

Curvy Girl & the

GRUMPY SANTA

MISTLETOE LOVE SERIES

JESSA JOY

CURVY GIRL AND THE GRUMPY SANTA

*A Brother's Best Friend Holiday
Romance*

MISTLETOE LOVE

JESSA JOY



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PROLOGUE - KEATON

Seven years ago, two days before Christmas

“Stop being such a goddamn grouch, Keaton.”

“I’m not being a goddamn grouch, I’m being a goddamn Grinch.” I shade my eyes against the bright light Rhys has turned on overhead.

“Grouch, Grinch, *whatever*. Or maybe you’re more of a Scrooge? C’mon, it’ll be fun.” He sweeps a pile of my freshly washed clothes from the bed and sits down. I close my eyes for a second. All the work I’ve done today has given me a headache. I rub the bridge of my nose. Maybe Rhys is right. He starts singing *Jingle Bell Rock* in a weird, high-pitched voice.

I shake my head, hoping he’ll stop singing. “I can’t believe you know all the words.”

He grins. “Mom loves that one. She reminds you that you’re invited to eat with us this year on Christmas Day. You can even stay over on Christmas Eve if you like. I’ll warn you that Grandpa snores and he’ll be in the next room. Dad recorded it once and it was like ninety decibels or something. Same as a lawnmower.”

“I’ll be fine. I just pretend it isn’t Christmas. I’ll work, order takeout and if I’m desperate maybe watch *Die Hard*. That’s as close to Christmas as I get.”

He raises his eyebrows. “*Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie. Watch *The Muppet Christmas Carol* or *Scrooged*. Now those are Christmas movies.”

I open my mouth to disagree but he starts singing again, louder this time. I throw my empty water bottle at him and he ducks.

“Okay, I’ll come. Just stop singing!” I stand up and stretch, then grab my coat from the back of the chair. One benefit to living in this tiny studio apartment is that everything’s in close reach.

Rhys hums under his breath as we walk through the streets of Snowflake Falls towards the town hall. Snow is piling up in big drifts alongside the swept pavements, and twinkle lights are festooned everywhere. My hometown is famous for how picturesque it is during the holidays. Even if all the glitter and nodding Santas everywhere get on my nerves, I can still appreciate the crisp, cold air and the snow-capped mountains in the distance.

Light spills out from the town hall, along with what has to be the school band murdering a version of *Step Into Christmas*. A huge banner flaps in the wind outside, spelling out the words ‘Christmas Eve Eve Party’ in big red and green letters.

Inside, we’re accosted by Magnus Huckle. He’s an older, white-bearded guy who’s always involved with projects to spruce up the town. He is in awesome shape despite being in his late sixties and even won a big horse racing event organized by one of the local billionaires last year.

“Five dollars, boys. Each.” He shakes a snowman-shaped tin.

“Oh, shoot. Do you have any cash, Keat? I just have my card.” Rhys rummages through his pockets.

Magnus holds up a card reader. “No worries. Here you go.”

I smile and tap my phone on it. “Good thinking. I hate carrying cash around. A cash-free Snowflake can’t come soon enough.”

Magnus laughs and points inside. “Tell that to Carl. He paid entirely in quarters. How’s your app going?”

“I’m still in the dev stages. But hopefully, I’ll be ready for beta testing next year.” I put my phone back in my pocket.

“I’d love to see it once you’re done. Let me know if you need any testers. In you go!” He holds open the door to the main hall and we’re hit by a wall of warmth and noise.

Rhys disappears in the direction of the mulled wine stand as I walk around the dancefloor. Tables are set up around the outside so local stores can display their holiday wares. The scent of cinnamon draws me closer to the Candy Cabin’s table. Mom used to take me there every year to sample their famous cookies and the smell reminds me of eating them in the snow with her. I blink and turn away, trying to blank out the happy memory.

“Keaton!” A cheerful voice rings out above the blaring music.

I turn back. For a second, I don’t recognize the gorgeous girl behind the counter. Her golden hair has tinsel woven through it in two long braids and she’s wearing a fitted red velvet mini dress that shows off her incredible tits and shapely thighs. I gawk at her for a second, taking in her red lips and sparkling eyes. On her head is a sparkly pair of plastic reindeer antlers.

I clear my throat. “Melody?”

She smiles. “You didn’t know who I was there for a second, did you? Want a cookie? It’s on the house. You get a free reindeer ornament, too.”

“Sure.” I step forward, almost knocking over a pile of cupcakes in my haste to get closer to her.

Taking the cookie she hands me, and slipping the ornament in my pocket, I try and fail to stop staring at her. “You look different. Nice, I mean. Nice, different.” I’m making a real mess of this.

“Thank you. My cousin Bette gave me a makeover. Her Mom is on a whole promo drive with the Candy Cabin and I’m here to be the happy reindeer who gets people to spend

their holiday money on the sweet stuff.” She giggles and flips her braids back over her shoulder.

“Are you done with school?” In the back of my mind, I’m wondering if she’ll go on a date with me. I’d even do something holiday-related if it’s with her.

“Yep, we’re all done until spring semester. It’s weird being a senior, knowing I’m not going back to Snowflake High after next year. I’m trying to save up some money to do a summer design course, so I’m taking any holiday job I can get. How’s your app stuff going? Rhys said you’d been working really hard on it.”

“It’s okay.” I’m being an idiot. I can’t get my words out. I’ve always thought Rhys’s sister was pretty, but I didn’t realize just how gorgeous she was until now. It’s like I’m in the presence of a movie star or something, and my brain is refusing to work properly.

“Have you heard from your Mom and Dad?” Her voice is kind.

“We speak every couple of days. It’s summer over there, Dad had a tan already. They’re planning on taking Grandma to the beach, I think.” I shrug.

“You didn’t want to visit?”

“The flight to Australia is expensive. Maybe next year.” I take a bite of the cookie.

“It must be hard for you, but they’re doing such a good thing. Your Grandma is lucky to have such a good family around. Are you coming to our house for Christmas?”

I gaze back at her. I was going to hide away and lose myself in work, but now I’m not so sure that’s the best idea. I open my mouth and a firm hand claps me on the back.

I twist around and Rhys is standing there.

“Hey, bud. Come over here for a sec, okay?”

I smile at Melody as he drags me back over to a quiet spot near the door.

His voice is low. “What the fuck was *that*?”

I stare down at him. “What the fuck was *what*?”

“You. Melody. I saw the way you were looking at her. You were like one of those cartoon dogs. Eyes on stalks and tongue hanging out.” His nostrils flare.

“Your sister is totally gorgeous. I hadn’t realized.” As soon as I say it, I realize I’ve made a mistake.

Rhys plants his legs wide. “You stay away from her. Don’t even *think* about her, okay? You want to be my friend, don’t go there. I’m serious, Keaton.”

I hold my hands up. “Calm down.”

“I’m not going to calm down until you tell me you won’t go anywhere near her.” He stands his ground as a group of people in garish Christmas sweaters squeeze past us to get to the dancefloor.

I look back at him. “It’s fine. Don’t get mad. She just looked hot in that dress.”

He grimaces. “I really don’t need to hear that. Here, I got you some mulled wine.”

I take a sip of the sweet, spicy liquid and turn away. My eyes dart back to the Candy Cabin table but there are too many people clustered close to it to see Melody. My fingers wrap around the little reindeer in my pocket. Rhys doesn’t need to worry, I won’t make a move on his sister. Even if she’s beautiful and sweet and kind, and standing near her is like being close to a fire when you’re cold.

I’ll spend Christmas alone again and concentrate on my work.

I can always count on that.



Chapter One

MELODY

Present day, four days before Christmas

My boots crunch on the snow as I walk up the path that leads to Snowflake Falls' brand-new ice rink. Known by locals as the Reindeer Runway, it leads from the town square to the rink, which Mom says is part of Snowflake's new redevelopment plan.

The snow-covered path shimmers under the tall lantern lights and it's lined with tall pine trees dusted in a layer of frost. Adorable reindeer statues stand at intervals along the path, their red noses glowing and antlers covered in twinkling lights. The old, falling-down gazebo on the path has had a major makeover. Where it used to have a sad, broken roof and a rusting bench, it's now a gleaming structure with a polished, silvery-white fence around the outside decorated with wreaths and red bows.

More multi-colored twinkle lights are wrapped around the trees on either side and light snow is falling, muffling the sound of my footsteps. In the distance, on the far side of the rink, the local carol singers are warming up for their performance tonight. It should be magical, but I can't get into my normal happy frame of mind. My Mom calls me a little ray of sunshine, but right at this moment, I'm more of a despondent icicle.

