

Taylor Vandenberg considered herself to be many things – both good and bad – but chief amongst them was observant.

It's how she found herself entirely blindsided by Ben only a few days before Christmas.

She sat at the counter in the kitchen at Thistle Drive, her laptop open in front of her as she worked on her latest post for her website, as Ben pattered around. There was Christmas music playing quietly in the background on her speaker – *her* speaker! The one she owned... it still tickled her, sometimes, all of these possessions she found herself purchasing.

“Ah! Damn it,” Ben cursed under his breath.

Taylor shifted her focus to her brother, looking over the top of her laptop at the look on his face as he stared down at the – dough? “What are you attempting to make over there?”

He let out a long sigh, tilting his head back in obvious defeat. “I'm *trying* to recreate mom's snickerdoodles for the holiday party at Donovan's.”

Taylor arched up to look down at... whatever he was making, holding back the unrestrained laugh that wanted desperately to escape. Ben's dessert repertoire was notoriously – well, not great, and the cookie dough looked more like pancake batter. She was only moderately successful at *not* laughing. “Ah. Yeah, that doesn't quite look right.”

Her brother glowered. “I can see that.”

“I mean, if only we had a sister who's had classical French pastry training and knows exactly how to make mom's recipes.”

“Savannah has more than enough going on with Henry, and the bakery is always swamped with orders for the holidays. The last thing she needs this year is more on her plate.”

Taylor conceded the point, looking back at her laptop and finishing her sentence – her list for holiday celebrations around the world unique to their locations was almost complete. She'd returned from her two week trip to Eastern Europe only last week, and was uploading final photos for Austria's Krampus celebration... almost done – before she hummed in thought.

“I did tell Sav that she shouldn't worry about baking anything for Christmas for us. But she looked about as offended as if I tasked her to come down the chimney and deliver gifts, herself.”

Ben shot her a very similar look. “Taylor... Savannah lives for her Christmas trifle. Oh, and the peppermint brownies. *And* the cheesecake – her classics.”

She held up her hands. “Okay, fine, I'm clearly the crazy person, here, for thinking our baby sister, who singlehandedly is raising an infant and running her business, would want to take a break from baking for us on Christmas. Especially when we have your snickerdoodles at our disposal.”

Ben flicked flour at her.

“And do we really need three kinds of desserts?” Taylor frowned.

“We always have them,” Ben shrugged as he moved to wash his hands on the other side of the counter.

Taylor bit the inside of her cheek.

It was a strange feeling, but one she was becoming more familiar with in the last six months or so. This feeling of... she couldn't quite place it?

She didn't regret her life choices. She didn't regret her travels, leaving Faircombe, or any of her experiences, because she truly believed they had all led her to where she was, now. She believed, deeply, that everything she'd experienced added value to her life.

But... the longer she'd been making a *home* in Faircombe, the more she felt this sensation of missing out.

As Ben said, Savannah made three desserts for their family Christmas every single year. But Taylor so rarely was here on Christmas day in the last two decades, she wouldn't quite know that.

No, she didn't regret the many holiday experiences she'd had all over the world. But, in a way, she felt a pang of missing Christmases past, with Savannah and Ben, Jo. Brooke.

Odd, she thought, not for the first time. And certainly, something she needed to explore more about herself.

Shaking her head, she swivelled on her stool and asked, "Just checking – we're hosting Christmas, right?"

She *assumed*, because most holidays – major and minor – were hosted here, at their family home. But they'd had a surprise Thanksgiving had at Savannah's bakery last month, just before she'd gone on her trip, so...

Ben looked up as he dried his hands, giving her a questioning look that Taylor couldn't quite follow.

"Uh – I mean, I guess, if you want to?"

Taylor was positive that her questioning look mirrored her brother's, as confusion started to creep through her, now. "Why would it be up to me?"

"Well, that's not usually Brooke's thing," Ben spoke slowly.

Taylor narrowed her eyes. "Why are you talking to me as if you think I developed a brain injury?" Then she realized what he actually *said*, and shook her head, "And – what do you mean it's not Brooke's thing?"

Brooke, at this point, had spent more holidays here than Taylor, herself, had; it was absolutely "Brooke's Thing."

"You know, having people over – the cabin is like her sanctuary." He shrugged, still obviously confused. "And she never told me she'd want to host Christmas there, but I'm not *against* it. I guess it's a little small to have everyone comfortably over, but, sure." The considering look on his face brightened momentarily. "You know, I've never not hosted Christmas, ever since mom and dad moved away; maybe it'll be kind of nice not having to make sure the house is in perfect order, making all the food. I'm shocked it's what Brooke wants, but – you'd know best, at this point."

Taylor could only stare at her brother more and more incredulously the longer he spoke.

“What in the world are you talking about?”

