

Chapter 1

Oh, thank goodness you're still open." Jonah Baxter pulled the door to Page Turners, the independent bookstore in Arcadia Valley, closed behind him.

A young woman with almost orange hair looked up with a smile from behind the counter. "For about another hour, yeah. Last minute shopping?"

Jonah blew out a breath. "Yeah. The season kind of got away from me. I'm Jonah Baxter. I don't think we've met?"

"Kenia Akers." She gestured to the shelves of books that filled the store. "Can I help you find something?"

He dug in his pocket and drew out a crumpled piece of paper that he opened and tried to smooth. “I have a list. Sort of.”

“That’s a start. Let me see it.” She snagged the paper from his fingers and frowned. “What kind of paper is this?”

Heat crawled up his neck. “Parchment paper. My brothers and I run A Slice of Heaven Bakery. It’s what was handy. Malachi does all the business stuff and he gets testy if I raid his desk—says I mess up his organization.”

“It has a nice texture.” She rubbed it between her fingers. “What’s it for?”

“Lining pans. To keep cookies from sticking, that sort of thing. You’ve never used parchment paper? These days it seems like everyone watches cooking shows and knows all about the tools of the trade.”

Kenia shrugged. “The kitchen isn’t really my favorite place to be. I think we have all of these. Eclectic list though.”

“My siblings have mixed taste.”

“You’re all readers?”

He nodded. Reading was something his parents had prized and the love of it had been learned as little children, cuddled up on the couch

while his mom and dad took turns reading aloud. They'd traveled as a family through Narnia and Middle Earth, and had joined the other farm animals in their amazement at Charlotte's web designs. As they'd gotten older, most families quit reading aloud together. Not his. They'd gone to the center of the earth and the deepest, darkest parts of the sea, then surfaced and walked through the Lake District of England with Lizzie Bennett and pondered philosophy couched in the story of four Russian brothers. Even as adults, before his parents died, evenings when they were back home ended with a chapter or two from whatever Mom and Dad were reading together. "It's a family passion."

"I like that. Flowers are my family's passion, primarily. But we do like books."

"That's good, seeing as you work in a bookstore."

Kenia laughed. It was a strong, friendly sound. "Very true. Here," she pulled a thick hard cover from one of the shelves, "who's this one for?"

"Malachi. He and his wife Ursula are both addicted to this fantasy series, but I know they're a couple of books behind, so hopefully they don't

have the latest already.” Jonah frowned. What if they did? “What’s your return policy like?”

“I’ll get you gift receipts. They can exchange it if they need to.” Kenia moved down the shelves, consulting his list periodically and pulling out books. He could’ve done it himself. Wandering a bookstore was a nice way to spend an hour or two. Then again, following behind someone with as nice a figure as Kenia had wasn’t exactly a hardship.

“If you’re busy, I can get the rest.”

“We’re almost done, and it’s not as if we’re packed.”

He chuckled. Most people probably did their shopping well ahead of Christmas Eve. He’d meant to do all his ordering online last week, but they’d been slammed with orders for Christmas parties and family gatherings and it had slipped his mind. When he’d gotten home from the bakery, he’d wanted nothing more than a hot shower, an hour of quiet, and bed. “I appreciate it.”

“Who’s Ruth?”

“My sister. You’ve probably met her, Ruth DeWitt? She runs the Fairview Bed and Breakfast. She loves to shop here.”

“Of course. That means we’ve probably met—or at least seen each other—at Grace Fellowship.”

He nodded. That would explain the nagging feeling that he knew her.

“Serena?”

“Soon-to-be sister-in-law.”

“Your wife or girlfriend doesn’t like to read?”

Jonah shook his head. He’d thought about getting something for Gloria. Not that she was his girlfriend. In fact, she’d made it very clear that she was *not*. They were friends. Maybe friends rated a Christmas gift, but he hadn’t wanted it to seem like he was pushing. “No wife. No girlfriend.”

“Really?” There was a glint of something in her eye. It couldn’t be interest, could it?

“What about you? Do you get your sweetheart books for Christmas?”

Pink tinged her cheeks. “I’m not currently involved.”

Hard to imagine. She was cute and spunky. In fact, she reminded him of Gloria a little. They didn’t share any physical resemblance, but their personalities were similar.

Kenia cleared her throat. “Okay, I think that’s everything, unless your list is missing someone?”

Jonah set the stack of books on the counter and mentally ticked through the recipients. “Nope, that’s everyone. I really appreciate it.”