Coming back to Snowflake from the city should be comforting, but it feels frustrating. I worked so hard at Daring Designs, we all did. But the little start-up ran out of funding and I couldn't find another job before the holidays. So, here I am, crunching over the snow, back in my hometown, and

doing whatever I can to make ends meet. And I'm definitely not dressed warmly enough. Despite growing up in this small town, my time in the city has made me underestimate just how cold it gets out here at sunset.

My friend Sienna waves as I approach the rink.

"Cold enough for you?" Her nose is pink.

"Perfect skating weather!" I walk over to where she's standing. The company she works for helped to build the rink and she has a clipboard in one hand and a pen stuck behind her ear.

She shivers, wrapping her arms around her body and stamping her feet, then winks. "Beach, *please*."

I laugh. "I see what you did there. Don't worry, you'll be back in your toasty warm office soon enough, planning your next vacation, while all of us holiday minions stand outside and freeze."

"At least you can take advantage of the rink to practice your skating. I still remember us all watching you in the regionals when we were young. I thought you were a real-life fairy princess in that pink dress."

"I loved that costume. I wasn't ever going to be a world class skater, but I liked the dressing-up part. Oh, Christa is waving at me. See you later!" I walk over to the Candy Cabin stand. Piles of sweet treats are laid out on a red tablecloth and gleaming in big glass jars.

"You're all set here, hon. Cocoa's on the burner, take it off if it gets too hot. And remember to put your cute cards up on the display. There's something I need to tell you. Nope. It's gone. I'll text you when I remember. Need to get back to the store. Give me a call if you need anything. Oh and put this sweater on under your jacket. You look freezing." Christa pats my shoulder, picks up a box, and dashes away.

I put on the sweater, which is bright red with a reindeer playing an electric guitar on the front, and busy myself arranging my cards on the display. Sienna walks over and picks one up.

“These are amazing! This is Peppermint Lodge, am I right?” She pulls her black-framed glasses down from the top of her head and inspects the card.

“Yes. And this one is the Christmas tree in the square. You can see the Candy Cabin on the left.” I hand it to her. “My brother thinks Santa looks like he’s got three eyes.”

Sienna laughs. “Your brother needs to wear *his* glasses.”

I roll my eyes. “Tell me about it. He’s too vain. Mom bugs him about it all the time. Does he ever wear them at work?”

She shakes her head. “Not to my knowledge. I saw him wearing them in the car once, but he took them off when he saw me.”

“That sounds like Rhys. Are you back here tomorrow?” I put the cards back on the display.

“Yes, we’re checking the fire safety checklists. Rhys is too.” Her cheeks have a pink tinge.

“Oh, *great*. He’s going to give me a hard time about finding a real job. That’s the last thing I need right now. I just want to chill and soak up the holiday atmosphere. They don’t do it like this in the city.”

Sienna looks down at the candy-strewn table. “Yeah, your brother is super ambitious. He’d work twenty-four-seven if he could.”

“I’ll tell him not to give you a hard time. God, I’d hate to have him as a boss. He’s so annoying.”

She smiles and pushes her hair back with her glasses until they’re resting on the top of her head again. “He’s not so bad.”

After Sienna leaves, I pour myself some cocoa and idly sketch the skaters circling the rink. I’m just as ambitious as my brother, but I’ve taken a less conventional route. I’m not going to let the failure of the start-up dent my plans. I might need to start from scratch with my illustrations, but I just need a few clients and I’ll be on my way. Back to the city, back to full speed. It’s not that I don’t love Snowflake, especially during

the holidays, but it feels like I'm taking a step backward. I worked so hard and now I'm right back where I started.

The rink is starting to get full and I'm kept busy serving cocoa with all the trimmings and the Candy Cabin's legendary Christmas cookies. A rowdy group starts singing along to *All I Want for Christmas is You* as they try to push each other over on the ice.

There's a lull while most people are out on the ice and I pour myself some cocoa, wrapping my hands around the warm red cup and dancing around to warm up. I have the sensation that I'm being watched.

A large golden retriever with baleful amber eyes and reindeer antlers is staring at me. It's sitting inside the stand, sniffing the air.

"Awww. Aren't you the cutest?" I can't resist animals dressed up for the holidays.

The dog inclines his head as I walk over and starts wagging his feathered tail as I crouch down next to him.

"Now, who do you belong to? Are you lost?" I check the bone-shaped tag on his festive red collar, clutching the cocoa with my other hand so it doesn't spill. "Max?"

He perks up his ears as I pet his soft fur and gives his tail another thump.

"Don't you worry, boy, we'll find your owners." I stand up, step forward, and collide with the padded belly of a hugely tall Santa Claus.

The cocoa spills all over my hand and I yelp. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What am *I* doing? What are *you* doing? This is my stand, too."

"What are you talking about? This is the Candy Cabin. Not a Santa rest stop." I shake most of the cocoa off my hand and take a step back so I'm not pressed against him.

"Yes, I'm Santa." He's so much taller than I am that I have to crane my neck to look up at his face. Except his face is

mostly covered with a huge, white, curly beard. Max starts to lick the cocoa off my fingertips.

“Are you...tipsy? Had too much mulled wine? I mean, that’s cool. It’s the holidays. Happens to us all. But you’re intruding here and I’d prefer it if you left.” I’m trying to look past the fluffy white beard. Something about this Santa is familiar.

Santa crosses his arms and rests them on his stomach as if he’s mocking me. “No can do.”

I look around wildly, trying to see if anyone I know is around. But who’s going to help me get rid of some weird, trespassing Santa? I try a different approach.

“Look, if I give you some cocoa on the house, will you go away?”

He shakes his head. Over the scent of the cocoa, there’s a fresh woody scent. How odd; Santa smells good. I have to resist leaning in for another sniff.

“Okay, I’ll throw in a cookie.” A small crowd of people has started to gather and I need to get back to work.

Santa pauses and then nods.

Finally! I pour some cocoa and hand him the cup, then a cookie. Our fingers brush and a thrill runs down my arm. I must have hypothermia or something, because why am I getting all frisky over Santa Claus?

He moves past me to the side and Max follows him, eyeing the cookie. I start to serve customers, expecting Santa and his hound to disappear. Except they don’t and he just stands there, watching me as I carefully ladle out the cocoa.

Once the crowd’s gone, he walks to stand at the front of the stand.

His voice is deep. “Didn’t expect to see you here, Melody.”

Wait, he knows me?

“I have no idea who you are, Santa. Pull down that beard, please.”

He tugs the long white beard from his face. His chiseled jaw is covered in dark stubble, his mouth unsmiling. Tall, dark, and handsome - all the clichés. It's the one guy I had an unrequited crush on all through high school and beyond.

My brother's grumpy, gorgeous best friend.



Chapter Two

KEATON

I'm staring at Melody and I can't stop. Without the stupid Santa beard it must be obvious how much I'm gawking at her, so I pull it back over my face. Having her close to me completely unexpectedly has left me with a raging hard-on. I'm glad of the huge baggy pants and all the padding.

"Keaton?" She turns her head to the side, looking me up and down.

"Yes."

"Why are you dressed up as Santa? And is this your dog?" She points at Max.

"Yes."

Her forehead wrinkles as her eyebrows draw together. It's adorable. "Meaning...yes, it's your dog?"

"Correct." I can only give her one-word replies. Melody's grown up from a lovely teenager to a drop-dead gorgeous woman. Her golden hair is longer than I remember, silky and luxurious, while her red lips are plump and inviting. She's all soft, eye-popping curves and so damn beautiful, even wearing that terrible reindeer sweater, that it's scrambling my brain. I need to get it together.

"And...the Santa thing? Is this an all-year habit or just for the holidays?" Melody smiles. At least she finds it amusing.

"I'm filling in for the guy Christa hired. He let her down at the last minute. Flu, I think. Does it matter?"

"Oh. And she hired you because..."

“She hired me to give away candy canes. PR to promote her business. They’re in my sack. It’s all above board.” I shake the big bag I’m holding, which is printed with a photo of the Candy Cabin store on the square.

“I get it. That must be what she forgot to tell me. Um...it’s nice to see you again, how’ve you been?” She blinks several times and adjusts the apron over that horrible sweater.

“Fine. I’m going to walk around and hand out the business cards. That’s part of the job. C’mon, Max.” I whistle through my teeth and Max walks ahead. I follow him through the crowd. It’s an excuse to get my head clear. Melody’s been in my thoughts for years, even though I’ve pushed down my attraction to her out of loyalty to Rhys. Having her right next to me, close enough to smell her soft vanilla scent, is like something out of a dream. I must be light-headed.

I hide behind the Santa beard, letting kids fuss over Max and his antlers, occasionally letting out a rumbly “Ho, ho, ho!” as I walk around the rink, handing out cards for the Candy Cabin.