He stared back at her. “What are *you* talking about?”

She blinked at him. “I asked if we were hosting Christmas.”

“Yeah...” He trailed off, still clearly believing she’d grown two heads in the last five minutes if his expression was anything to go by. “*We* as in, you and Brooke.”

“No, *we* as in – you and I,” she gestured between them.

“Why would you think I would assume you meant you and I?” He tossed his hands in the air as if *she* was the one not making any sense.

She could only stare at him, as she spoke slowly, “Because, I live here? With you?”

“You don’t live here.”

“Yes, I do,”

“No, you don’t.”

Taylor wouldn’t exactly say she was *frustrated*, but she would say she was *baffled* because – “Ben. I *live* here.”

And, in a way, it was almost insulting. Because Taylor had chosen to move back less than a year ago, here. She’d settled *here*, at Thistle Drive, to re-affirm her roots. That had been a *huge* thing for her!

Ben’s serious brow-line crinkled critically as he crossed his arms. “In a given week, how much do you sleep here?”

Okay. Taylor sat back with that, taking the words in. “I don’t know... at least once. Usually. And all of my furniture is here.”

Which wasn’t *a lot*, but it was more than she’d ever had, before!

Ben shook his head, the confusion falling from his expression as it melted into clear laughter. “You can think whatever you like. But why don’t you ask *Brooke* about “*we*” hosting Christmas and see what she thinks you mean?”

Taylor did exactly that.

The next morning, as she stretched in bed, automatically reaching out for her hand to land on Brooke’s back.

A warm sigh escaped her lips as the feeling of *rightness* settled inside of her. She did love to wake up like this – which wasn’t shocking. Taylor had always enjoyed sharing a bed, sleeping with another person, waking with human touch and connection.

But she loved even more that it was with Brooke.

And, if she was being honest, it still kind of amazed her.

Not only that she was *here* – that *they* were here – but that she... liked it. She enjoyed waking up like this. Here, with Brooke, day after day.

Her feet weren't getting itchy, she didn't feel that tug in her stomach like she had to *go*.

She wouldn't lie and say she hadn't enjoyed her last trip; she had. She'd had a great time for a few weeks, meeting new people, reconnecting with a few friends she'd made in the area in the past.

But, honestly? It had felt *nice* to come home, after. She'd boarded her plane back *home*, with thoughts of Brooke and it had filled her with simultaneous butterflies and a settled sensation, as if – it was just... right.

And even though she was somewhat getting used to that feeling, Ben's words from the day before still echoed in her head.

She'd thought they were doing a – well, a somewhat typical adult relationship? Wherein they both had their own places to “live” but spent a good amount of time together, because Brooke was the person she craved to be around the most.

She relished in every sigh, she craved every eyeroll, she savored every droll comment. She loved spending the night with Brooke, she did. And she did so, often.

But she didn't *live* here. Right? She'd never really lived with another person. She'd only ever had permanent residence at Thistle Drive – in the past and in the present, alike.

Something like that didn't happen accidentally, right? Even for her.

“You look intense this morning,” Brooke's sleepy murmur jolted her from her thoughts, and she smiled fondly down at Brooke as she stroked her fingers over Brooke's shoulder blade.

“That's rich, coming from the most intense person I've ever met,” she arched an eyebrow down at her girlfriend, smiling, despite the actually intense thoughts she was having.

Brooke blinked several times, sleep easily clearing away from those hazel eyes before she rolled onto her side to really look at Taylor, blatantly studying her. “No, really. You look like there's something on your mind that's not all *mornings are soft*.”

Taylor couldn't help but smile at the comment, because – she believed, very deeply, that mornings should be soft. That mornings should be relaxing and slow. That mornings meant she should be able to kiss and cuddle and touch Brooke as much as possible before Brooke went to work, and that they should at least have time for a tea or coffee before that happened, too.

Just, because.

She moved her gaze carefully over Brooke's face, thinking about how very much she did love those mornings, as she said, “There *is* something I want to talk about.”

It was like a flick of a switch.

The traces of soft morning Brooke – her own version of soft, a version only Taylor got that she *adored* – disappeared with her words.

It was like Taylor could *see* the thoughts whirring to life behind wary eyes and she could feel under her very fingertips the tension that seeped into Brooke’s bones.

She watched in bafflement as Brooke nodded to herself, then pushed herself up.

Watched, puzzled, as Brooke pulled on her robe, belted it, pulled her hair up, and then made her way downstairs.

And she followed, utterly baffled – just barely pulling on her own robe, but leaving it open – as Brooke walked into the kitchen, poured two cups of coffee at the small island, fixed them up the way they both liked it, and braced her hands on the counter.

She took in a deep breath and then nodded. “All right.”

