



Now a Beloved Christmas Movie

EVERY DAY
IS
Christmas

*"Karen Schaler...
a holiday publishing darling."
—Entertainment Weekly*

From the Writer of the Netflix Hit A Christmas Prince

KAREN SCHALER

Praise for Emmy Award-winning author Karen Schaler... and her feel-good, uplifting, and empowering stories that have inspired her beloved Christmas movies, novels, and audio originals.

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“How *A Christmas Prince* [Netflix] screenwriter Karen Schaler became a holiday publishing darling.”
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“Schaler’s smart, appealing protagonists will keep readers turning the pages, and the plotting is pitch-perfect, leading to an inevitable but charming happily-ever-after.”
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“Karen Schaler brings the cozy to Christmas in her heartwarming tales of love and joy.”
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“Karen Schaler writes stories that are bursting with Christmas charm!”
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“For Schaler, creating these fantastical holiday stories comes naturally.”
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Praise for *Love Always, Christmas*

“This book was everything for my Christmas loving heart...
It’s a journey I’ll return to every year.”
—Eric, NetGalley

“*Love Always, Christmas* was so much fun! Karen Schaler’s
books always hit the mark! Enjoyed this one! 5/5 stars.”
—Kat, LibraryThing

“A beautiful story about life, love, and family...
I loved this book. Devoured in one day.”
—Peggy, Goodreads

Praise for *Once Upon a Christmas Carol*

Top 10 Audible Bestseller

“This was a great Christmas story, full of heart and depth.
Loved all the characters and the message
and even the tears I cried. Thank you!”
—T. Nemec, Audible Review

“Loved this Karen Schaler book, what a joy to listen to this audible. Great narration, great story line, a
book that I’ll listen to again this Christmas season and every December!”
—Richard, Audible Review

“This book is a must listen! I love how there were different narrators and how the music weaves in and
out. I swear I felt like I was in the front row of the Christmas Eve performance when Anna and Rachel
were singing.
I literally had tears in my eyes.”
—Kimberly, Audible Review

Praise for *A Royal Christmas Fairy Tale*

A “sweet Christmas charmer... Royal family enthusiasts and fans of wholesome romance will embrace this enjoyable love story.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for *Christmas Ever After*

“A wonderfully festive setting... The cast is charming and the atmosphere’s enchanting.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for *Christmas Camp*

“VERDICT a charming movie-to-book crossover that would be right at home on the Hallmark Channel and a winner for fans looking for a touching holiday read.”

—*Library Journal*

Praise for *Finding Christmas*

“Schaler’s smart, appealing protagonists will keep readers turning the pages, and the plotting is pitch-perfect, leading to an inevitable but charming happily-ever-after.

Sweet as a Hallmark Channel movie, but never saccharine, this innocent tale will satisfy fans of both romance and Christmas.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

ALSO BY KAREN SCHALER

FICTION

Love Always, Christmas
A Royal Christmas Fairy Tale
Christmas Ever After
Finding Christmas
Christmas Camp
Christmas Camp Wedding (novella)
Royal Extra After (novella)

SCRIPTED MULTI-CAST AUDIBLE ORIGINAL

Once Upon a Christmas Carol

NONFICTION

Travel Therapy: Where Do You Need to Go?



EVERY DAY
IS
Christmas



KAREN SCHALER





Screenwriter & Author Karen Schaler
at Lifetime's TV Christmas Party in Los Angeles, California

Dearest Readers,

When I was asked by Lifetime TV executives and multi-Grammy-winner Toni Braxton and her team to write an original Christmas movie that Toni could star in playing Ebenezer Scrooge from Charles Dickens's classic *A Christmas Carol*, I was honored and honestly a little nervous. To write a fresh new story inspired by such a beloved piece of literature for a music icon was an exhilarating and daunting task. My goal was to write a movie full of rich, relatable characters that would resonate with audiences today. Our movie is called *Every Day Is Christmas*, and one of my favorite lines is when Justin says, "You make time for the people who matter most." Whenever life gets too hectic, and I'm getting pulled in a million different directions and need a reminder of what truly "matters most," I rewatch our movie. The brilliant actors and their performances always touch my heart. I laugh. I cry. I learn. When I was deciding what Christmas novel to write for you this year, I knew it had to be *Every Day Is Christmas*. I'm overjoyed to share even more of this uplifting Christmas story filled with heart and hope. This holiday tale about redemption and second chances will take you on a delightful journey of self-discovery, transformation, and empowerment. I've also included some of my exclusive photos taken during the filming of *Every Day Is Christmas* to

give you a sneak peek behind-the-scenes of creating Christmas movie magic, and I've added some original Christmas recipes and activities inspired by this story. Wishing you and your loved ones a very Merry Christmas.

XOXO,
Karen

Don't Miss Your Free Gift!