“Keaton! Hey there!” Magnus stops me. “Impressive beard you’ve got going on there, sir.”

“You recognized me under all this fluffy shit?” I ask.

“I’m good at seeing what’s below the surface, as you well know. Come over here where it’s quiet and we can talk about our project.” He points to a log table and chairs behind a tree, away from the main path. Max and I follow him, sitting down as he pushes a cup of mulled wine towards me and I pull my beard off.

I listen, sipping the orange and cinnamon-scented wine, my mind returning again and again to Melody. It’s like she’s stepped out of my fantasies and into my reality, and I’m just not ready for it.

Magnus tells me about his plans for reviving the area of wasteland around the school. Magnus and I both have our secrets. He’s hugely wealthy, a combination of inherited money and good business deals, but he keeps that to himself.

It's something the two of us have in common. Magnus helped me sell the app I built to the highest bidder, making me a multi-millionaire by the time I was twenty-three. We did it all through an anonymous company, as I had zero interest in courting fame or any of the other bullshit that comes with it.

I bought my parents a place in Australia and moved from my tiny studio into the family house here in Snowflake. They fell in love with the sunny climate and decided to make their stay permanent. I've visited a few times, but it's not for me. Too damn hot. My roots are here in this small town and I want it to thrive. My money means I can help people out without giving myself away. So the ice rink, the renovated church, and the town hall's brand-new roof are all my doing.

I take jobs like this Santa fiasco to cover for the fact that I'm not working. I also help out at the animal shelter in Bakersville, which is where Max came into my life. Max leans against Magnus's leg and he scratches behind his ears.

"You have a faraway look in your eyes, Keaton. Girl trouble?" Magnus's green eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles. He's always bugging me to get out there and date someone. He thinks it would make me less grouchy.

"Nope. I can't wait to get this Santa shit off, though." I scratch under the polyester collar of the red suit.

"Just think of it as the perfect disguise. You can eavesdrop on conversations, see who needs help, and what the reaction to the rink is. Santa Sleuth." He raises an eyebrow.

I snort. "Good one. I'll report back."

"Thank you. This rink was a good idea. Snowflake needed a centerpiece like this to attract more visitors. An inspired plan. And all your doing." He raises his cup.

I stand up and down the rest of my drink. "I'm going to get back to it. See you later."

Max and I weave back through the crowds. My steps slow as I get closer to the stand. I lurk by the side of a homewares stand selling creepy wooden elves. Well, I try to lurk. Little

kids keep on spotting me and coming over to get candy. I hand it over distractedly while glancing over at the Candy Cabin.

Melody's cheeks are flushed with the cold, her eyes sparkling as she dances around to *Last Christmas*. Her hips are made for holding onto and her ass is incredible in those tight jeans. Memories of all the times she's appeared in my fantasies over the years race through my head. But, despite the smile on her face, she doesn't seem exactly like the carefree girl I remember. Something has changed and I want to ask her why.

She looks over and I straighten up, trying to look like I wasn't covertly spying on her.

"I need to get more candy." I walk behind the stand and squeeze behind her to reach the cardboard box where Christa stores the samples. I underestimate how cramped it is back here and my body grazes hers. I stiffen, trying not to touch her and she laughs.

"I don't reckon both of us fit behind here, especially with all that padding." She shakes her head, wedged between my stomach and the stand, then wriggles free. I can't let her know how much she affects me.

"Maybe not. How come you're back in Snowflake, anyway?"

Her smile fades. "I lost my job. Not sure if Rhys mentioned I was working for a design start-up. It went bust and I couldn't find another job in time to pay my rent. So, I'm back. Fingers crossed, I can get some freelance work and get out of here, but until then..." she gestures around at the candy piled on the stand.

"I thought you loved the holidays." I pull my beard off and look down at her. We're standing facing each other, still close but not touching.

"I do! And Snowflake does it in style. But how many design companies are here? It's not somewhere I can work. Mom is delighted, of course. And it's lovely to see Sienna and all my friends again. Even you." She winks.

"I'm not big on Christmas."

“I can tell. Which is ironic, considering you’re dressed as Santa Claus, don’t you think?”

I shrug.

“Seriously Keaton, you can’t be grumpy about Christmas. There must be something you like. What about ice skating?” She nods her head in the direction of the rink.

“I’m not the best skater. You are, though. Didn’t you win that big competition?”

“Wow, you remembered? You’re welcome to come out with me on the ice if you want some lessons.” Her gaze is steady as she peers up at me.

“Thanks, but I better get back to work. C’mon, Max.”

I don’t look at her as I squeeze past and head into the crowd. Maybe if I pretend she doesn’t exist, I can get through this without letting her find out what she does to me.

Maybe.



Chapter Three

MELODY

Three days before Christmas

I found it hard to sleep last night. The hours of serving customers and then meeting Keaton unexpectedly made me feel wired. He turned my offer of skating lessons down without a second thought. Why is he so grumpy? He's always been a man of few words, but this felt personal, like he didn't want to be around me at all. Like I'd done something to piss him off, but I have no idea what that could be.

Yawning, I trudge my way through the snow-covered streets from my parents' house to the town square. I'm wearing my sister's bright pink snow boots as mine have disappeared in the time I've been out of town. I'm starting to feel more like myself being back home and the waves from friendly faces I recognize add to my upbeat mood. Folks are out shoveling snow, kids are building snowmen in their front yards and every passing vehicle seems to be playing holiday songs.

The temperature has dropped even more, but I'm more prepared today, wearing my warmest coat and these over-the-top boots. I have a couple of hours before I'm due to start work, so I head to the coffee shop to get some much-needed caffeine. I have my sketchbook with me and I can work on some new ideas.

A tinkling bell announces my arrival as I step into Gingerbread, on the far side of the town square. A wave of coffee-scented warmth greets me, a welcome respite from the biting cold outside. As I scan the room for an empty table, I spot Keaton sitting by himself at the back, near the frost-tipped

window. His hair is ruffled where he's been running his hands through it and he's leaning over a laptop, wearing a pair of black-framed glasses as he squints at the screen. On the table in front of him is a glass of water. Out of that huge Santa costume, he's so handsome it takes my breath away. One thing hasn't changed, though. He looks as grumpy as ever.

"You're on my radar, Mr. Scrooge," I mutter under my breath. My grandma used to say I could charm the birds from the trees if I was determined enough. And the very fact that Keaton's such a grouch is a challenge. It doesn't hurt that he's so gorgeous.

Mixing with the scent of fresh-brewed coffee is the sweet aroma of sugar cookies and cinnamon-spiced treats. Soft holiday music plays in the background as the singers croon their way through a lo-fi version of *Let it Snow*. The store is filled with twinkling fairy lights that cast a warm glow on the wooden tables and plush chairs. All the festive decorations are so cheery that it gives me an idea.

Zuri, Gingerbread's owner, gives me a big smile. "You're back! In town to see your folks?"

"Might be longer than that. Looking for a job. Do you still do the special holiday cocoa with all the trimmings?"

"Sure do."

"Great, I'll take two. And some sugar cookies?"

As I wait for my order, my attention is drawn to Keaton's dog, who's wearing a festive holiday sweater. He sits obediently next to Keaton's table, expressive brown eyes fixed on him adoringly. The contrast between the cheerful pup and Keaton's perpetual scowl makes me smile.

"Is Max trying to get you in the holiday spirit with that sweater?" I approach his table, balancing a loaded tray, nodding at Max who looks up at me with an expectant wag of his tail.

Keaton stares back. He doesn't say anything.

"Did you knit it yourself? It's very cute. *Love* the color."

The corner of his mouth twitches ever so slightly in response. It feels like a small victory that I've managed to crack his serious facade, however briefly.

"That's not surprising. It's almost as bright as those boots you're wearing. You don't need to remind me it's the holidays. And no, I didn't knit it. Max has many admirers, including Zuri." He rolls his eyes.

"I think it's great Max is getting in the spirit. Look at this place! It's like stepping into a Hallmark movie!"

"Don't remind me," he groans, glancing around the coffee shop. "You know, the holidays aren't all sugar cookies and mistletoe."

"True," I lean against the table and give Max a scratch behind her ears. "But that doesn't mean we can't try to find a little happiness in the small things, like adorable dogs in festive sweaters."

"Fine," Keaton sighs, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he reluctantly smiles at Max. "Maybe there's something to be said for your relentless optimism."

"See? Was that so hard?" I tease, sitting down in the chair opposite.

"Alright, don't push your luck. And why are you sitting down? I was about to leave." He closes his laptop with a snap.

"I got you a drink. You looked sort of sad with that glass of water. You can have a sugar cookie too, if you like. Are you missing your family?" I push the cup towards him.

