "Thank you, Griffin. Say hello to your folks for me."

"Will do."

I'm out the door in five steps, reaching for my phone just as it starts to buzz.

Wifey is written across the screen.

Smiling, I haul my toolbox down the street as I answer the phone. "Hey, babe."

There's silence and then a male voice. "Griffin." I know that voice. It's Larson, one of the EMTs in town.

"Larson, what the hell are you doing with Claire's phone?"

"Man . . ." His voice sounds tight, almost as if he's been crying. "I don't know . . . shit, I don't know how to tell you this."

"Tell me what?" The hairs rise on the back of my neck.

"It's Claire . . ."

I stop midstride, my feet feeling like they're being weighed down by cement, my chest seizing, wrapping around my heart, my lungs. The air is squeezed viciously from my body as a piece of me slowly breaks in two.

Those words, those eerie words, reverberate in my mind, spoken with such malice, with unpredictable promise . . .

From this day on, your love will be broken.

Rattling around in my head, echoing, spoken over and over again. The wind picks up, smacking me hard in the chest, and leaves twirl around me, a sense of dread looming over my now-shadowed heart.

There's no way . . .

CHAPTER ONE

GRIFFIN

Two years later . . .

Beep, beep, beep.

“Ughhhhhh,” I groan into my pillow. The blaring sound of my alarm went off just as my dream was getting good. Why does it always seem to go off when I’m about to win an unspecified major award? I’ve always won something, but I never get to find out what kind of prize it is. Who knows? It could be the leg lamp from *A Christmas Story*.

But hell if I’ll ever find out.

Pressing the stop button on my phone, I roll onto my back, my eyes adjusting to the morning summer light drifting through the sheer white curtains hanging in my bedroom.

Like every morning, I glance to my right and take in the untouched pillow, the empty nightstand, the opposite side of the bed forever cold.

Even though it’s been two years, the pain is still there.

The guilt.

The weight of what-ifs playing over and over in my head.

What if she hadn’t had such a strenuous job?

What if I missed a sign?

What if I had been there?

What if I’d never gone to New Orleans?

I shake the negative thoughts out of my head, not wanting to start my day in another emotionally distraught stupor.

I swing my feet to the side of the bed and press the palm of my hand to my eye, wiping away any leftover sleep. Taking a deep breath, I hop out

of bed, my feet landing on the newly refurbished hardwood floors of my little Cape Cod–style house. Padding across the floor, the summer heat not yet suffocating the top floor in the early-morning hours, I make my way to my bathroom, flip on the shower, take a leak, and then glance at myself in the mirror.

Old.

Yup, I look fucking old.

I lean forward and inspect myself, letting the shower heat up.

I'm thirty, but I don't feel thirty.

My bones ache.

My ankles crack with every step I take.

My back is two bunker gears away from giving out on me.

And those wrinkles near my eyes. Fuck, they're bad. Deep and angry, aging me at least ten years.

My throat pulses, making me let out a few rasping coughs straight from my semiblackened lungs. Two days ago we put out a fire in an abandoned warehouse along the harbor, and I'm still feeling the effects.

Usually my voice recovers quickly after I put out a fire, but this time, it seems like the smoke settled in my throat. Grainy and weathered, that's how I sound.

Sighing, I step into the shower, letting the water cascade through my short brown hair and down my back, but only for a few seconds—I don't grant myself much time to get ready in the morning, since I prefer to sleep.

I'm in and out in five minutes, drying off and then putting on my usual summer uniform of jeans and a crew neck shirt with a giant lobster on the front. In bold lettering, it reads, *The Lobster Landing*—my family's gift shop.

The gift shop and bakery is famous, not just in Port Snow but throughout Maine. My parents have built their little fudge shop into a confectionary and artisanal haven, patronized by locals and tourists alike. It's a must-see attraction on Maine's tourism website—number three, to be exact.

And not only is it our family business, but it's mine to run now; well, at least unofficially it's mine to run. Someday it will solely be mine. My parents still handle the books, but day-to-day operations come down to me. Which is why I'm up early every day—sometimes after a long night of

firefighting—heading into the shop to make sure everything is ready for a fresh batch of tourists.

Taming my short strands, I run a quick towel through my hair, throw a little pomade in my hand, do a quick style, and brush my teeth, and I'm out the door.

The morning haze lifts off the soaked grass from light showers the night before, the sun barely peeking up past the crest of the ocean as Port Snow natives mill about, preparing their shops and restaurants for the day's traffic.

The walk to the shop is short and brisk, the familiar sounds of the waves crashing into the rocky harbor like a joyful prelude to what the day will bring. My spirits can't help but lift as I approach the Landing. It's the only white building on the block, covered in white shake shingles with vibrant red trim, showcasing a distinct teal door. Quaint flower boxes full of blossoming red and green hues spill from its windows, and I'm reminded of just how far we've come, the kind of legacy my parents built for future generations of Knightlys.