Tap Here

Download Karen Schaler's **CHRISTMAS CAMP GUIDE** that includes exclusive holiday recipes and activities from all her Christmas novels and Christmas movies & be the first to find out about Karen's new books and movies, special giveaways and discounts.

For those who honor the true meaning of Christmas, this book is dedicated to you as a testament to your unwavering spirit. May this story spark even more goodwill, kindness, and compassion as you let love guide you on your own holiday journey and beyond...

“I will honour Christmas in my heart,
and try to keep it all the year.
I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future.
The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me.
I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.”

– *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens



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Chapter 1



Alexis Taylor had one true love that made her pulse race, excited her, and never let her down.

Money.

The more she earned, the happier she was, and the more she craved. She was insatiable.

She proudly credited her drive and determination for her unprecedented success. She was in control of her own destiny, and if you asked her, her future had never looked brighter.

Alexis's mind was whirling with her never-ending "must do immediately" list as her driver, Justin, expertly maneuvered his black SUV toward the towering office building she owned. It dominated the entire upscale block in downtown Atlanta, just like she dominated the city's financial scene.

She'd purchased the sleek, modern building five years ago, taking the penthouse floor for her financial firm, Taylor Investments, and renting out the rest of the space for a huge profit.

As soon as she saw the building, she had to have it. Its gleaming glass exterior reflected the vibrant energy of the city, mirroring her own ambition and drive. She knew it was a place where her dreams would take flight, and she never looked back.

Right now, the exterior of the building was decked out with dazzling gold Christmas decorations. From the decadent garland and giant glittering gold

wreath above the entryway to the elegant line of sparkling Christmas trees leading up to the front door, it was an opulent, impressive holiday display.

Alexis nodded her approval as she took it all in. She always made sure her award-winning decorators only used gold. It was her favorite color because, for her, gold signified money and winning. Like a gold-medal athlete at the Olympics, Alexis's goal was to always keep her eye on the prize and to continue her winning streak. She'd stop at nothing to triumph over any competitor who tried to get in her way.

She smiled thinking about how she had not only turned Taylor Investments into one of the top financial firms in Atlanta, but into one of the most respected companies in the country. She had made her company her life's work, and so far, it was paying huge dividends.

But none of her success had come easy. She'd worked extremely hard her entire career to get to where she was today. Every victory had led to another, even higher mountain she had to climb. As a woman in a traditionally male-dominated industry, she'd felt she had to work three times as hard as her male counterparts for the same rewards. But that never stopped her. Instead, she'd learned to use adversity as fuel, and step-by-step, she'd continued to climb the corporate ladder until she was at the very top of her game.

As Justin pulled up to the curb and glided to a stop, Alexis's fingers were flying as she answered multiple texts on her phone. She didn't look up when he got out of the SUV, came around, and opened her door.

"We're here, Alexis," Justin said with a winning smile. He held out his hand to help her out, but she didn't see it. She was too busy texting. When she did step out of the SUV on her own, she looked flawless in her black designer suit and her sky-high Christian Louboutin heels with their signature red soles.

"Thank you, Justin," she said, barely glancing at him as she stood next to the SUV and continued to text on her phone.

The phrase *tall, dark, and handsome* fit Justin perfectly. Even a quick glance told you this was a man who never missed a workout. He held himself with confidence but was always quick to smile, making you instantly feel

comfortable in his presence. Genuinely kind, loyal, and smart, Justin was an employee Alexis knew she could always count on to do his job.

“I’ll be back at six to pick you up,” Justin said.

“Make it eight. I have a lot of work to do,” Alexis answered, still texting on her phone.

“You know it’s Christmas Eve, right?” he asked.

Alexis reluctantly glanced up from her phone. She gave him a look. “Justin, you’ve known me for years. What do I do every Christmas Eve?”

Justin sighed. “You always work late. But I thought you and Marc were going on vacation?”

Alexis’s phone rang, interrupting them.

Her frown deepened when she saw the name “assistant” pop up on FaceTime. She took the call. “Is he here?” she asked curtly.

Her new assistant, Elise, a bright, bubbly, twenty-two-year-old, smiled back at her. “Yes, Alexis. He’s in your office, waiting.”

“Thank you,” Alexis said and hung up fast. Her heels clicked against the pavement as she headed for the building. She called out over her shoulder, “I’ll see you at eight, Justin.”

As she entered the lavish lobby, she only looked up from her phone long enough to check out the massive Christmas tree that dominated the space. The spectacular, twenty-foot Douglas fir tree was a real showstopper. It was covered with so many gold decorations you almost couldn’t see the greenery. This was exactly how she liked it.

She smiled with satisfaction when she saw that there were already several families lined up to take pictures in front of the tree.