"Thanks. A little, maybe. I've visited every other year. What about you? Coming back here from the city can't be easy."

"Alright, I'll admit it," I begin, taking a sip of my drink before continuing. "This year has been challenging. Losing my job has left me feeling...well, a little lost."

Keaton's expression softens, the hint of a frown creasing his brow. "I'm sorry to hear that, Melody. You're dedicated though. Rhys used to talk about how much practice you used

to do for your skating. You'll find something else. Don't let it ruin your holidays back with your family."

"Thanks. You're right. I'll try not to let this setback dampen my Christmas spirit. You've cheered me up!"

"Maybe there's hope for me yet."

"I always knew there was a soft, gooey center hiding beneath that tough exterior," I grin back at him.

"Now that's a step too far!" he warns, but there's a twinkle in his eyes.

"Alright. If you're not a fan of the holidays, what would your ideal December look like?"

"Simple," he leans back in his chair and crosses his arms, giving me a big grin. "No decorations, no carolers, no holiday parties, and most importantly, absolutely no cheesy Christmas songs."

"Sounds incredibly...dull. But I guess that's right up your alley."

"Hey!" he protests, but he still has a smile on his face. "Just because I don't partake in all the holiday hoopla doesn't mean I don't know how to have fun."

"Fine, enlighten me then. What does the great Keaton Price do for fun?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he asks, leaning closer.

"Actually, yes, that's why I asked," I reply. There's a flurry of warmth in my core and I can't tear my gaze away from his.

There's a knock on the window and my brother waves at us as he rushes past. He's carrying a large box and Sienna is scurrying along next to him, trying to keep up. I wave back, trying to work out where they're going.

When I turn back to the table, Keaton's on his feet, pulling on his coat. As he stands up, a little figurine falls out of his coat pocket. I lean down and pick it up.

"Hey, isn't this one of those reindeer ornaments Christa used to give away with her cookies? I thought she'd stopped

doing that years ago.” I peer closer at it.

He reaches for it, our fingers touching and an electric jolt moving up my arm as he touches me.

“I don’t know. Thanks for the drink. And the cookie. See you at the rink.” He doesn’t smile as he walks away, Max following as he weaves his way amongst the tables.

I get that feeling that I’ve done something wrong again, but I don’t know what it is. Screw him and his weird moods; I can’t keep up. If he’s annoyed with me about something, it’s up to him to tell me about it. Maybe Grandma was wrong. This is one bird I definitely can’t charm.

I get my sketch pad out, crunching on a cookie as I draw the ice rink from memory, adding in the twinkle lights decorating the trees on the path leading up to it. In the foreground, a guy stands looking at the skaters, his expression wistful. It takes me a moment to realize I’ve drawn Keaton. I put the pencil down and stare at the bulletin board opposite me.

A colorful flier in the center reads: “Don’t forget us at Christmas! Support Bakersville Animal Shelter.” There’s a drawing of something that I think is meant to be a dog in a Santa hat underneath.

“It’s not the best drawing, is it?” Zuri’s collecting cups from the empty tables around me and loading them onto a tray. “I was going to mention it to you, you could do a much better illustration. It’s not paid, unfortunately, but it would be for a good cause.”

“I reckon I could give it a try. Who do I need to speak to?” I flip the page on my sketchbook.

“Mr. Huckle, I think?”

I nod, picking up my pencil, and sketch Max in his festive sweater, sitting under a Christmas tree. Doing this is what makes me happy. I lose all sense of time until someone dropping their cup on the floor startles me out of my reverie.

I glance at the clock. Fifteen minutes to get to work.

Back to standing in the cold and trying not to annoy grumpy Santa.

I should at least be resentful at how rude Keaton's been, but weirdly, the idea of working in close proximity with him makes me feel a little excited.

And I have no idea why.



Chapter Four

KEATON

It's so cold outside it's almost ridiculous. I trudge down Reindeer Runway, through the parking lot and on towards the Candy Cabin, Max bounding by my side. He's proud to be wearing his festive sweater, so at least one of us is enjoying all this holiday crap. The rink is nearly empty today – seems like most folks have decided to stay inside and keep warm. Can't say I blame them.

My breath clouds up in front of my face as I exhale. Did I make things weird with Melody, by leaving like that? She was only trying to have a light-hearted conversation, after all. My fingers stroke the little reindeer. I'm an idiot carrying it around, but I can't bear to get rid of it.

Christa's re-stocking the stand as I arrive. "Evening, Santa Keaton. Cold enough for you? My grandma used to say when the weather got like this that it was colder than a polar bear's toenails. If it stays this quiet, you guys should close an hour early. Don't want you turning into icicles when there are no customers. Could you tell Melody?"

"Sure." I get the suit out from under the counter and replace it with my coat, then pick up the sack, filling it with more candy canes. Hearing her name makes my heart thump in my chest. I definitely have it bad.

"How're the two of you getting along? You're good friends with her brother, aren't you?" Christa knows everyone and everything that happens in Snowflake. If there was an information hotline for this place you could call, she'd pick up.

“Yes. We get along fine. The holidays aren’t really my bag...I’m kind of a grump about the whole thing.” I gesture at my Santa suit as I pull on the white beard.

“Well, don’t be so grumpy that you forget to have any fun at all, ever. Melody could do with a little Christmas cheer. She puts a bright smile on everything, her Mom says, but losing her job like that affected her. And you know what they say...”

“What do they say?”

“Help someone else and you get out of your own head. You should try it.” She laughs.

I nod and pick up the sack, putting Max’s antlers on his head as I walk around the rink. Most people are on the ice and there are very few spectators tonight. After an hour or so, Magnus walks over to me with two cups of mulled wine.

“For you and your lovely friend at the Candy Cabin. She’s offered to design the posters for the animal shelter. My drawing of a dog is not the best, I admit.” He presses the cups into my hands and leaves before I can protest. Max and I walk slowly back to the stand. Melody’s alone, gazing out onto the ice, but when she spots me her cheeks flush and she looks away.

“For you. From Magnus.” I hand her the cup.

“That’s nice of him.” She doesn’t meet my eyes.

“He said you were going to help out with the illustrations for the animal shelter. That’s very kind of you. The shelter is where I got this good boy, isn’t it Max?” I pat his head and his tail thumps.

“Yes, I’m happy to help out.” She takes a sip of the wine.

“Oh, Christa said we could finish early if it stayed quiet. Think the temperature drop made most people stay indoors tonight.”

“That’s good.”

Max darts past me in the direction of the German sausage stand and I follow, trying not to spill my wine. I catch up with him and bump into Jamal, the rink manager.

“Pretty empty tonight...” I say.

He looks despondent. “Yeah. Hope this is a one-day thing.”

The wide-open ice rink gives me an idea.

“Can I ask you a favor, Jamal?” I ask.

Ten minutes later, I’m on the ice, clutching onto the side. I can just about skate, but this heavy Santa costume makes everything ten times more difficult. I’ve taken off the beard and my face is cold. Jamal walks over to the Candy Cabin, Max following, his reindeer antlers bobbing.

I’m too far away to hear what they’re saying, but Melody smiles when Jamal presents her with the skates. She then reads the note I’ve tucked under Max’s collar and looks up. It’s my cue to lumber out onto the center of the ice. I wobble awkwardly on my skates, the Santa suit hindering my movements. My arms flail about like a windmill, and I’m pretty sure I look ridiculous. I don’t fall over, but it’s close.

The wind blows as a few people with better skills skate around the outside of the rink. Some teenagers take advantage of Jamal’s absence to go straight onto the ice with their own skates and without paying the entrance fee. They whoop and holler, racing each other around the outside. There’s a tap on my arm.

“I don’t think the Santa suit is helping your mobility.” Melody’s voice is playful.

“I think you’re right.”

“That note made me laugh. ‘Santa in peril! Please help me!’ How could I resist?” She skates around me, ending with a little pirouette.

“I really need help. I’m not even sure if I can make it back to the edge again.”

“Sure you can.” Melody reaches for my hand. The contact makes my heart pound in my ears and my dick hard. I start laughing at the idea of having a hard-on while dressed as Santa Claus in the middle of an ice rink.

“What’s so funny?” Melody starts to skate very slowly and I try to keep up.

I shake my head. “I’m terrible at this.”

“Nonsense. You’re not bad at all. It’s mainly confidence.” Her small hand is warm in mine as we circle the outside. After a couple of laps, I’m used to the weight of the Santa suit and we speed up a little.

I’m warming up with the exercise and despite myself, I find myself humming along to *All I Want For Christmas Is You*. Something about the song rings true to me. If I could unwrap Melody on Christmas Day, I think I’d die from sheer happiness.

“I hear you humming, grumpy. I thought you hated holiday songs the most?” Melody smirks.