Jen, my older sister, is there to greet me when I reach the front door. She's sitting on the kitschy lobster-shaped bench in front of the shop, legs crossed, coffee mug in hand—she doesn't believe in to-go cups—and one of her fingers twirling her long brown hair, which is held tight in a ponytail.

“Good morning.” She stands when I reach her.

“You could have opened, you know.”

She takes a sip of her steaming coffee. “I know, but I didn't feel like it. Zach's in charge of the kids this morning, so I wanted to enjoy some silence. It's his turn to deal with the twins from hell and their demonic brother.”

Unlocking the front door, I let my sister in first, a smile on my face. “Braxton is demonic now?”

Jen goes straight to the fudge counter, where she starts unwrapping all thirty of our unique flavors, including key lime pie, maple walnut, and candy explosion—to name a few—while I head to the back office. “I swear to God, it's like living with you fools all over again. Even though he's only five, he already has the Knightly-brother blood running through his veins. And let me tell you this”—she pauses and points at me—“the minute that boy starts sticking my underwear in the freezer like you four cretins used to, he's moving in with you.”

From the back of the shop, I bring a fresh cash drawer to the old-fashioned register resting at the front of the shop. It's original to the store and still fully functioning, adding an extra bit of historical charm to the space.

"I take no responsibility for Braxton's bad behavior. You know that's Brig and Reid's doing."

"But he likes you best."

"Can't blame the guy for having good taste." I wink at Jen just in time to see her roll her eyes.

"Dad got the new fudge catalog in."

Oh Christ.

It's the worst piece of mail that could ever arrive at my parents' house. It's like Christmas Day for my dad but pure horror for the rest of us.

A bound booklet of seasonal fudge recipes from the supplier, full of colorful graphics, it sweeps our dad, the consummate dreamer of confectionary creations, right off his feet.

Highlighters are uncapped.

Notes are taken.

Endless fudge fantasies are created.

And the family is put to work not only making the fudge but eating it.

Oh, woe is me, right? Poor Griffin has to eat fudge. Well, when you've been eating it for about thirty years, there's a limit to how much fudge you can actually digest.

I've reached my limit, and so has Jen.

Brig and Reid still have a few more years under their belts.

And Rogan . . . well, the guy is a health nut and refuses to put any sort of sugary substance in his body. He hasn't eaten a bite of fudge since 2007.

"Mom couldn't hide it before he got the mail?"

Jen shakes her head, arranging flavor after flavor of our famous fudge on the marble counter, ready for taste testing and purchasing. "She knows better than to hide that thing again. Last time, when he found it in the trash, he didn't let up for days about how she was stifling his creative flow. And he said he wanted to try out a few new recipes before the big Fall Lobster Fest."

Sounds about right.

The Fall Lobster Fest is one of Port Snow's largest attractions. It kicks off the season of pumpkin-spice lattes and apple-cider doughnuts, and every

year, my dad goes all out, catering toward fall flavors, coming up with the theme for our booth, and creating an atmosphere of elegance and sophistication, showing off our wide variety of goods and the popularity of the Lobster Landing. It's a huge deal, something I've always helped with but never headed up, something my dad still holds on to, unable to truly trust anyone to take it over.

Moving on to the small bakery case beside the fudge, I wheel over the rolling baking racks that have fresh-from-the-oven baked goods our in-house baker, Craig, creates at three in the morning . . . every day.

Scones.

Cinnamon buns.

Cider doughnuts.

And all the turnovers your little heart desires.

It's one of my favorite parts of setting up the shop, the smell of fresh baked goods. Not to mention the specialty pies in the back just waiting to be boxed up and paid for.

"So what's the damage?" I ask, placing the scones on a white display platter with tongs. "How many new recipes are we going to have to try?"

"Mom said only five."

"*Only* five? But we have thirty flavors already."

Jen gives me a pointed look, not even halfway through unloading all of the fudge. "You think I don't know that? Mom said Dad was going to put some flavors in the fudge graveyard."

Ahh, the fudge graveyard, where old flavors go to rest. We only bring the dead flavors back out for special occasions. "Good."

"Yeah. Mom put the kibosh on adding any new flavors when we hit the thirty mark."

"That's why we love her."

The bell that hangs over the front door chimes as Brig struts in, a breakfast sandwich in hand. The bell was installed when my parents first opened for business over thirty-five years ago, but now it's only heard during the early hours of the morning, when it's just my siblings and me—the store is usually too packed and noisy at any other time.

"Morning," Brig calls out, wearing the same lobster-emblazoned shirt as Jen and me, though his is a little more form fitting. "Thought I'd stop by to see if you guys need any help?" Casually, he makes his way around the shop, inspecting every detail. Running his finger along the clear glass

bakery coolers, taking in the unique lobster shirts hanging on clothing racks, and even trying on our famous lobster-shaped oven mitts.