“Perfect,” she said to herself as she passed them. She always prided herself on drawing people into her building by having one of the most magnificent Christmas trees in the city. She knew the bigger the tree, the bigger the crowd, and that was something she could cash in on. She always made sure her lobby was open at seven in the morning for all the tourists and locals who lined up to take pictures in front of her company’s tree. She’d even gotten it listed on the city’s website as one of the top twenty things not to miss at Christmas.

Next to the tree was her real moneymaker. It was a giant gold guest book where she collected people's emails when they signed up for a chance to win dozens of amazing gift certificates from different local hotels, spas, and restaurants in the city. It was a win-win in her eyes. All the businesses loved donating the gifts for free advertising, and she loved getting everyone's emails to add to her newsletter list that always generated new clients.

The irony wasn't lost on her that despite her office being *the* place to be for Christmas cheer in the city, personally, she did whatever she could to avoid all things Christmas. The truth was, despite all the glitter and glam she provided for everyone else, she couldn't care less about Christmas. If she had it her way, she'd skip the holiday altogether.

The only reason she went all out with the decorations was to try and get new clients. For an extra marketing push, she'd even put up a huge Taylor Investments sign right behind the Christmas tree, so no matter what angle you tried to get a picture of it you couldn't miss also getting her sign in the shot.

Her signage really paid off when she partnered with a top TV news station to do live coverage of her tree lighting every year. Her Taylor Investments sign was always in every shot.

She smiled thinking about how easy it was to tap into everyone's obsession with Christmas and keep her business in the spotlight at the same time.

She only wished it was that easy to get her year-end numbers where she needed them to be. Despite her herculean efforts, her profits right now weren't meeting her goals, and that was unacceptable.

Now it was go time.

Alexis picked up her pace as she headed for the elevator. She was texting again when a sweet little girl, dressed up in a red velvet Christmas dress and shiny black, patent leather shoes, suddenly darted out in front of her.

"Mommy, look, there it is!" the child exclaimed, excited, as she tugged on her mom's hand. The little girl only had eyes for the Christmas tree.

"Whoa!" Alexis jumped back, narrowly missing the child.

"I'm so sorry," the mom apologized to Alexis as she let go of the girl's hand so the child could run up to the tree. "Maddy gets so excited to see this

Christmas tree. It's our favorite Christmas tradition. Whenever we're in the neighborhood, we have to come by."

"That's okay," Alexis said as she continued walking, but the little girl's mom didn't take the hint and kept talking.

"Maddy never gets tired of your tree," the mom rushed on, merrily. "She says it's a princess tree. She thinks anything this beautiful must belong to a princess. She's going through that stage."

Alexis thought about it. She didn't hate the idea of being thought of as a princess who ruled a financial kingdom, minus the Christmas tree part.

She looked over at Maddy staring up at the tree in awe. For a moment, it reminded her of when she was Maddy's age and still believed in fairy tales and happily-ever-after. But when this memory was quickly followed by another memory of when she was the same age picking out a Christmas tree with her parents—it made her heart ache. She inhaled sharply as she mentally shook herself and buried that Christmas memory back deep inside herself where it belonged.

And this was why she didn't do Christmas. Thinking about Christmas and all the things she'd loved and lost hurt too much.

Maddy's mom reached out and gently touched her arm. "Are you okay?"

Alexis pulled herself together. She forced a smile and nodded. "Yes, I'm sorry. I'm just late for work. I have to go." Not waiting for the woman to respond, Alexis quickly walked away.

"Merry Christmas," the woman called out after her.

Alexis walked away faster, fighting back tears. She didn't realize she was holding her breath until she got onto the elevator and let out a sigh of relief. Even though no one else was in the elevator with her, she still had to hold herself together because the elevator's walls were all glass. As it started to climb, she couldn't help looking out and seeing Maddy and her mom taking a picture in front of the Christmas tree. The mother and daughter duo were laughing and looked so happy. When Alexis saw Maddy smile up at her mom with so much love in her eyes, she had to look away because it felt like her heart was breaking all over again. She shut her eyes for a moment and took a

deep breath to steady herself. Usually, she was a pro at locking away any uncomfortable feelings from her past. Clearly, she needed to get a grip. Fast.

By the time she got to the penthouse floor she had composed herself and was all business when the elevator doors opened. With authority, she walked across the gleaming white marble floors and down a hallway that was decorated with more exquisite, gold Christmas decorations that screamed “we cost a fortune!”

Her eyes narrowed when she heard Christmas music playing. “What’s going on?” she asked herself. As she picked up her pace, she heard the Christmas song “Deck the Halls” get louder and louder...

“Deck the halls with boughs of holly
Fa la la la la, la la la la
'Tis the season to be jolly
Fa la la la la, la la la la
Don we now our gay apparel
Fa la la la la, la la la la
Troll the ancient Yuletide carol
Fa la la la la, la la la la...”