“They’re growing on me.”

“Next you’ll be telling me that you’re coming to the Christmas Eve party tomorrow night...” She spins around so she’s skating backward.

I open my mouth to tell her that if she’s going, I’ll be there too, but one of the teenagers catches my attention. He’s also skating backward, but way too quickly, and he’s going to crash into Melody. I grab her, pulling her out of his way before he touches her. I’m too clumsy to stop us from both sliding down onto the ice and I end up on top of her, propping myself up so I don’t crush her with my weight. My hand is behind her head, stopping it from hitting the ice. We’re both breathing heavily, our faces inches apart.

“Are you okay?” I ask. Her wavy blonde hair is spread out on the ice.

“Yes, I’m fine. I know how to fall. How about you?” She doesn’t move her head away.

“All the padding helped. Nothing’s broken. I’m not sure how I’m going to get up, though.”

She starts laughing. “We’ll be trapped here for the night. At least your fake belly will keep me warm.”

“How do you know it’s fake?”

That makes her laugh harder. I want to kiss her, to finally feel those soft lips under mine. She smells so good close up, like frosted vanilla, that I don’t want to move. There’s the sound of a throat clearing above us and I reluctantly look up.

Jamal is standing there. “Saw the accident. Good save. I’ve thrown those boys off but you can carry on if you like. Fifteen minutes left before I close for good.” He puts his hand out and hauls me to my feet. Melody performs some kind of graceful maneuver to get back on her feet. We skate over to the center of the rink as a light snow starts to fall.

We’re the only people left here now. I take Melody’s hands and we spin in a slow circle a couple of times as *Let It Snow* plays over the speakers. I can’t stop staring at her and she’s gazing back at me, as we slow the circle down, getting closer with each rotation. She giggles as I stop, catching her around the waist and pressing her into my body.

“Will you kiss me?” she whispers, her breath forming little clouds in the crisp air. I shouldn’t do this, but the pull between us is too strong to resist.

“Melody, I…” My voice falters as I reach out and touch her cheek, the soft warmth of her skin contrasting with the icy chill on my fingertips.

“Keaton,” she breathes again, her eyes searching mine as if looking for confirmation. Rhys would never approve, but right now, all I can focus on is this beautiful girl in front of me on the ice.

I lean in close as our lips finally meet. Her lips are soft under mine, as my tongue explores her mouth, both of us breathing fast, the world melting away around us. It’s better than I could ever have imagined, her curves pressed against me, out here in the middle of the ice.

Max barks and I stop kissing Melody in order to check where he is. He’s standing with his paws up on the side of the rink, his antlers falling off.

“Wow,” Melody murmurs as we break apart, her cheeks flushed. “That was...unexpected.”

“Unexpected, but perfect,” I admit, unable to keep the smile from spreading across my face. “I’ve wanted to do that for the last seven years. I thought about you every day.”

“Really?” she asks, a playful glint in her eyes. “You hid it well under your grumpy exterior.”

“I’m a man of mystery.” I wink.

“You sure are.”

Max barks again and then runs off. “I should catch him before he decides to explore the town. I’ll shut up the Candy Cabin if you want to skate a little longer.”

“Thanks!” Melody looks at me for a few seconds, as if she wants to say something, and then whirls away. I skate slowly back to the edge, take off my skates, and put my boots back on, then go off in search of Max.

I glance back over my shoulder as Melody pirouettes in the icy rink and hold my breath. Some idiot is gawking at her, watching her skilful moves. What was once just a fantasy is a painful, amazing reality. I want Melody to be mine. The idea of her with anyone else makes my heart twist and my fists clench. I can’t take this further because of Rhys. His warning rings in my head. But how can I walk away?



Chapter Five

MELODY

Two days before Christmas

“Wow, you look incredible!” Sienna runs up to take a closer look at my outfit. I’ve made a big effort for tonight’s Christmas Eve Eve party, wearing a bright red dress bought in the city and a pair of unsuitable high-heeled shoes.

“Thank you. It’s a relief not to be wearing an apron. And to have someone else on candy duty.” I wave at Christa, who smiles from the Candy Cabin table.

Sienna smiles. “Your apron wouldn’t cut it as a party outfit. I think the mayor might throw you back out there in the cold.”

She hands me a cup of hot rum punch as my brother comes up and points at the ceiling, mumbling about building regulations. He’s always thinking about work and sure enough, he leads her away. Poor Sienna. She’ll probably end up taking notes while he drones on about building materials. I scan the room, hoping that Keaton might be here. The chances are slim, since he hates holiday parties, but I’m hoping after last night’s kiss, he might show up.

This party has gone seriously upscale since the last time I attended, back in high school. The mayor must be spending half his budget for the year on the sparkling crystal decorations, free buffet, and the big band playing swing versions of holiday tunes. I walk over to the enormous Christmas tree. There’s an unusual decoration at the back, so I walk behind it, half-hidden from the dancefloor so I can take a closer look. As I’m peering up to inspect the ornament, which

looks like a Santa holding a cell phone, a conversation starts up right next to me.

“Come over here, my dear.” It’s Magnus Huckle.

“Oh, is this the tree Keaton bought? It’s spectacular.” That’s Magnus’s wife, I think.

“Yes, but keep your voice down. Remember no one knows.”

“It’s a shame. I think people in this town would stop thinking he was just some aimless grump if they really knew how much good he does for Snowflake Falls.”

Magnus sighs. “It’s his choice. If he wants to be a Secret Santa, we need to respect his wishes. The new animal shelter will cost more than two hundred thousand to build, but he insists on funding all of it. It’s going to take some very careful accounting to keep that a secret.”

“Maybe it’s better that this comes out. We could tell Christa, then the whole town would be chattering about it in twenty-four hours.”

Magnus snorts. “Yes. But it’s not going to happen. We’ll respect Keaton’s privacy. Oh look, there’s Lucas. Let’s go say hello.”

I hold my breath as they walk away. Keaton is some kind of secret benefactor? The same grouchy guy who’s making some spare cash dressing up as Santa for the Candy Cabin? Spending hundreds of thousands on the new animal shelter? I down my punch, dazed. Why hasn’t he told anyone? Not even Rhys? He’s living a double life right here in Snowflake Falls, where everyone knows everything about everybody else.

From across the room, I spot a tall, dark-haired figure. Out of his padded red Santa suit, the hard lines of Keaton’s body and his confident walk are unmistakable. Without thinking, I squeeze out from behind the tree and walk over.

As I get closer, his mouth drops open slightly. We’re both staring at each other, and the light and sounds of the dancefloor fade away. I want to ask him about his whole

Secret Santa thing, but chicken out when I'm right in front of him.

He glances around and then takes my hand, pulling me in for a hug. "You look absolutely gorgeous. Don't tell Rhys I said that."

I laugh. "You don't look so bad yourself. And Rhys has disappeared to do some work, if you can believe it, so you're safe to keep the compliments coming. You decided holiday parties aren't such a bad idea?"

He grins. "Holiday parties in *general* are still not my thing. But holiday parties with you in attendance are more my style."

A waiter walks up to us with a tray of champagne and Keaton takes two glasses.

I incline my head to one side. "Champagne? Don't you think this party has gotten very...fancy?"

"It was always due for an upgrade. The last time I was here, seven years ago I think, they ran out of punch and everyone had to drink water. And they couldn't heat the hall past seven in the evening."

"How can they possibly afford this though?" I look closely at him, but his face is impassive.

"Maybe the mayor has some kind of lucrative criminal side hustle going on." He glances over at the mayor, who must be in his seventies. "Meth, maybe?"

I giggle. "He does have a motor home he could cook from."

"Oh, Magnus mentioned he loved the drawing you did for the animal shelter fliers. I don't know if you know, but he has his fingers in lots of pies. Knows a lot of influential people. It might be worth sending him your portfolio." He gazes down at me.

"He's already asked for it! Fingers crossed he likes what he sees."

"I'd love to see it sometime. Is it online?"

“Yes, I have a website. And I’d be happy to show you. I didn’t know that design was your thing.” I take a sip of my drink, the bubbles making my nose fizz.

He opens his mouth and then closes it. It’s like he wants to tell me something but can’t bring himself to. The band starts to play *Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas* and Keaton leads me onto the dancefloor. I breathe in his delicious woodsy scent, the room spinning a little as we dance.

His hands stroke my back through my dress. “I’ve wanted to be this close to you for a *long* time, you know.”

“And not lying in a heap on the ice with me? You mean you prefer this?” I look up at him.

He grins and his hands tighten on my lower back. “I like anything where I get to be close to you, Melody. I haven’t seen you in seven years - I’ll take what I can get.”