“That’s what we’re here for.” She rang up the books and told him the total. Jonah managed not to wince as he handed her his credit card. Maybe he should’ve gone for paperbacks, but that seemed too cheap for Christmas.

“It was nice to meet you, Kenia.” Jonah hefted the two bags of books and aimed for the door. “Merry Christmas.”



“Gee, what’d you get us, Jonah?” Micah laughed as he came from the kitchen into the living room of their brother-in-law’s farmhouse that they shared. For one more week. After that, it was just going to be Jonah rattling around in here by himself. Ruth and Corban as well as Malachi and Ursula still stopped by to spend the evening. A lot. But it wasn’t the same.

“I still have the receipt.” Jonah glowered at his brother and finished stacking the last book under the tree. “You’re lucky I got you anything for Christmas since I have to get you a wedding present next week, too.”

Micah beamed. “You do, don’t you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jonah shook his head. It didn’t really bother him. Much. Was it ever going to be his turn?

“So, what’d you get Gloria?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on. Christmas is tomorrow, I’m hardly going to spill the beans between now and then.”

“I’m serious. I didn’t get her anything. We’re just friends. You don’t have to get friends a Christmas gift.”

Micah snorted. “Yeah, you do. Especially when you’re half in love with her.”

“I’m not.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

He would. Over and over again until it finally stuck. Gloria had been clear. Multiple times.

“You need to get her something.”

Jonah rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess I could go online and get her a gift card.”

Micah sighed. “You’re pathetic.”

Probably. But it didn’t change the fact that, against the yearnings of his heart, he was trying to respect Gloria’s wishes. They were friends. Nothing more. “What am I supposed to do at almost nine p.m. on Christmas Eve?”

“Go online and get her a gift card. I just don’t understand why you didn’t get her something before now.”

“What’d you get Serena?” It was time—past time—to change the subject.

“You’re going to think it’s stupid.”

“No I won’t.” Or, at least, he’d try to keep from laughing in his brother’s presence.

“There’s this new kiln she’s been eyeing. But she keeps talking herself out of it, because she doesn’t really need another one. But this one has some bells and whistles her existing kilns don’t have. So...it seemed like it’d be worthwhile. She can do some new techniques with it.”

“That’s not stupid, that’s thoughtful. And expensive.”

Micah shrugged. “Yeah, a little. But I have some savings, and since her parents are insisting on paying for the wedding, and her dad send me a check that he said I had to use for at least part of our honeymoon...I figured it was worth the splurge.”

“You okay with that? The money?”

“I am. Now. Her parents’ hearts are in the right place. They have the money and they like to spend it on the people they love. It’s just been a little bit

of an adjustment. And I don't want to get used to it, you know? I mean, Serena could decide this is the last movie she's ever going to do. And we'd be okay with our income from the bakery and her potting."

Jonah laughed. He'd seen the unrestrained joy on Serena's face on her occasional breaks from filming or in the photos Micah took when he zipped out for a weekend to see her. She wasn't quitting acting any time soon. But still, it was a good thought.

"So. Gloria?" Micah dropped down on the couch and leaned his elbows on his knees. "Is she not going to be your plus one at the wedding next week?"

Jonah sighed. "I want her to be."

"Have you asked her?"

"Not yet."

"Why not?" The look on Micah's face said he clearly thought Jonah was an idiot.

Jonah hunched his shoulders. "I get tired of being shot down. I've been asking her out for two and a half years. She'll come to the bakery every day and flirt. She'll come to family gatherings or outings with big groups and only hang out with me. But when I ask her out on something that can't

possibly be defined as anything other than a date, I get an instant no and the reminder that she's not looking for a relationship."

"I thought maybe she'd eased up on that since she's been coming to dinner so often."

"That's just to see Serena, I think." Jonah shrugged. "Maybe I'll just go stag."

"Don't be silly. Ask Gloria. Since Mal's the best man and Gloria's the maid of honor, it's not like they're going to pair up beyond the recession. Plus, you're paired with Ursula, so Mal's going to want her back. And Corban isn't going to relinquish Ruth, ever. So since you're the only two unattached people in the wedding party, you might as well go together."

"I guess. I'd planned to just leave it be. Since she's so dead-set against relationships, it's not like she'll be bringing anyone anyway. So we'll hang out and that'll be fine." At least, that seemed like it would be the case. The woman drove him crazy. His brother wasn't wrong about being half in love with her, no matter how much he denied it when asked. But it all seemed rather hopeless.