Alexis’s annoyance grew when she got to the main office area and saw that none of her employees were at their desks. Instead, she found them all gathered around one of the Christmas trees, having a wonderful time. They were exchanging and opening presents, laughing and celebrating.

“Seriously?” she said as she marched up to them, annoyed.

Everyone immediately stopped talking. Their smiles disappeared. The music stopped.

Alexis locked eyes with the first employee she saw. It was Lorianne, one of her new employees. She was in her early twenties and had just started working at the firm last week.

When Lorianne innocently smiled back at her, Alexis raised her eyebrows. *Clearly, this girl has a lot to learn*, Alexis thought.

Alexis turned her gaze to one of her senior employees, Dave. He’d been working for her for the past five years. She’d recruited him right out of

college so she could train him to be exactly who she needed him to be. He was smart and a quick study, and that was about all she knew about him. When she locked eyes with Dave, she was pleased to see him gulp. He looked nervous. *That's better*, she thought.

She wanted her employees to not only respect her but to also fear her a little. That way, she figured, they'd work hard for her to make sure they didn't get on her bad side.

She knew she had a reputation for firing people if they didn't pull their weight, and she wasn't one to give second chances. She was always happy to lean into that narrative if she thought it would make her staff work harder. But right now, she was speechless because none of her employees were working at all.

"What are you all doing?" she demanded as she stood with her hands on her hips, staring back at her employees.

"It's Christmas Eve. We're exchanging Secret Santa gifts," Lorianne chirped merrily.

Alexis looked at Lorianne like she was from Mars. "Secret Santa gifts?" Alexis asked, mimicking Lorianne's cheerful tone.

Lorianne nodded eagerly. She appeared to be unaware that Alexis was about to explode.

"Oh boy," Dave said under his breath.



Chapter 2



O “*h boy*” is right, Alexis thought as she locked eyes with her very naive new employee, Lorianne. She only had one word for her. “No.”

Lorianne tilted her head to one side and gave Alexis a confused look. “No? No, what?”

“No Secret Santa gifts. No Christmas music. No presents. Nothing,” Alexis shot back at Lorianne. If looks could kill...

Lorianne winced.

Dave cringed.

Alexis turned her focus to the rest of her staff.

Everyone looked nervous.

“You know the markets close early today,” Alexis said. It was a statement, not a question. “We don’t have any time to waste.”

Silence. No one moved.

Alexis threw her hands up in frustration. “Go. What are you all waiting for? Get back to work. Now.”

As everyone scurried back to their desks, Alexis overheard Lorianne and Dave talking.

“What was that?” Lorianne asked, looking baffled.

“You’re new,” Dave answered with a sigh. “I should have warned you.”

Lorianne’s eyes widened. “You mean she’s like this *every* Christmas?”

“Yup, but this year seems to be worse,” Dave said. “She says Christmas is a waste of time and money.”

Alexis's eyes narrowed when she heard Lorianne laugh.

"Money?" Lorianne asked incredulously. "Her shoes cost more than I made last month."

David adjusted his designer tie. "Alexis says you have to look like money to make money."

Alexis smiled. That was exactly what she said. She liked Dave. He understood.

"Easy for her to say," Lorianne continued. "She owns the top financial firm in the country. She has everything."

"Not everything," Dave said. When he glanced her way, Alexis quickly walked off. She frowned. *What did he mean by that?* she wondered. Of course she had everything. The best company. The best office building. The best home. The best clothes, jewelry, the list went on and on. She had everything she'd ever wanted. Dave, she decided, was delusional.

She was still frowning when she entered her posh office. The sophisticated, sleek, modern design featured minimalist furniture with a desk surrounded by state-of-the-art technology. There were giant computer monitors everywhere monitoring stock markets around the world. The impressive setting had floor-to-ceiling windows that let natural light flood the room. But instead of admiring the panoramic view of Atlanta, she saw Marc, the guy she was dating, sitting on the couch waiting for her.

Marc was the kind of guy who was perfect on paper—and he was pretty perfect in person, too.

Handsome, with a smile that could melt any girl's heart, Marc was a successful corporate law attorney. He was a killer in the courtroom but had an uncanny knack for not taking himself too seriously when it came to his personal life. She knew Marc was all about living each day to the fullest. He was the kind of guy who appreciated the finer things in life. He was always well dressed, with tailored clothing that accentuated his fit physique. He had the kind of upbeat, positive personality that drew people to him.

The reason Alexis was drawn to him was because he was excellent at his job and had saved her company millions of dollars with his legal expertise.

Alexis's eyes narrowed as she studied him because right now, he wasn't looking like a savvy businessman at all. He was grinning back at her, like a kid at Christmas on a sugar high.

