

## CHAPTER TWO

# COLE

*Snow from the night before glistens  
across the bitter ground,  
while news of the sisters' arrival  
spreads all throughout town.*

*The gossip is crisp, the excitement oh so thick,  
while Cole stomps around as a very unhappy dick.*

“DID YOU KNOW THEY WERE coming?” I say to my best friend Max.

Max pauses from where he’s sharpening his axe and quirks a brow in my direction.

“Did I know who was coming?” he asks.

I sit on one of the old farm chairs that’s one large man away from its wood crushing into sawdust—I like to take risks—and lean my forearms on my thighs. “The Taylor sisters.”

“Who are the Taylor sisters?” he asks before wiping down his axe and inspecting it.

A chilly wind blows through the open gap of the barn door, reminding me once again that fall has ended and winter is here. The cold has never bothered me. I’m accustomed to the blistering Colorado mountain winters, hence why I’m only wearing a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved flannel

shirt. That's what happens when you spend your entire life in a mountain town. You adapt to the weather conditions, expecting the unpredictable, but confident the sun will shine at least once during the day.

"You know who the Taylor sisters are," I say. "Cindy Louis's great-grandnieces Taran and Storee."

"Ohhh," Max says with a nod and a wink. "Storee Taylor."

"Can you not?" I say, shaking my head, seeing exactly where he wants to take this.

"She's back in town, huh? Are you going to try to ask her out again?"

"I didn't ask her out in the first place," I say, hating that I brought up the topic.

"That's right, you didn't—you didn't get the chance to before she blew you off."

"She didn't blow me off," I say, irritated. "She changed the subject and then had to leave, simple as that." There's so much more to the story, but it's not something I want to relive.

"Weren't you seventeen and she was fifteen?"

I drag my hand over my face. "Uh, no, we were both eighteen." I shake my head because he's not getting it. "Never mind," I say as bells jingle nearby, sounding off that another ride through the evergreens is about to start.

Evergreen Farm is Kringletown's pride and joy. Well...one of them. Known as the highest incorporated town in the country, sitting at 10,522 feet, Kringle is a year-round Christmas town.

Yup, we celebrate Christmas...year...round.

The holly jolly music never ceases.

The twinkle lights never turn off.

And Santa—aka Bob Krampus—never stops ho-ho-hoing from his house at the top of Ornament Park—also known as the town park, which is in the shape of a bulb ornament.

The Bavarian-style buildings that line Ornament Avenue, Krampus

Court, and Route 25 are continuously adorned with wreaths, lights, and freshly fluffed garland. The Christmas stalls behind the Myrrh-cantile are always open, offering the latest in homemade crafts for those looking for that unique gift for the holiday season.

And Evergreen Farm, owned by the Maxheimers—Max’s family—is always running. During the summer, there’s tree planting, paintball, live bands, and an animal farm that teaches respect for all animals. During the holiday season, there’s tree cutting, ice skating, sleigh rides—powered by electric snowmobiles—s’mores around the many campfires, gingerbread baking classes, and every vendor this side of the Rocky Mountains looking to grow their business.

As for me, I hide out in here, the reindeer barn, where I take care of the Maxheimers’ precious and very famous reindeer. I don’t mind the smell. I don’t mind the snorts or the shaking of antlers or even the wet snouts looking for snacks in my pockets. I like the solitude, I like the hard labor of shoveling reindeer shit into a wheelbarrow, and if I’m going to be truly honest, I like the sound of their clomping hooves.

No one bothers me—besides Max—and no one dares try to take my job, because between the three Maxheimer siblings, none of them want to do what I do. And since I’m an honorary Maxheimer, I take on the tasks with pride.

Max lifts his axe over his shoulder and rests his hand on his hip as he stares down at me. Standing at six foot four, one inch taller than me, Max—or Atlas, his real name—has been my best friend since we were babies. Otto and Ida, Max’s parents, were best friends with my parents. When my parents passed away ten years ago, they took me under their wing. Which means Max treats me like a brother. In other words, he pulls no punches and takes no shit.

“You really think I’m going to drop the fact that the girl you used to dream about all the time is back in town after how many years and act like it doesn’t mean anything to you?” he asks.

“First of all, I didn’t dream about her. Jesus, I’m not a pathetic, love-sick asshole. I just thought she was hot.” I shrug nonchalantly. “That’s it. Secondly, we don’t need that kind of disturbance at the start of December.”

“Why not?” he asks.

“Because you know how this town is. They’re already starting to talk about it. I overheard Sherry Conrad talking to Thachary down by the Polar Freeze about the Taylor sisters coming into town and what kind of shenanigans they might get up to.”

“Shenanigans?” Max raises a brow. “What kind of shenanigans did they ever get up to?”

I study him for a prolonged moment, blinking a few times to see if he was kidding. “Max, we grew up in the same town. You were here for the year of Bob Krampus’s Santa reveal, the hot cocoa shortage of 2012, and the year the signature tree in Baubles and Wrappings tipped over. *They* caused all those misfortunes.”

He scratches the side of his cheek. “Huh. I guess I never thought about it, but hey, they’re older now. They’re probably here to take care of Cindy. Martha and Mae can only play nurse for so long before they start erupting from the inside out. You know better than me that the twins are a nuclear bomb waiting to explode.”

Martha and Mae Bawhovieer are twin sisters. They’ve lived together ever since I’ve known them, and they are very hot-headed, a source of strife in the town with their constant jabbering. They also stick their noses in everyone’s business. Luckily for me, or rather unluckily, they live on my cul-de-sac.

“I think you’re internally freaking out because you like Storee,” Max adds.

“I don’t like her, and I’m not internally freaking out,” I say. “Trust me, she’s the last person I want to fucking see... especially now.”

“Why especially now?”

I didn’t mean to say that last part out loud.

Normally I tell Max everything. Like I said, he's basically a brother, but there's one conversation I never shared with him because, well, it hurt just a bit too much.

"Because we're so busy," I say.

"Says the guy sitting on a chair from the 1800s, gossiping about out-of-towners settling into the house next to his."

"Am I not allowed to have a conversation with my best friend while he sharpens his axe? According to your dad, I'm required to take breaks."

Max shakes his head. "Whatever makes you feel better, man." He heads toward the barn door and then turns to me. "So, what are you going to do about the Taylor sisters being in town? Knock on Cindy's door and see if they need help? Offer to shovel snow? Perhaps show them a few ways to warm themselves up?"

"I'm not going to do anything," I say with a stern expression. "I have no intention of even speaking to them."

"So then why bring it up?" Max asks, seeing right through me.

I have no idea why I brought it up, except that ever since I saw them unloading their car, I haven't been able to free my mind from the image of Storee's deep red hair blowing in the breeze.

"To warn you," I say.

"Warn me of what?" he asks. "I'm not scared of the Taylor sisters. I've never even met them, since they always stuck close to their aunt. I only know them through what you've told me."

"Not warning you about them," I reply. "I'm warning you about me, because now that they're in town I'm going to be unpleasant to be around until they leave."

"How is that any different from how you are regularly?"

My expression flattens, unamused.

He chuckles. "You know, your self-reflection and emotional intelligence have truly grown over the years."

That's better.

“Thank you. And don’t worry, I know you’re shivering over there from the thought of having to deal with me in my rawest and rarest form of grumpiness—”

“Dude, you say that as if it’s not an everyday occurrence.”

I’m not a grump all the time...there are moments when one of the reindeer makes me smile. They’re few and far between, but they’re there.

“Either way, I have no intention of going near either of the Taylor sisters. It’s going to be a Storee-free Christmas. Mark my words.”

---