Micah frowned. "Ask her. If she matters to you, give her another chance."

Jonah nodded. One more chance. And then? Then he was going to work on getting her out of his system for good. There was only so much rejection he could take.



“Merry Christmas.” Gloria strolled through the doors of the bakery holding a wrapped gift in her uniformed arms.

Jonah chuckled and set aside the paperback thriller Ruth had given him as part of his Christmas gift. “You’re a day late.”

“And a dollar short.”

“In that case, the coffee’s on the house.” He stood and crossed to the coffee station. “The usual?”

“Sure. What’s the cookie today?”

“Peppermint chip. They’ve been a big hit all December. But I tried something else out, if you’re feeling adventurous?” Jonah set one full mug of coffee aside and filled a second for himself. He added a generous splash of agave to Gloria’s coffee before dumping half and half in his own.

Gloria sat at one of the small cafe tables and set the present in front of her. “I’m always game to be a guinea pig.”

“Cool. One sec.” He set the coffees down on the table and pushed through the swinging door that led to the kitchen. He pressed a hand to his racing heart. How, after nearly three years, did she still have this effect on him? Especially when she wanted nothing more from him than friendship? When would he get a clue? Using tongs, he loaded four orange spice donuts onto a plate. He glanced over to where he’d hung his coat this morning. The gift card he’d printed online Christmas Eve after Micah hounded him was in the pocket. But...she had an actual present. He groaned and dug out the envelope he’d slipped it into. At least he had *something* to give her. He grabbed the plate and headed back out in the front of the bakery. “Here we are.”

“Ooh. Those look pretty. What kind?” She reached for a donut and sniffed it. “Orange?”

“It’s sort of a riff on wassail. Orange and clove and some other Christmassy spices. The guys thought they tasted good. So have the handful of customers who’ve been in today.”

“Slow day?” She bit into the treat and her eyebrows lifted. “Mmm. This is good.”

He grinned, his insides warming at her approval. She’d been on his mind while he was mixing the flavors. Gloria exuded that warm, comforting aura he always associated with wassail. He’d added a little bit of ginger and extra clove to bump up the spice. Gloria had that bite, too. “Glad you like them. As for slow.” He shrugged. “I can’t complain. I thought about closing the rest of the week, too, but we didn’t get nearly as many vacation holds as I was expecting on the weekly orders, so it made sense to come in and get people their bread and treats. We have some big orders for New Year’s parties, too.”

“And you’re making Micah’s cake?”

“Yeah. The party orders all have to be picked up or delivered by tomorrow. That still gives me two days to get the cake squared away.”

“So you’re only open two days this week?”

He nodded.

“That’s good. You deserve a little break. You work hard.”

“This from the lady who was on duty for Christmas.”

“Yeah, well. No family. I might as well take my turn so most of the other guys could have the day. Speaking of that, though. I brought your gift.” Gloria pushed the wrapped rectangle across the table.

“Thanks. I got you this.” Jonah tugged the envelope out of his pocket and handed it to her. He was probably supposed to open the thing...but it was already better than what he’d gotten her simply because it was a real gift.

“When I saw that, I thought of you and knew you needed it. And if you already have it, I can return it.”

He took a deep breath and tore the paper, revealing the latest cookbook by one of his favorite chefs. He’d eyed it at the bookstore when he was shopping for gifts on Christmas Eve, but had held off in case someone got it for him. When none of his siblings did, he’d planned to get it himself later this week. His fingers itched to snatch the gift card out of her hand. “I don’t have it yet. I’ve been wanting it though. Thanks.”

Gloria opened the envelope, her eyes dimming as she pulled the printed gift card out. “Oh. Nice. Thanks.”

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He winced. “I wasn’t sure...I mean...I don’t usually get things for friends. You know what? Let me get you something else.”

“No, this is fine. It’s great. Really.” She tucked the paper into the breast pocket of her uniform and emptied her coffee. “I guess I should get back out there.”

“Let me get you a box for the other donuts.” He stood, his gaze falling on the cookbook. Maybe she did care. “Gloria? Would you be my date for Micah’s wedding?”

Her tongue darted between her lips and there was an edge of frantic in the way she shook her head. “No. Jonah...we’re just friends. That’s all we can ever be. I’m sorry. I...I have to go.”

Jonah’s heart sank as he watched her flee the bakery. That was the last time he was listening to his brother when it came to dating. Jonah might be half in love with Gloria, but that was his problem. He’d get over it—over her. Eventually.

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