"Surprise! Merry Christmas," he called out, flashing his winning smile as he held up some expensive-looking designer shopping bags.

Alexis was confused, and not in a good way. Marc wasn't on her schedule for this morning. She'd planned to see him at lunch. She took a deep breath to try and find some patience that was always in short supply with her. "Marc, Christmas is tomorrow, and you know I don't like *surprises*."

Marc happily gave her all the shopping bags. "But you're going to love this one. Sit down. Let me show you," he urged.

Alexis reluctantly sat in the chair across from him. She put down all the bags that he'd just given her.

Refusing to give up, Marc quickly picked up a fancy silver bag. With a flourish, he tossed aside some silver tissue paper and held up a sexy red bikini. "Check this out," he said as he handed her the bikini like he was giving Santa a Christmas cookie. "Nice, right?"

She fought to keep her patience. "Marc..."

But he was too excited to wait for her to finish. He eagerly continued, "Hold on. Before you say anything. Wait for it. Wait for it..."

From another bag, Marc pulled out a giant, floppy sun hat and a pair of blinged-out sunglasses. With a flourish, he put them both on Alexis.

She didn't move.

He leaned back and admired his work. "Now that's what I'm talking about. You look perfect. Bali, here we come!"

"Babe," Alexis started. She tried to sound lighthearted. She failed.

"What? You don't like the hat?" he asked.

Alexis slowly took off the hat and sunglasses. She put them back in the bags. "I can't go to Bali."

Marc's smile disappeared. "What?"

Alexis took a deep breath. She knew this wasn't going to be easy. "I'm sorry, but my CFO called me first thing this morning. There's something wrong with our year-end numbers, so I can't go."

Marc stared back at her like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Alexis, we've been planning this trip for months. Jeff runs your office. He can handle it."

Now it was Alexis's turn to give him a look like he was nuts. "No, Marc. It's my company. My responsibility. I can't leave now."

Marc leaned forward and looked into her eyes, "Can't or won't?"

Silence.

Alexis didn't blink.

Marc sighed and sat back on the couch. "I can't believe you're doing this again. You're always canceling our plans, using work as your excuse."

Alexis took his hand. "I'm sorry." She could see how disappointed he was. She never meant to hurt him. She'd thought they were on the same page... until they weren't.

Marc sighed. "So you can't go to Bali?"

"I can't do us," Alexis said. She knew their relationship had run its course. She'd originally agreed to Bali because Marc had promised it would be a great way to escape all things Christmas. What she hadn't told Marc was that the CEO of the luxury resort they were planning to stay at in Bali had wanted to meet with her about possibly working with her company. So she saw the Bali trip as also a work trip. It had seemed like a win-win.

She'd hired Marc almost a year ago, in February, to assist her legal team with a project. To meet a tight deadline, they'd worked around the clock. Since they barely had time for any meal breaks, they often ordered in and worked through the night. When they were finally too tired to work anymore, they went out for drinks where they continued to talk shop. She wasn't sure exactly how it happened, but somehow, their work relationship had slowly morphed into a personal relationship, probably because she didn't know the difference.

She told him upfront that if they were going to be anything more than business associates, she needed to keep things casual. Marc agreed, saying he was also too busy for anything too serious.

At first, she thought they had the perfect arrangement. Marc was always traveling internationally for his job. They were often like two ships passing in

the night, and that worked great for her. She was a huge fan of long-distance relationships, and in the beginning, it worked with Marc. When he was gone she could focus on her job, and when he was in town she'd carve out a few hours they could spend together. They always enjoyed each other's company. Most of the time, they just talked about work because that was what they were both passionate about.

But if she was being completely honest with herself, she'd always known that Marc wanted more. From the start, he was always trying to plan quick weekend trips for them to take. He had the mentality of work hard, play harder. The first trip he tried to plan had been to Mexico, where he had a luxury condo on the beach in Cabo San Lucas. He'd even chartered a plane so there would be more flexibility in their travel schedule. But even with that flexibility, a few hours before they were scheduled to leave she had to travel to New York City for an emergency investor meeting.

The next trip Marc tried to set up had been another short getaway to a private island in the Caribbean. He'd booked a spectacular villa on the beach and a private chef just for them. But on their way to the airport, she'd gotten a work call and had to cancel the trip.

There was another time she'd actually gotten on the plane, and they'd flown to West Palm Beach, Florida. By that point, Marc had figured that if he kept their trip in the United States, he'd have a better chance of making it happen. But as soon as they landed, she had to immediately turn around and head back to Atlanta for another work "emergency." It was the closest she'd ever gotten to taking a vacation.