Taylor was still standing in the doorway to the kitchen, Gremlin circling between her feet, as she asked, “*All right?* What the hell was all that?”

“*That* was my registering that you have something apparently very serious that you want to discuss, and I’m not ready to do that, in bed, naked. Not happening.” She gestured to the coffee, and her orderly robe, and how she’d tied up her hair. “Now, though, I’m ready.”

Taylor pushed herself out of the doorway and moved forward to stand opposite the counter from Brooke, bracing her hands on the island as she held Brooke’s gaze with her own. “What would you say if I said... I volunteered to host Christmas this year?”

Brooke’s eyebrows shot up, before immediately pulling back down into a grimace. “I – we’re going to host Christmas? *Here?*” She gestured around the kitchen, before sighing and dropping her hand. “I guess it doesn’t shock me that you’d like to, so... all right.”

Taylor could only stare for a few long moments, confused surprise rushing through her. “All right?” She repeated.

Brooke shrugged, studying the area with pursed lips. “I’m assuming that we’re just going to have Ben, Jo, Savannah, Henry, Marisa and Jayson. They don’t normally come to Thistle Drive, but I always have them come here for dessert when I get home.” She then frowned. “They are going to have to cook some stuff before they come; we don’t have enough space in the kitchen for everything.”

We.

“*We* don’t,” she echoed, staring at Brooke, confusion turning slowly into wonder.

“No, the kitchen is way too small. You disagree?”

“So. I’ll text Ben and Sav and tell them. That they should come here... where I live... for Christmas.”

Finally, Brooke stared at her, *really* looking. “Are you okay?”

Taylor stared back. “Do I live here?”

Brooke’s eyes narrowed. “Uh, yes?”

“Since when!”

“I don’t know, officially.”

“Brooke, you are the *most* official person I’ve ever met? I figured if you were going to have me live here, it would be a whole... you know... thing?” She shook her head, drawing her hand through sleep-tumbled dark hair. “You’d give me an awkward speech or a short little question or something, and I would laugh and agree.”

“I gave you a key,” Brooke pointed out, all of the tension that had been in her shoulders from twenty minutes ago having melted, now, as she sipped at her coffee. “Last July. When you came home from Thailand and decided to come right back to the cabin when you landed at three in the morning and woke me up when you knocked.”

“I mean, I remember *that*,” Taylor allowed, even as she grinned softly. Sleepy-grumpy Brooke opening the door, confused and asking why Taylor didn’t just have Brooke pick her up... before she’d pulled Taylor into the house and taken her up to bed.

The key had made an appearance the following day.

Brooke continued to stare, as if unable to compute their disconnect here. Which, in fairness, Taylor was struggling with, as well.

“And since then, you’ve spent – what? Five or six nights here every week? You have drawers? You’re here before I am most days after work?” Brooke listed, admittedly, sensible reasons as to why Taylor might live there.

Still... “Don’t you think it’s strange that I wouldn’t just spend every night here, if I officially live here?”

Brooke stared at her, eyebrows furrowed, over the mug cradled in her hands, held in front of her mouth. “Honestly, if you were someone else? Yes. But you aren’t someone else; you’re you. So, no.”

A short laugh worked out of her throat. “What does that mean!”

Brooke only nailed her with a look as she sipped from her mug.

“So... I live here,” Taylor murmured as she looked around.

“Well, you *did* already hang the garland and the lights,” Brooke commented.

And, admittedly, it was the place she felt the most comfortable, with the person she wanted to spend the most time with. So... it made sense.

And – “Does that mean we can really host Christmas?”

Two days later, Taylor felt exorbitantly more excited about *hosting Christmas* in her *house* that she lived in *with her girlfriend – Brooke Watson* – than she would have truthfully ever imagined.

But something about it tickled her.

It thrilled her to be able to wake up earlier than Brooke, for once, and wake her up with long kisses and nibbles and strokes of her fingers until Brooke woke up, and Taylor made her come in her mouth, twice.

It thrilled her to do so under the blanket that Taylor had brought over – she'd purchased it from an amazing seamstress she knew in Peru.

It thrilled her that when they walked down the stairs, several of the few belongings she really had were on the shelves – knick-knacks, mostly, but things collected from a few travels that she had stored, as well as a few bigger items, like her desk, that she'd bought and kept at Thistle Drive.

It double-thrilled her that she got Brooke to wear a matching sweater with her. If anything had ever told her Brooke loved her from the deepest part of her soul, it was that.

And it thrilled her to watch Brooke hold her clipboard and review her checklist, as she slowly circled the kitchen. “Ben, Jo, Savannah, and Henry should be here within the next twenty minutes. Marisa and Jayson aren't coming until noon. The gifts for Jo and Henry are under that tree you bought. All the food we're making is already prepped,” she murmured, and... yeah.

God, Taylor really loved her.

