

*Half Moon Ember* Bonus Chapter

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Robert tugged the alpine-print sweater over his hips, then brushed the thighs of his jeans, trying to get the chill out of his bones. He glanced out the window of the cavernous walk-in closet, where a curtain of fat snowflakes fell downward, blanketing the ground in white.

Snow!

A quick glance in the full-length mirror confirmed his new sweater, a Christmas gift received earlier that morning from Tim and Laura Galen, fit perfectly. Made of soft cashmere, it was gray with a subtle geometric pattern. Beautiful yet understated, like the day so far. The Galens had invited him and Heather to their Telluride home for the holiday, and Robert couldn’t help but marvel at his surroundings. The giant house was an extension of the couple. They did nothing to call attention to it or themselves—it was simply a part of their world.

Normal.

Robert’s gift to them had been an artist rendering of a photo he’d taken of Heather in the Grotto. A friend of his did wonderful work in acrylic, and judging from Tim and Laura’s

reaction, the painting had been a hit. As for Heather, she and Robert had decided not to exchange gifts, especially since they were traveling for the holiday.

He shook his head and grinned. Less than two weeks prior, he'd been at the pinnacle of his new career—the Ember opening. Now he was celebrating Christmas with the love of his life and her family.

In the freezing cold.

“Stop dawdlin’, man,” he murmured, but was pleased with his outfit. It seemed appropriate for a Christmas-afternoon wagon ride. A snowy wagon ride. The lonely, light jacket hanging in the monstrous closet might be a bit thin, but it would have to do. Robert bent down to pick up the one pair of shoes he'd brought along on the adventure.

He froze mid-crouch.

His well-worn, brown leather loafers were now more well-worn. Shredded, actually.

“Oh, no. That is *not* good.”

Picking up the less damaged shoe, Robert brought it to his face and hoped the damage wasn't as bad as he thought. He winced as the shoe caught the overhead light, revealing torn leather and lots of teeth marks. Light footfalls entered the closet behind him, followed by a soft sneeze. Robert turned, dropping his eyes from the destroyed shoe he held to the small Bichon Frise standing at the entrance. The white bundle of fur cocked her head and huffed.

Robert arched a brow. “Came back to finish the job, huh?”

The dog sat and whined softly. Laughing, Robert tossed the shoe to her. It was nearly as big as she was, and she leaped to her feet to bark at it. Then she descended with glee, growling as she devoured the laces.

*Now what am I gonna do?*

This trip was the first time he'd ever been away from St. Croix, and snow was certainly a new experience. Brrr! The single pair of loafers—his favorite, dammit—hadn't been up to the task, but they were better than what he currently had. Which was nothing.

Louder footsteps entered the large bedroom outside the closet. "Cupcake," Heather called. "Is that you making all the noise?"

She entered the closet, and Robert's smile widened. She also wore jeans and a new Christmas sweater, but damn if she didn't wear the entire outfit a lot better than him! Her sweater was white with gray snowflakes. Her gorgeous copper hair was pulled into a side ponytail and draped forward over her right shoulder.

"Wow," he breathed. "You belong on a runway, Heather."

Her frown at seeing the dog demolishing Robert's shoe changed to a smile upon meeting his eyes. Her gaze slowly traveled down his body, taking in his sweater. "Thanks, but that goes double for you. My mom has great taste."

Robert laughed and pointed at the white ball of destruction. "Unfortunately, so does her dog."

The tiny fluff ball had begun a fresh assault on his shoe and Heather gasped, bending down to remove it from the dog's mouth. "Cupcake! No! Bad dog." Unrepentant, the dog sat down and panted at her. Frowning, Heather studied Robert's tattered shoe. "I told Mom she was too young to travel. This is ruined!"

He pointed to the other shoe, still on the floor. "At least now I've got a matchin' set. She already destroyed that one."

Groaning, Heather swooped down and picked up Cupcake with the other arm. The dog thought that a wonderful idea, squirming and licking her neck. Heather broke into a begrudging smile as she marched out of the closet. “Come on, dog. Mom needs to hear about this.”

Robert followed on her heels, curious to see this play out. After the Ember gala and its Pet Paradise adoption event, Laura had been inspired to adopt a dog herself. “Nothing big or boisterous,” she’d said, “but I’d love to get something to spoil.”

A local rescue in Palo Alto had suggested Cupcake, and Laura fell in love at first sight. She’d done her best to teach the pup manners, but was too kind-hearted to notice some of Cupcake’s shortcomings. In the two days Robert and Heather been there, the dog had also chewed up the handle of Heather’s hairbrush. She had muttered darkly upon discovering the attack, but held her tongue in the name of family peace. But apparently, Cupcake destroying Robert’s shoes crossed the line and demanded action.

They walked down a long hallway, and Robert’s white sock-encased feet sank into thick carpet with every step. At the end, they entered an enormous great room, painted white. Thick wooden beams ran across the ceiling and fifteen-foot-tall windows took up one entire wall. The majestic Rocky Mountains and distant town of Telluride were visible through the gently falling snow. The end of the room was dominated by a floor-to-ceiling rock fireplace, lit with a cheery fire.