When Marc had first suggested the Bali trip for the week between Christmas and New Year's, Alexis said there was no way she could go because she always worked through the holidays. But when Marc had assured her that the incredible home he wanted to rent for them had state-of-the-art technology so she could still work and promised that this was the perfect way to escape Christmas, she'd finally agreed to go. Marc had also sold her on the idea that she could get some much-needed rest and reboot in Bali, so she could come back to work in the new year recharged and ready to go. And there was one more reason she'd said yes to the trip. There was a huge client

she'd been trying to land who lived in Bali, and they'd invited her to their exclusive, legendary New Year's Eve party.

She'd really believed that this trip was going to happen. But as soon as she'd gotten the call that morning about her year-end numbers not meeting her goals, she didn't need to think twice about canceling Bali.

She knew Marc didn't understand and would never understand why she would always put work first. It was so frustrating to her because whenever she started a relationship she always made sure to be very transparent and upfront. She let everyone know how important her company was to her and that it always had to come first. At that time, all the guys agreed. They always said they completely understood because they felt the same way about their own careers.

She only dated self-proclaimed workaholics like herself, believing that only another person who loved their careers as much as she did could ever really understand her and be a good fit.

But while all the guys promised they understood, every single time she had to choose work over them, they always got upset. Then they would tell her that she was the one with the problem, claiming there was a big difference between being committed to a job and being obsessed with it.

Since she never saw a problem with being obsessed if it brought success, she knew her only *problem* was who she was dating. As soon as they showed their true colors—and they always did—she would break up with them, not wanting either of them to waste any more time.

She always blamed herself for dating in the first place. She should know better by now. She was happy being single. Everyone she'd dated had been like Marc. She'd met them through work, and so their relationship was more of a business partnership. The idea of romantic love and having butterflies and fireworks with someone was something she'd given up on a long time ago.

When Marc abruptly stood up, it jarred Alexis back to the present.

“What do you mean, you can't do *us*?” he asked, stunned.



Chapter 3



*H*ere we go again, Alexis couldn't help thinking. This was the part she hated.

Alexis waited a second before answering Marc calmly. She wanted to give him a chance to catch up so she talked slowly. "I can't do us because I need to focus one hundred percent on my company." She paused to take a breath. "I know you don't get it, and that's why we're just not going to work. You understand, right?"

But Marc didn't look like he understood at all. He shook his head, looking crushed.

"So that's it. We're done?" he asked. "You're breaking up with me?"

For an answer, Alexis picked up the rest of his shopping bags, walked over to him, and held them out to him.

He had no choice but to stand up and take the bags.

Alexis tried to soften the blow with a smile. "You're a wonderful guy, Marc. You deserve someone who will always put you first. That someone just isn't me."

Marc stared back at her. "I don't know what to say..."

Alexis walked over and opened her office door. "I know you're going to find someone great."

Marc took the hint and headed for the door. "Okay," he said, sounding confused.

“Okay, great, bye,” Alexis said as she gently guided him through the door. As soon as he was out, she breathed a huge sigh of relief.

She really did want him to be happy and find someone who’d be excited to go to Bali with him. But she knew she wasn’t the right person. She had no regrets. She had done the right thing for both of them.

Alexis knew she had one gear and that was full speed ahead—she never looked back. She hadn’t been named one of the top money managers in the nation by letting herself get detoured. Working extraordinarily hard her entire life, she threw everything she had into her career. She never apologized for her determination and drive. Her company and its success fueled her forward. It was her North Star, guiding everything she did, always.

As she watched Marc walk away, he looked like he’d just lost his best friend. She’d known for a while that she needed to end their relationship. But she’d never found the time to sit down and talk to him about it. Now, she was actually grateful he’d come in unannounced this morning. This meant “the talk” with him was over and her schedule was now freed up so she could work through lunch.

As she turned to go back into her office, out of the corner of her eye she caught Lorianne give Dave a twenty-dollar bill. She overheard Lorianne ask Dave, “How did you know?”

“I’ve worked here for years,” Dave answered.

“She does this every year?” Lorianne asked, stunned.

Alexis folded her arms in front of her chest as she waited for Dave’s answer.

“Yup,” Dave said. “If Alexis has a boyfriend, she always gets rid of him right before Christmas.”

Alexis couldn’t deny it. What Dave said was true. If she was dating someone, she always broke up with them before the holidays. She attributed this to two things. First, it was her busiest time of the year. Second, the guys she dated always started getting sentimental around the holidays. These two things combined were a huge red flag signaling to her that it was time to wrap things up before there were any mistletoe misunderstandings.

While she never celebrated Christmas, it looked like she had a Christmas tradition after all—breaking up with boyfriends before the holidays.

She was just sitting back down at her desk, eager to get back to work, when she was interrupted by her assistant, Elise, bursting through the door.

She was staggering under the weight of a ridiculously huge Christmas gift basket that was filled with champagne, chocolates, nuts, and fruit. The basket was so tall, Alexis couldn't even see Elise's face.