Brooke circled until she faced Taylor, arching an eyebrow at her. “I hope you're enjoying this.”

“Oh, I am,” she assured. She uncrossed her arms and propelled herself closer to Brooke, as if magnetized toward her.

As soon as she was close enough, Brooke lowered the clipboard and easily turned into her, letting Taylor tilt her head up to press a soft kiss to her lips.

And as they pulled back, Taylor reached into her pocket and tugged out the little gift she'd had wrapped and ready for the last couple of days.

Brooke blinked, her cheeks slightly flushed, as she looked down. “I thought we weren't doing gifts?”

“We aren't,” Taylor reasoned, before she bit her lip and pressed it toward Brooke.

She loved the serious furrow of Brooke's eyebrows as she registered what it was, before her utterly questioning gaze slid up to Taylor's. “My own key? You're showing me... my own key for Christmas?”

Taylor laughed, and *god*, she fucking loved Brooke. She loved the incredulous tone of her voice, the way the low timber of it settled in her stomach like she really was *coming home*.

She loved the doubtful look in her eye that, despite Brooke herself, was superseded by a warmth and just a *sparkle* that she reserved for Taylor and Taylor alone.

“I’m showing you that... I live here,” and even though she was laughing, the words escaped her mouth softly, her voice wrapping around them like the outer wrappings of the gift she hoped it was. “It’s a key ring. That I’m going to carry. With your – *our* – key on it.”

That she had known, for obvious and understandable reasons, that Brooke had doubted Taylor’s ability to be *here*. But that she *was*, and she had no plans of going anywhere, even if it surprised herself in the grand scheme of things.

She watched as Brooke bit at the inside of her cheek, her fingers curling around the keychain. Before she looked up at Taylor, and the fact that there were people who knew Brooke and couldn’t see everything she had under her exterior... it baffled Taylor, because there was so much in there, and her heart swelled with it.

Even before Brooke gently handed it back to Taylor and hesitated for a second. “I... have something for you, too.”

From her very clipboard, she tugged a little envelope out.

Taylor’s mouth fell open and even if she tried, she would have been unable to hold back her teasing, “A *gift*? You were the one who said no gifts!”

“Because you don’t like... *things!*” Brooke gestured vaguely, in her own defense. “I just – I thought,” she huffed out a breath, before muttering, “I thought you’d like this better.”

Without any fanfare, she handed Taylor the card.

And of course, it was a very simple – wordless – log burning fire on the front. “Classic.”

Brooke only looked at her, lips twitching slightly but otherwise unamused.

Taylor grinned, flipping the card open, and – well, was actually very surprised, with Brooke’s handwriting taking up the whole card.

Taylor –

I’ve never written a Christmas card.

Not, like, a traditional one, I suppose, anyway. Holiday memos or well-wishes, but never – this. I’ve always been able to sum up what I need or want to say to someone fairly succinctly, and I don’t feel the need to extrapolate or wax on about something longer than absolutely necessary.

But I wanted you to know that this is all I’ve ever wanted. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.

And the fact that you’ve stayed here, that you’ve made me really feel like I’m enough and that I’m what you want – it’s actually more than I would have ever asked for.

I love you.

I've loved you through every Christmas I can remember experiencing. And I will love you through every one in the future. I will love you every night you stay here, with me, in a home that has always made me think of you.

I'm not someone who needs or asks for gifts, because I've made it a goal to be able to get anything I need on my own. But... who you are for me, fills something inexplicable, in all of the vulnerable places I find hard to voice.

For "a gift" this Christmas – I'm trying to voice it.

Though, I do hope you just KNOW, in that way you know me.

Regards,

Brooke B. Watson

Taylor swallowed hard, around that tightness in her throat instantly feeling like the paper in her hands was delicate and cherished. Because Brooke didn't, typically, say or write these things, the things that Taylor would often say or discuss so easily.

And –

She stepped forward and wrapped her arm – with the card in her hand – tightly around Brooke's waist before sliding the other into her hair, pressing her lips to Brooke's.

She kissed her, hungry at first because she couldn't *not*. Just in the way she wanted to be able to taste Brooke, to *feel* her.

And then it gentled, as she came to cradle Brooke's face, as Brooke's hands splayed on her back, the clipboard clattering dimly to the floor behind her.

As Taylor pulled away, she didn't go far. Instead, she slid her hand back into Brooke's soft hair and held her there, so she could press her lips against her temple.

"I know. I do know," she whispered, through every emotion Brooke brought to the surface inside of her.

"Everyone's going to be here in a second," Brooke whispered, but didn't move to pull back.

And Taylor still didn't move. Because it was true – her family was due to arrive at *their* cabin, for Christmas, at any moment. For the first time in a very, very long time, Taylor was really home for the holidays.