“Well, I’m more than happy to oblige. And I had no idea you wanted to be close to me. You’ve done a good job of disguising it with the whole grumpy Santa act.”

“I’m a many-layered Santa. Complicated.” His voice is teasing.

“And...who knew Santas were such good dancers?” I smile up at him.

“We get special training. We even practice our pole routines on leftover candy canes.” His deep voice rumbles in his chest. There’s a longing in his eyes, like he wants to hold me closer to him, but he’s trying to resist.

The pull towards him is strong. I want him to kiss me again like he did yesterday, but it’s impossible in front of all these people. Rhys may not be here, but if his best friend and I kissed, my brother’s phone would light up like a Christmas tree within minutes.

The song comes to an end and the band launches into a sprightly version of *Jingle Bell Rock*.

“You want to get out of here?” Keaton leans down and whispers in my ear, sending tingles down my spine.

I nod. “How are we going to do it without everybody noticing?”

“I’ll walk over to the tree and make conversation with Magnus. You slip out while we’re talking. Then I’ll meet you out back in five minutes.”

“Very stealthy. You’re good at being sneaky.”

He laughs. “You have no idea.”

Once I’ve got my coat, I take the back exit and wait outside. I’m not sure what I’m doing, but I know I don’t want to be apart from Keaton. My high school crush on him has turned into something else. It’s the kindness behind that grumpy exterior that’s reeled me in. I just don’t know if I should tell him that I know who he really is.

Keaton marches outside and puts his arm around me.

“Sorry for making you wait in the cold. I know it sounds like a line, but my house is just around the corner.”

I smile. “And my house has my grandparents, mom and dad, my sister, my cousins, and four cats. Let’s go to your place.”

He leans down and cups his hands around my face. I breathe in his woodsy scent, mixed with the icy air. His voice is low as he gazes at me. “Did I tell you how beautiful you are? And that I’ve been longing to kiss you again like we did yesterday?”

I shake my head and smile. His big hands move from cupping my jaw to the back of my head as he leans down to kiss me. A fire lights my core as his mouth moves on mine, rougher and harder than our first kiss. I moan softly, wrapping my arms around his neck as I press my body closer to his. His hands roam down my back to my hips, pulling me even closer to him.

As we kiss, his hardness presses against me and that magnetic pull draws me even closer. His tongue explores my mouth, as I gasp. I break the kiss and look up at him. “I want you.”

“I want you too. So much, Melody. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.” He strokes my face, his fingers light.

As we walk through the streets, I slide a little on the ice. “I didn’t wear the most sensible shoes.”

Keaton stops and scoops me into his arms. I protest, pushing against him. “I’m too heavy, put me down!”

He shakes his head. “You’re perfect. And there’s no way I’m risking you slipping and having to take you to the emergency room. What a way to spend Christmas Eve Eve. That would ruin your holiday.”

He turns the corner, walking slowly and carefully up to his house. I’m warm and cozy pressed against him as he mounts the stairs and then places me gently down on his porch.

Once we’re inside, I glance around. It’s decorated in a modern, minimal style with pine floorboards and low lighting. There’s a huge, plush sofa and a state-of-the-art TV, along with some expensive-looking, colorful paintings on the wall. “This is your parents’ place?”

He nods. “I redecorated after they decided to stay in Australia permanently. It’s pretty minimal now, but my Mom loved china figurines and flounces, so I enjoy the contrast. And Max doesn’t care.”

Max opens one eye from his deluxe dog bed by the fireplace and thumps his tail.

“Come into the kitchen? I have some stuff in the fridge.” Keaton steps forward to head down the hallway but I can’t resist any longer.

I reach for him and pull him closer to me, and he leans me against the wall, his body pressing into mine. His hands slide down my back and rest on my hips, pulling me even closer to him. Without a word, he leans down and captures my lips with his. It’s a gentle kiss at first, testing the waters, but it quickly grows more intense. Our mouths move in perfect sync, my heart racing in my chest.

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him even closer to me. He responds by deepening the kiss, and I lose myself in

the moment. It's like nothing else exists but the two of us, time stopping as we embrace. I'm relaxed, like I'm finally home, but at the same time I'm the most turned-on I've ever been. My feet are unsteady on the ground, like this is all a dream I don't want to wake up from.

As we break the kiss, we both gasp for air. Keaton looks down at me, his eyes intense.

"I've wanted you for so long. I guess if I believed in Christmas wishes, you'd be mine. This is a dream come true for me. And I could never get enough of kissing you..." he says softly, leaning down to press his mouth on mine again.

As we continue to kiss, his fingers trace the outline of my curves and a jolt of pleasure shoots through me. I moan into his mouth as the heat builds between us. His tongue meets mine, moving in a slow rhythm.

He breaks away, his mouth moving to my neck, causing shivers to radiate down my spine. I moan and tilt my head back, allowing him better access to my skin. He lifts my hair away, stroking it softly as his kisses continue down.

I catch my breath as he suddenly lifts me up, wrapping my legs around his waist as he carries me to his bedroom, switching on a soft light. He lays me down on the dark blue-sheeted bed and strips off his shirt, revealing his broad shoulders, muscular chest and sculpted abs.

He looks down at me, a half-smile on his face. I reach for him, hungry for his touch and he shakes his head. "I'm going to take my time, gorgeous. I've been thinking about doing this forever."

He leans over me and I breathe in his wonderful scent. He's close enough to touch now and I reach my hands upwards. My fingers trailing up his chest, I smile up at him. "You can start by helping me out of this dress..."

He unbuttons the pearly buttons down the front of my dress, kissing each inch of exposed skin, then leaning up to kiss me again and again, his tongue teasing mine as his hands roam over my body.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” His voice is low, a rumble in his chest.

I unhook my bra and he groans as my breasts fall free. Arching my back, I press my breasts against his chest and he groans again, his hands gripping my hips tightly. He trails hot kisses down my neck and collarbone to my breasts. I let out a soft moan, my hands fisting in his hair as his tongue slowly circles each nipple, then sucks and nips at each breast in turn.

I’m panting now, reaching for the hardness of his cock, outlined through his pants.

“Are you sure about this?” he asks, his eyes locked on mine.

I nod, unable to find the right words to tell him how much I want him. “Yes. I’m on the pill, not that I’ve been with anyone for a long, long time. I had a clear STI test a few years ago, but I haven’t been with anyone since then.”

He shakes his head. “Me neither.”

He moves lower, his lips tracing a line down my stomach and to the waistband of my panties. He looks up at me, his eyes dark, and I nod my permission. He pulls them off slowly, his fingers lightly caressing my inner thighs as I tense my stomach, my whole body aching for his touch. His hands trail upwards, parting my folds and his fingers find my clit, stroking me softly as I arch my back, spreading my legs wider.

“You’re so wet. I want you to come for me.” His voice is a low growl.

He dips his head, his lips finding my clit and I gasp, my hips bucking up towards him. He flicks his tongue over and over again, making me moan louder. He carries on licking in a steady rhythm that sends electricity radiating out from my core all over my body. He slides one finger and then another inside me, sliding in and out in the same rhythm as his tongue, increasing his pace. I let out a ragged breath, gripping the bed sheets, as my orgasm overtakes me, coming hard as a warm wave of pleasure washes over my body.

I catch my breath and then scrabble for his belt, undoing his pants as his massive cock springs free. He moves quickly, pushing me back onto the bed and crawling over me, his hips between my legs. The heat radiates from his body as he gazes at me. He guides himself inside me, inch by inch, and I gasp with pleasure as he fills me up completely.

He pauses, looking down at me, his eyes dark. “You’re mine. I could stay like this forever, filling you up, deep inside you.”

He begins to move, slowly, his thrusts long and deep. I wrap my legs around him as he pumps into me harder and faster. His lips find my breasts, sucking each peaked nipple while he moves inside me. His big hands hold my wrists up over my head as he thrusts in and out, my breasts jiggling, the sensation driving me closer and closer to climax. My breathing quickens and my thighs quiver as he increases his rhythm, one hand between us, his fingers moving on my clit, the other holding my wrists. His lips find mine and I moan as our tongues entwine. Waves of pleasure ripple through my body as I come again, pulsing against his cock.

He thrusts faster until he stiffens, calling my name as his hot seed fills me over and over again. He pulls me gently against him, kissing my lips as our breathing slows.

“You’re perfect, did you know that? Better than I ever dreamed of. Having you here with me is everything I want.” He kisses my cheek, stroking my hair.

Outside, the wind blows the snow against the window. Inside, I’m sated, happy, and warm as I drift off to sleep.



Chapter Six

.....
KEATON
.....

Christmas Eve

I wake up with my arms wrapped around Melody.

Max has come upstairs during the night, as he often does, and got up on the bed. He's wedged himself around our legs and is snoring away.