"What in the world..." Alexis asked, exasperated. At this rate, she was never going to get any work done.

"This just came for you," Elise said breathlessly as she plopped the gigantic basket on Alexis's desk in front of her.

Alexis glared at the basket like it was filled with snakes. "No," she said adamantly as she pushed the basket away from her.

Elise looked confused. "No?"

"I don't do Christmas," Alexis said. "I know this is your first day, but if you're going to work with me, you need to know that. I'm surprised someone didn't tell you."

Elise knit her eyebrows together in a puzzled expression. "But Taylor Investments always has the best decorations in the city. Your Christmas tree is famous. I see it on Instagram all the time."

"That Christmas tree is nothing but free advertising," Alexis said as she turned her attention to her computer. She started studying a spreadsheet.

Elise looked dismayed and disappointed.

"I only decorate because it's good for business," Alexis added as she stood up. She picked up the Christmas basket and handed it back to Elise. "So please, get this out of here. I don't want it. Got it?"

Elise peeked through the massive red satin bow that was tied at the top of the basket. "Got it." She swayed back and forth under the weight of the basket as she hustled out of the office as fast as she could.

Alexis rubbed a throbbing temple. "Please, no more distractions," she groaned. She checked her phone and quickly answered two texts before turning her attention back to her computer. She was running behind schedule to get all the work done that she needed to do. Truthfully, she was relieved

that instead of going to Bali she could stay home and work on Christmas Day while everyone else was taking the holiday off. She always believed working through Christmas gave her a competitive edge because she stayed focused on her job while everyone else was slacking off.

As she was scrolling through some old emails, looking for a response from one of her clients, she saw Marc's last email pop up about their Bali trip. Without hesitating, she clicked delete and went back to work.

* * *

A few hours later, Alexis finally looked up from her computer. She stretched a little, rolled her shoulders, and rubbed her neck. She took a deep breath and was about to dive back into work when she heard something that distracted her. She froze. Her eyes narrowed.

It was Christmas music.

She gritted her teeth when she heard the song "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" playing.

Her frown grew as the song got louder...

"We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
and a happy new year
Good tidings we bring to you and your kin
We wish you a merry Christmas
and a happy new year..."

Alexis grabbed her computer tablet and marched out of her office. She looked for her assistant, Elise, but she wasn't at her desk. Her irritation multiplied when she saw that none of her employees were at their desks. It was a ghost town.

"Where is everyone?" she asked, exasperated.

As Alexis followed the Christmas music, her scowl grew. The music was coming from her conference room, and it was getting louder and louder...

“We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
and a happy new year...”

Alexis’s jaw dropped to the floor as she approached the conference room and saw her staff having a party. The conference room table was piled high with everything from sandwiches and appetizers to trays of Christmas cookies and candy. There was even a bar set up in the corner with champagne and red and white wine.

Alexis stormed into the room. “The party’s over,” she announced over the loud music.

The Christmas music came to an abrupt stop.

Everyone on her staff stared back at her like they’d been caught stealing Christmas cookies from the cookie jar.

Alexis looked down at the tablet she was holding. “I just got another update on our year-end numbers, and apparently, no one made their goals.” She gave them all an accusatory look.

Jeff, her chief operating officer, stepped forward. He was a good-looking man in his mid-fifties who looked like he was born in a business suit. There was a sense of dignity and calm about him. His voice was as soothing as his smile.

“Okay, we took a hit when a few of our tech stocks crashed, but we’re coming back,” Jeff said, sounding encouraging.

Alexis locked eyes with him. “Apparently not fast enough.”

“Alexis,” Jeff started, but she stopped him by holding up her up hand.

“No, Jeff, I don’t want to hear any excuses,” she said in a steely voice. “You run this office. You know I need results, not excuses.”

“We had a great year,” Jeff continued in a positive, upbeat voice. “Our profits are up twelve percent.”

“Our goal was *twenty* percent,” Alexis said, cutting him off. Her voice was dripping with disappointment.

Alexis looked around at all her employees in the room.

Lorianne visibly withered under Alexis's stare. She put down the gingerbread cookies she was holding.

Alexis pointed at her tablet. "We have exactly one week to improve these numbers. I want to see everyone back here tomorrow morning."

Everyone's eyes widened in surprise as they nervously looked at each other. "Tomorrow? Tomorrow's Christmas," Jeff said. "The markets aren't open, and our office is closed until January second."

"Not anymore," Alexis said as she stared at the numbers on her tablet.

Lorianne was incredulous. "But a lot of us have made vacation plans with our families. It's Christmas..."

When Alexis looked up, the rest of the staff held its breath. She smiled slowly.

Jeff winced like he knew whatever was coming wasn't going to be good.