Jen and I both do a double take, our mouths hanging slack with shock.

Brig never comes in just to see if we need help, and never this early. He's usually sleeping in at this hour, or at the garage, restoring old Mustangs, which he's somehow turned into his full-time job.

Taking the lead, I ask the question on the tips of both our tongues. "Why are you really here?"

Shock and then insult pass through his eyes, and he clutches his chest as if I just wounded him. Spinning onto one of the red leather-upholstered stools that offer a small seating area near the coffee and tea, Brig gasps. "Can't a darling brother come in on a Monday to see how his siblings are faring and to offer an extra hand during this busy tourist season?"

Jen and I exchange glances. "No," we say at the same time.

Dramatically, Brig rolls his eyes, stacks his feet on the stool next to him, and stuffs the last bite of his sandwich in his mouth. "Saw a travel group last night over at the Lighthouse Restaurant," he says through his full mouth. "A bunch of girls getting their master's and taking a break from a tough summer buried in their books. I happened to overhear they were coming to the Landing for scones this morning. Wanted to help with the rush."

Yeah, "the rush." I'm sure that's the last thing on my lovestruck brother's mind. Of all the Knightly brothers, Brig is the hopeless romantic. He's relentless and thinks he's going to find love in some off-chance way when he's least expecting it.

And yet he's still single, still looking for "the girl" and driving us crazy while he searches.

"You're such a liar." Jen finishes up with the fudge; its arrangement is rainbow inspired today, the colors all flowing together, beautiful and appealing.

For how old the shop is, it really has its charm, partly because of the displays my mom so carefully designed and partly because my parents have restored every historical piece of architecture in the joint while keeping everything up to code. Wood-beamed ceilings, bay windows at the front, original hardwood floors, and white shiplap bordering the walls, giving the entire space a light, coastal feel.

Brig smiles like a fool. “Hey, I can’t help if I think I saw my soul mate last night. Red hair, big brown eyes, freckles for days . . . she was stunning, just sitting there, looking like a goddamn fiery angel.”

“Why do you keep going after tourists?” Jen asks.

“Because you never know when you can turn a tourist into a lifer.” Brig wiggles his eyebrows like an idiot before growing serious. “And no one local will even give me the time of day.”

Rolling her eyes dramatically, Jen eyes me from where she’s making coffee. “And what about you, Griff? Any tourists who’ve caught your eye lately?” Brig’s comment doesn’t escape me; I know full well what he’s talking about, why not one single local girl will even consider going on a date with him, but Jen refuses to acknowledge our “beliefs.”

Keeping my head down, I make a noncommittal sound and focus on showcasing the pastries. Raspberry scones, blueberry scones with lemon icing, and apple-cinnamon-chip scones. Just keep focusing on the scones.

“Griffin, I’m talking to you.”

“And I’m ignoring you,” I answer honestly, not wanting to get into another one of her “you have to get back out there” conversations.

“It’s been two years.”

I’m well aware of how long it’s been, believe me. Every day I wake up to an empty bed, a wifeless home. No pink slippers flopping around the house; no *You’re Foxy* mug being sipped from in the morning and at night; no sweet, addictive laughter bouncing off the walls of my home during a late-night Scrabble match.

Instead I face empty silence, growing lonelier and lonelier with each passing day.

“I know,” I mumble, the dull ache in my chest, which I live with on a constant basis, growing.

“Why won’t you at least let me set you up with Jessica, the head of the PTA? She’s been very vocal about her interest in you. She’s asked me multiple times to set up a blind date—and you know how unusual that is in this town. Besides, you would like her, Griff. She has two kids, both darlings, nothing like my demonic spawn, and she’s really good at yoga, which means she’s flexible.”

I shake my head. “Not interested.”

“Griffin, I hate seeing you so alone. It hurts my heart.”

Taking a deep breath, I plaster on a fake smile. “I’m not alone; I have you fools.” I clear my throat and put an end to the conversation. “Now, come on, we still have some work to do before we open.”

Jen doesn’t move right away; instead, I can feel her gaze stuck on me. “I talked to Kathy the other day, you know.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, taking a deep breath, not wanting to get into this with Jen again, not wanting to hear the lecture that follows after, the one where Jen tells me that even though my wife died, her mom didn’t, and I should still talk to her.

“Jen,” I warn.

“She worries about you, Griff.”

“Tell her I’m fine. Now let’s move the fuck along.”

And that puts an end to the conversation. Thankfully.

I put the finishing touches on the bakery case, Jen preps the coffee and hot water, and Brig tests the fudge—the guy eats everything he sees and sets out to be more of a barnacle than a helper.

From the already bustling streets outside, I’m guessing this is going to be a very long and busy day. My only hope of catching a break—from both the workday and Jen’s concern—is if I’m somehow called in to the station.

Here’s hoping there’s a cat stuck in a tree somewhere.