Tim and Laura Galen sat on a couch next to the fireplace, both dressed in Christmas sweaters similar to Robert’s and Heather’s. Tim frowned at his laptop while Laura held a paperback in her hands, the latest romance bestseller.

Heather, with Robert just behind, strode into the room and stopped before her mother, unceremoniously dumping the four-month-old puppy on Laura's lap. She dropped the book with a squeak. "Hello there, Cupcake."

"Mom!" Heather held out the destroyed shoe, indignant. "Look at what she did to Robert's shoes. They're ruined!"

Laura's happiness at being reunited with her puppy turned to alarm, her eyes becoming saucers. "Oh, no!" Her fallen face turned to Robert's. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine. Another souvenir to remember this trip," Robert said with a laugh, though the outdoor ride was looking more freezing by the minute.

*I've got extra socks...*

Tim closed his laptop with a sigh and examined Robert's shoe. "I told you to leave her with the Palo Alto staff, honey. This is completely shredded."

"She's been so good this whole trip! Cupcake, why did you do this?" Laura looked at the dog, as if expecting an answer.

Robert kept a straight face, no easy feat. The dog had already destroyed several ornaments hanging from the mammoth Christmas tree in the corner, as well as a section of baseboard in the dining room.

Cupcake woofed at her in reply and wagged her fluffy tail.

Tim laughed as he looked at the wall clock. "We'll get you another pair, Robert, don't worry. But time's wasting! Grab your boots so we can go on our hayride. I don't want to miss the snow." He stood and turned to Laura. "I'll get our coats."

"Uh," Robert said. "That's goin' to be a problem."

"Why is that?" Laura asked, stroking the dog's back.

“Those are the only pair of shoes I brought.”

Heather cocked her head. “You didn’t pack any boots?”

He grinned. “How often do you think I use snow boots in St. Croix?”

Tim stopped mid-step and slowly turned around. His gaze darted to Robert’s mangled shoe, looking forlorn on the couch. “Well, you sure can’t wear those anymore. Laura, can you do something about this? Pronto?”

Robert had no idea what that meant. But presumably Laura did, because she vaulted to her feet, placing Cupcake on the floor. “Absolutely. Robert, fear not. I’ll take care of everything!” She trotted out of the room, with Cupcake following at her heels and staring adoringly at her.

Robert shuffled up to Heather and spoke quietly out the side of his mouth. “What does that mean?”

She turned to him, covering her mouth with both hands as she tried not to laugh. “You’re about to find out!”

Less than hour later, Robert sat in Laura’s vacated spot on the couch, stunned as a young woman in a tailored suit and very-inappropriate-for-the-weather black high heels set out two mountains of shoe boxes. Her dark hair was styled in a French roll that didn’t dare move as she nodded at her hilly creation. She clasped her hands together and gave Robert a warm, professional smile. “All right, Mr. Davis. We’re ready to begin.”

Robert stared at the twin peaks of boxes and wondered *what* exactly was about to begin. After Laura had left the room earlier, he and Heather retreated to their suite. But minutes later, Laura had knocked on the door, informing them that Alison would be there shortly.

The dark-haired woman must be Alison. Heather sat next to him, peering at the shoes while Tim and Laura sat on an adjacent couch. “Uh, call me Robert,” he said absently.

“Of course, Robert,” she said without missing a beat.

“Thank you so much for making time for us, Alison!” Laura exclaimed.

*Ha! That is Alison. One mystery solved...*

Laura clasped her hands under her chin. “I hope I didn’t cause you too much trouble?”

Next to her, Tim snorted. “It’s Christmas Day, Laura. Of course we did.”

“Not at all!” Alison said, and she was so smooth Robert couldn’t even detect a lie. “This sounds like a true emergency. I’m glad to help.”

Laura moved to Robert’s other side and wrapped an arm around his elbow. Cupcake sat at her feet. “Alison is my personal shopper here in Telluride. She’s a miracle worker. You’re in excellent hands, I promise!”

He glanced at Heather, who wore a delighted smile, obviously enjoying the turn of events.

“This really isn’t necessary,” Robert said to the room at large. “I can pick somethin’ up tomorrow when stores re-open.”

“Oh, no!” Heather said, narrowing her eyes at Cupcake, who eyed the shoe boxes with fiery intensity. “This is most definitely necessary. You need shoes, Robert. And boots!”

“Agreed,” Tim added. “Let Alison work her magic. I’m sure she brought just what you need.”

Robert turned his attention to the display before him. One pile of boxes contained new loafers and the other snow boots. He tried on several pairs of buttery leather shoes, and with Heather’s and Laura’s help, finally chose a pair of brown loafers that fit like nothing he’d ever

experienced. They felt more like slippers than shoes. He read the scrawled signature on the box, but didn't recognize the Italian name.