Snow is still falling against the window and faraway the Snowflake Falls choir is warming up for their Christmas Eve carol session. Usually, it reminds me of how far away I am from my family, but now I feel content. For the first time in ages, I'm at peace.

I don't want to move, but I'd like to wake Melody up with some fresh coffee and hopefully get back under the covers to worship every inch of her luscious, curvy body. I wriggle my way out of bed and Max sleepily follows me downstairs.

My cell beeps.

Rhys: Are you up and dressed? I'm on my way over. Be 10 mins.

Fuck.

I forgot I'd said to Rhys that I'd help him out with getting a Christmas tree for his office party. My truck is big enough to fit it in the back and he talked me into driving him up to the Christmas tree farm today.

But if he's arriving here, Melody has to go. There's no way he can find his sister upstairs in my bed, he'll kill me. Max looks at me, concerned, as I bypass his food bowl and trudge straight back upstairs.

Melody's still asleep, her golden hair spread out over the pillow. I touch her shoulder.

"Wake up, beautiful."

She blinks her eyes open, stretches, and reaches for me with a smile. I shake my head.

"I'm sorry, but your brother is on his way over."

Melody sits up. "Rhys? How come?"

"I forgot I told him I'd help him get a tree. You better get out of here."

Her face falls. "You want me to leave?"

"You want to be in my bed when he arrives?"

Melody stares at me for a second and then pulls her clothes on. She doesn't look at me. There's an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach as she pads downstairs, looking for her shoes. I'm about to follow her back downstairs when the front door closes.

She's left without saying goodbye.

Shit.

That's not how I wanted things to go. She's pissed off with me and I don't blame her. She must think I'm blowing hot and cold because I'm not sure of how I feel about her. But the opposite is true. I've never felt this way about anyone except her. And I want to get this right. I need to tell Rhys that I'm in love with his sister so I have a chance at a real future with her. If she'll have me, that is.

I head back downstairs and feed a confused Max, who gobbles down the food in his bowl as I lace up my snow boots. He comes and leans on my leg, and I scratch behind his soft ears. There's a hammering at the door and I grab my coat and keys, whistling for Max.

Rhys looks jubilant.

"I've done it, bud."

“Done what?” I get in the driver’s seat of my truck, open the back for Max to hop in, and turn on the heater as Rhys gets in on the other side.

“We closed the Carford deal. The one I’ve been talking about for the last four months? Have you been listening?”

“Well done.”

“Who pissed in your cereal? You’re even more of a Grinch than usual.” He snaps on the radio, tuning it into the local station. A chirpy DJ babbles on about more snowfall headed into town on Christmas Day before *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree* starts up.

“I have something to tell you.” I turn the radio down.

He smiles. “Me too. I don’t think I can hold it in much longer.”

I glance over at him as I take the turn for the farm. “Excuse me?”

“Sienna. I’ve been head over heels for her for a long time. Didn’t want to say anything to anyone because she’s my employee. You know, boss-employee relationships are kinda taboo. But I think I’m going to have to tell her how I feel. I think this is love, dude.” Rhys has a huge grin on his face.

“That’s the same Sienna who’s one of Melody’s best friends?”

He nods. “Yeah, my sis might be a bit weird about it. But I think she’ll come around once she realizes how we feel about each other.”

I park and let Max off the truck, taking the axe from the back and walking into the field filled with Christmas trees.

“Keat? Are you in a hurry to get this over with? Not that I care, I want to see Sienna again as soon as possible.”

I turn around. “I’m going to keep hold of this axe until I’ve told you what I need to.”

His eyes widen. “Must be bad.”

“I’ve fallen in love with Melody. I’ve been in love with her since high school, but I never did anything because you warned me off her. But I can’t stay away now. And I think she may like me too...if I haven’t ruined everything.” I clutch the handle of the axe.

Rhys stares at me. I wait for him to start shouting and brace in case he decides to throw a punch my way. Instead, he throws back his head and laughs. He’s chuckling so hard that he has to lean over and catch his breath.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“The two of us. Both in love. At the same time. I’m in love with my sister’s best friend. And my best friend is in love with my goddamn *sister*.”

My lips twitch. “I didn’t think you’d find it amusing. I thought you might punch me. You were pretty serious about me not dating Melody seven years ago.”

Rhys shakes his head. “I didn’t know my ass from my elbow back then, dude. Things change. I’ve changed. My sister deserves some happiness and so do you. I’d be a hypocrite if I objected, not that I want to.”

I hand him the axe. “Thanks. And I’m happy you’ve found someone. I thought you were married to your job.”

He shrugs. “Something was missing in my life and I filled it with work. Now I see I was wrong.”

He walks around a huge tree and I lose sight of him for a moment. A huge weight has been lifted from my body and I’m light-headed. Max runs up to me, his tail wagging.

“Shall we go see Melody once we’re done here, Max? Make things right?” I ask.

He looks back at me and barks twice.

I know what I need to do.



Chapter Seven

MELODY

As the light fades, the crowds start to leave the rink. They're heading home to gather around the Christmas tree. This is usually my favorite part of the whole holiday period, but I'm strangely empty inside.

I shiver, wrapping my hands around my body to keep warm. My feet feel weird, probably from wearing those unfamiliar high heels last night. The very same heels I wore to slip and slide my way home this morning.

I grit my teeth, remembering how Keaton kicked me out of his house. While I can imagine Rhys wouldn't have been delighted to find the two of us in bed together, I didn't think Keaton would treat me like some dirty secret. Or a disposable one-night stand. I guess all those pretty words meant nothing to him and I'm the loser who believed him.

How am I going to cope with seeing him again? It's not like I can avoid him forever, since he and Rhys are so close. I've fallen for Keaton, for the kindness under his grumpy exterior and his secret existence as the town's benefactor. And now I'm going to have to pretend he doesn't affect me, to be cold and polite as he most likely will be to me. Maybe he'll just ignore me. I don't know what's worse.

Mr. Huckle walks over, wearing a Scandinavian-style sweater printed with snowflakes, and smiles. "Did you have a good night last night?"

I smile politely. "What a great party! The tree was amazing. How about you?"

“Ah yes, it was fun. I drank a little too much of that rum punch. Could I have some cocoa, please? And I’ll take a bag of those sugar reindeer cookies for my nephew’s kids. We bought a huge bag a week ago but we’re all out.”

I ladle out the cocoa and hand him a bag of cookies in a red and white paper bag.

“Thank you. I wanted to talk to you, Melody. A friend of mine has a design consultancy in Bakersville. He’s looking for freelance illustrators and I mentioned your name. Would you be interested? I can pass on your details if you are.”

I stand up straighter. “Hell, yeah!”

He laughs.

“I mean...yes, please! That would be great. Thanks, Mr. Huckle.” I want to hug him.

“Please, call me Magnus. And it’s my pleasure. You’re very talented.”

He walks away, leaving me with a smile on my face. My love life may be in shreds but at least I have a potential career opportunity on the horizon. Maybe if I get a good job, I can be like Rhys and throw myself into my work, forgetting everything and everyone else.

The rink is nearly empty when Sienna stops by the Candy Cabin.

“Could I get some candy canes and a bag of snowflake-shaped cookies? My mom loves those.”

“Sure. You look...happy. Not so stressed.” I bag up her purchases.

“Yes, I am happy. More than happy. But I have to tell you something and I don’t want you to hate me, okay?”

I stare at her. “Go on. I’d never hate you.”

“So, work being crazy means Rhys and I have been spending a lot of time together. And I’ve always had a crush on him. I think maybe he might like me too, but I’m not sure.

But I don't want to upset you." She fiddles with the bag I've handed her.

"Oh my god, Sienna! No, no, don't worry about me. I want you to be happy. And I want Rhys to be happy too. The holidays are a time to be with the person you care about." A tear runs unexpectedly down my face even as I try to keep my cheery smile on for her.

"What is it? Do you need a hug?" Her voice is gentle.

I shake my head. "I'm okay. I'll tell you all about it after Christmas. I think maybe I just need to get packed up and go slob out in front of the TV tonight. I'm a little overtired."

"Are you sure? You take it easy. It's so cold out here. Will you finish soon?"

"Yes, I'm nearly done. I'll text you later. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas." She smiles and walks away, swinging her bag of cookies. The wind whistles through the big Christmas tree at the side of the rink. I start packing everything away, ready for Christa and her husband to come and collect it later on.

I'm almost finished when Jamal walks up with some skates. "Final skate is on me. There's nobody out there, you'll have the rink to yourself..."

I reach for the skates. "Thanks. I could do with letting off some steam."