But he'd bet they didn't sell Salvatore Ferragamo shoes at Foot Locker.

Heather flashed him a wide grin paired with a slow wink. He raised a brow at her, letting her know they'd continue the conversation later. In bed.

He went through a similar process with the boots, and soon wore a pair of waterproof black boots that probably cost more than his car.

"There!" Alison said as she collected the disregarded boxes. "My work here is done."

"Thank you so much, Alison," Laura crossed to give her a hug. "You're an absolute lifesaver."

After giving his wife a fond look, Tim smiled at the woman. "Send the bill to my assistant. I'll make sure you get an extra bonus—this really was above and beyond. Thanks."

"It's no imposition, I assure you! Happy to help."

"Yeah," Robert breathed, still perplexed over the whole experience. "Thank you all."

"Merry Christmas!" Laura cried, a smile lighting up her face.

After Alison took a load of boxes out to her car, Cupcake whined. She placed her head on her front paws, forlorn.

Tim propped both hands on his hips and stared at the dog. "Maybe I'll hitch *you* to the wagon. If you had a job, you probably wouldn't be so interested in destroying everything."

"She's just a baby, Tim." Laura scooped Cupcake up, cradling her in both arms. The puppy squirmed with obvious delight. "She'll learn."

Tim opened his mouth again, then shut it, evidently thinking better of what he'd been about to say. Robert hid a grin behind his hand, wrapping his other arm around Heather.

Eventually, the extra shoe boxes were all removed from the house. As Laura showed Alison to the door, Tim turned to Heather and Robert, rubbing his hands together. “At last! *Now* can we go on our hayride?”

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Robert’s shaved head was snugly ensconced within a warm stocking cap, and he’d borrowed one of Tim’s coats to keep warm. Heather had laughed at the jacket he’d brought and said, “Uh, no way. You can fit into one of Dad’s.”

He and Heather were snuggled under a red plaid blanket, seated on a wooden bench that ran along the side of a beautifully restored wooden wagon. Tim and Laura were similarly seated on the other side. Cupcake was safely back at the house, in the care of a maid.

*Hopefully, her shoes are locked up.*

The wagon was pulled by two draft horses and driven by an older man wearing a thick pea coat. A thick hat with ear flaps covered his head as he held the two sets of reins loosely in his hands. The two horses wore bells which jingled as they traveled down the deserted lane.

The scene was magical, riding through the gently falling snow.

*Though I guess I’m not actually in a Christmas song,* Robert thought as he drew Heather closer. *We’re in a two-horse open sleigh, after all.*

Robert wiggled his toes in his new boots, amazed how warm and cozy he was. He’d thought about offering to pay for the shoes and boots. That only seemed right. But he knew the Galens well enough by now to understand they would never expect, or want, him to. They undoubtedly thought the whole episode had been their fault—or more precisely, Cupcake’s—and they wanted to make it up to him.

As they headed back toward the “cabin”, as Laura liked to call it, the snow fell harder. Tim and Laura were only distantly visible across the wagon, and their soft voices were muffled, making Robert feel like he and Heather were alone inside a snow globe.

“Did you have a good Christmas?” Heather asked. “Apart from the shoe debacle?”

Laughing, he kissed her forehead. “Amazin’ Christmas. This is like nothin’ I’ve ever experienced.”

“Your parents won’t be upset, will they? That you didn’t spend the holiday with them?”

They’d already been over this, but Heather was still sensitive to Althea’s feelings.

“They’re completely ok with it. They send their Christmas greetings, by the way. I talked to Mom this mornin’. We spent Thanksgivin’ there, so this is only fair.” He laughed softly.

“Though compared to this, our holiday was pretty homely.”

Heather reached out a hand, covered in a knit mitten, to squeeze his. “It was homey, Robert. Not homely. That was one of the best Thanksgivings I’ve ever had.”

“Me too. Like this has been one of my best Christmases.” The Galen Empire was utterly foreign to him, but the amazing thing was, he was pretty comfortable being a part of it.

Because of the beautiful woman at his side.

Like she was melding with his family and their lives and traditions.

“What do you think of your first experience with snow?”

Robert thrust his tongue out, letting the fluffy flakes fall onto the surface, and they both laughed. “It’s perfect for Christmas. And I’m also lookin’ forward to gettin’ back to the sun.”

“Me too. I much prefer the warmth.” She snuggled closer, and Robert rested his cheek against her stocking cap-covered head.

“The new year will bring a lot of changes,” he said softly. “You with Ember, and me with the Tourism Board project.”

“Good changes. Dreams come true, really. Both of them.”

He tilted her face toward him. “No. You’re the dream come true.”

The horses’ bells chimed in the fading afternoon light as they crested a hill. In the distance, the three-story mansion was lit like a beacon, white lights twinkling along its roofline. Robert’s lips met Heather’s, a flash of warmth within the cold Christmas air, and the snow continued to fall around them.