Out on the ice, I lose myself skating around and around the rink. *All I Want For Christmas Is You* is playing on repeat and I try out some of the jumps I remember from my competition days. All the elements that would normally fill me with joy are here; holiday music, twinkling lights, and twirling around on the ice. Except there's an empty hollow in the pit of my stomach because Keaton rejected me, tossing me out of his home like he was ashamed of my presence. Just because of what my stupid brother might think.

Screw them both.

I slow down, skating back to the center of the ring and practicing my footwork. I'm so absorbed that I don't notice a dark-haired, clumsy figure wearing a bright red Santa hat slowly skating across the ice until the last moment.

Keaton slides to an ungraceful stop.

We stare at each other as the music plays. I hate how handsome he is, even in that silly hat.

"Come for a secret meeting? Don't worry, I'll keep away from you since you've made it clear you don't want me around."

"Melody, look I—"

I put my hands on my hips and face him. "I know you have a *lot* of secrets. And I'm not going to be one of them. I overheard Magnus talking to his wife, it's not his fault, I was behind a Christmas tree, he didn't know I was there. You're the town's Secret Santa. You have a bunch of money you don't want anyone to know about and I guess you use it for sneakily helping people out. It's very generous. But me? I'm nobody's secret."

"Of course—"

"Don't 'of course' me. You're grumpy one minute and kissing me the next. You make my head spin. If this whole grump thing is your cover, drop it now. And explain why you're here."

"I'm going to. I'm sorry, Melody. I wanted to tell Rhys when you weren't there. I thought he'd freak out."

"Why would he freak?"

"Because he told me seven years ago to stay away from you. That his best friend couldn't date his sister. I had the biggest crush on you back then. I've had a crush on you since I saw you at the party seven years ago." He looks down at me, his dark blue eyes sincere.

"Why the hell didn't you say something? My brother isn't my keeper, you know." I shake my head.

“Yeah, well I’m an idiot. I’ve been an idiot about a lot of things. And I’m glad you know about the Secret Santa stuff. I would have told you anyway.”

“Told me when?”

“When and if you let me be a part of your life. This is it, Melody. I’ve wanted to be with you for years. I love you. Your smile, your talent, even the way you sing along to those cheesy Christmas songs...I want it all. If you’ll have me.” He slides a little closer, but he can’t stop properly so he keeps sliding until I put my hands out to stop him.

“And why would I want to do that, you big grump?” I move my hands from his chest up to around the back of his neck. He’s so tall that I have to stretch.

He puts his arms around my waist and pulls me closer. “If I kiss you, would you at least consider it?”

I nod and his lips meet mine. One of my favorite Christmas songs is playing in the background, but I don’t even know which one it is.

I break away for a second to look up at him. “I love you too, Keaton. Keep kissing me.”

He laughs, inclining his head to kiss me again. All I know is that his lips are moving on mine, his big, hard body pressed against me as he keeps me warm.

It’s going to be a *very* happy holiday.



EPILOGUE - KEATON

One year later, Christmas Eve

I've been so deep in my work that the time has passed faster than I thought and it's dark outside. Max comes into the room and puts his golden paw on my leg.

I laugh. "Time to go, buddy?"

He wags his tail and barks. Max loves it when there's snow on the ground, and he's keen to get outside and roll around in it. I put on my coat, then hunt around for my special hat.

In the truck, I turn up the radio. The DJ is interviewing Carl, the weird old guy who predicts the weather, and they're both chuckling away. It sounds like more than a few alcoholic eggnogs have been consumed, judging by how they're both giggling like little kids.

Snowflake Falls is lit up by garlands of twinkle lights, and the local kids have been busy building snow people in their front yards. I even spot a life-sized golden retriever snow sculpture in one of them, which makes me smile.

I pass by Magnus's place as he's hammering a nail in their front door. A huge wreath sits beside him. As I slow down to wave at him, he lifts up the bent nail and smiles, pointing to the wreath. It's clearly so heavy that it's fallen off the door.

I grin and wave back. I've been working with Magnus on my new app, which is designed for communities to organize their projects while working remotely. All the profits will go to charity, and I'm excited about its release next year. Now the new animal shelter is up and running, I'm also involved in rebuilding the local community center.

While more people are aware that I've been donating money to fund local causes, I haven't made any big announcements. I'm happy to keep it that way. But what's changed is I've dropped the grump thing. I don't need to keep people at arm's length to preserve my secrets anymore.

My cell beeps.

Melody: I'm here! See you soon xxx

I make the turn for the rink, slowing down as I approach the parking lot. Not many people are left out on the ice. Most folks will have headed home to celebrate Christmas Eve with their families in front of the fire.

Melody, Max, and I are due at her parents' house, along with Rhys and Sienna, and her sister Estelle. Her Mom has been cooking for weeks and my stomach rumbles at the idea of all the delicious holiday food.

I get out of the truck and Max hops down, following me on the winding path to the rink. Melody's been at work at the agency in Bakersville all day and she's stopped here for a quick evening skate before we head to see her family.

Christa smiles as I walk past. "Hey Santa! Where's your red suit?"

I tap my head. "Just going with the hat this year. How's business?"

"Rockin'! We sold out of all Melody's cards and I had to order in new candy canes. Busier than ever. She's out on the ice. Jamal says you're all set. Here's the box. I'll have you know that I've kept this secret for the last 48 hours. My husband says it's a record." She taps the side of her nose.

"Appreciate it, Christa. I was worried Mel would find it if I left it in a cupboard somewhere. She's good at finding stuff. I don't think she has any idea, though."

"Good luck. You two were meant to be together. Snowflake has a way of making the right people find each other. I'll look after Max while you do your thing." She smiles.

I walk to the edge of the ring, putting on my skates. I'm a little steadier on my feet, now Melody's taught me the basics, but I'll never be in her league. I like my feet firmly planted on the ground. Melody's spinning in the center of the ice, her blonde hair whirling under her knitted red cap.

I could stand and watch her forever, but I'm eager to get closer. Even a few hours apart makes me keen to see her, excitement building in the pit of my stomach as I clutch the little velvet box in my coat.

She turns around, her eyes lighting up as I skate towards her. "You're wearing the Santa hat!"

"I thought it was the right time of year for it."

"You know what that makes me think of..."

I pull her into my arms. "Presents? Turkeys?"

"You're a turkey. It makes me think of getting it on with you by the fire, next to our very own Christmas tree. I can't wait until we get home."

I stroke a lock of hair away from her cheek. "I have something to ask you first."

She beams at me. "Anything."

I slowly kneel down. The ice is slippery under my knee, but I manage to stay upright. I reach into my pocket and pull out the velvet box. Melody's eyebrows shoot up and she catches her breath.

"Melody, will you marry this grumpy Santa and make him the happiest guy in Snowflake Falls?" I ask.

Her eyes shining, she nods. "Yes! I can't wait to be your wife."

I slide the sparkling diamond onto her finger and then stand up, only wobbling a little. She presses her body into mine and we kiss. *All I Want For Christmas Is You* starts playing at top volume. We look over and Max is barking, accompanied by Christa and Jamal, who are both clapping and cheering.

“We should go tell your family...” I say, taking her hand.

“We should. One more kiss before we go...” Melody presses her lips on mine again and I forget everything else except her.



Don't miss this steamy bonus scene on Melody and Keaton's wedding day one year later:

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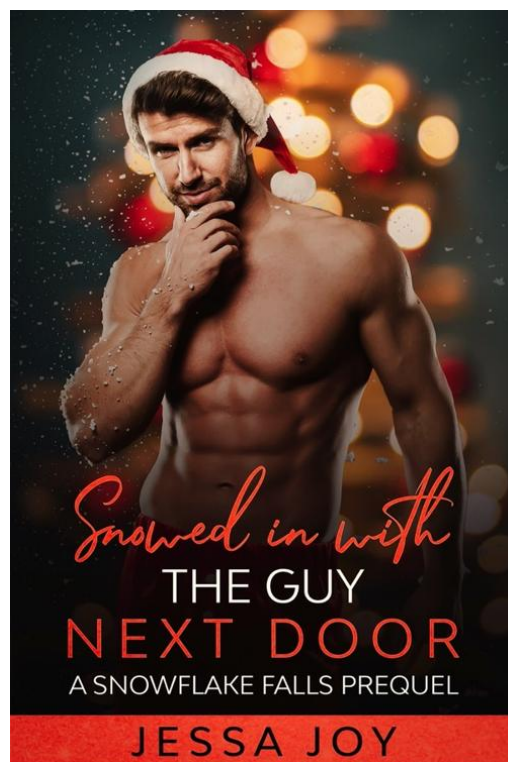
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I write steamy and upbeat contemporary romance, all about curvy women and the hot men who can't get enough of them. My aim is for readers to feel good once they finish one of my stories.

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