Alexis locked eyes with Lorianne and then addressed the rest of the staff. "Then you go be with your families. But if you want your jobs, I'll see you all here tomorrow morning at seven."

Jeff looked at the devastated staff. "Can we have a minute please?"

The staff couldn't leave the conference room fast enough.

As everyone shuffled out, Alexis met Jeff's concerned look.

"Alexis..." he began.

Alexis shook her head, stopping him. "Jeff, do not start." Her eyes flashed a warning. She was in no mood to listen to Jeff try and defend the staff like he always did, or for him to try and talk her out of doing what she knew was right. Her employees knew the deal. If they didn't make their numbers, they didn't get their Christmas bonuses. Period.

Ten years ago, she recruited Jeff from another company because she knew he was one of the most brilliant financial minds in the country. He was the best of the best, and she was determined to have him on her team.

But after hiring him, she had found his weakness. He was too soft sometimes on the staff. When she called him out on it, he countered with the fact that it was his job to keep everyone happy and feeling like they were valued and appreciated. He presented her with research that showed dedicated and loyal employees were happier and more productive—and that

equaled more profits. She quickly brushed off the so-called “research,” knowing there was always a study to prove a point if you looked hard enough, but she had cut Jeff some slack as long as they were making their numbers. But when everyone wasn’t making their numbers, like now, watch out.

Jeff looked uncomfortable, but he didn’t flinch under Alexis’s stare. This wasn’t his first time going to battle for the staff. He took a deep breath before trying again.

“Alexis...”

She jumped in before he could finish. She’d run out of patience. “I’m canceling the Christmas bonuses.”

Jeff looked shocked. “But everyone counts on those bonuses. It’s a huge part of their salaries. It’s more than fifty percent of mine.”

Alexis raised her eyebrows. “You know bonuses aren’t guaranteed. They’re *earned*. No one earned them.”

“Everyone worked really hard this year, Alexis. We made money for you. A lot of it,” Jeff said in his most persuasive voice.

“Not enough,” she fired back in a sharp tone that left no room for discussion.

Jeff shook his head in disbelief. He left the conference room looking devastated.

Alexis watched him stop to talk to the staff. He gave everyone an apologetic look.

“How bad is it?” Alexis heard Dave ask.

Jeff sighed.

She waited impatiently for Jeff to say something. *Just tell them*, she thought. *Rip the Band-Aid off.*

Jeff cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, everyone. All of the Christmas bonuses are canceled.”

“What?!” Lorianne exclaimed. “We have to work on Christmas and cancel our family vacations, and now we’re not getting our bonuses?”

“I can’t believe this,” Dave said. “We’ve all worked so much overtime on nights, weekends, and holidays.”

“I’m sorry,” Jeff said, looking miserable.

Lorianne, upset, turned to Dave. “First, she’s Scrooge, and now she’s the Grinch stealing our Christmas.”

Dave sighed. “Yup.”

Alexis, glad to have that done, went back into her office and shut the door behind her.

* * *

The hours flew by, and before Alexis knew it, when she looked up from her computer, it was already dark outside. She picked up her tablet and started scrolling through her budget. “I’ve already cut all the Christmas bonuses—what else can I cut?”

Elise walked into her office. When she heard her boss talking about more things to cut, she quickly turned around to leave, but not before Alexis spotted her.

“What is it?” Alexis asked, not looking up from her tablet.

Elise nervously walked forward. She was holding a small box and held it out to Alexis. “This came for you...”

Alexis didn’t even look up. She was still concentrating on her tablet. “Just put it in the storage room with everything else we’re donating to the women’s shelter.”

“Actually, I think you might want this one,” Elise said as she opened the box, revealing an antique, silver picture frame. “Isn’t this you in the picture?”

When Alexis glanced at the picture, her heart skipped a beat. Time stood still as she struggled to process what she was seeing. She slowly picked up the picture that had been taken when she was in college. She was with her mom and dad, standing in front of their beautiful family Christmas tree. They were all smiling and looked so happy together. It took Alexis’s breath away. She felt like a knife was twisting inside her heart.



Chapter 4



W “here did you get this?” Alexis asked. Her voice cracked with emotion as she stared with disbelief at her family’s Christmas picture.

“It was dropped off earlier,” Elise answered.

Alexis couldn’t take her eyes off the picture. “Okay, who sent it? Where’s the card?”

“I couldn’t find one,” Elise answered. “It must have fallen off. The box was buried under some other gifts.” Elise leaned in for a closer look at the picture. She smiled. “Is that you with your parents?”

Alexis nodded as a wave of profound sadness and loss washed over her.

“Then maybe they sent it,” Elise said cheerfully. “Are you seeing them for Christmas?”

Alexis pulled herself together and put the picture down on her desk. “No, I won’t be seeing them for Christmas. They passed away.”

Elise’s smile was replaced with a look of regret. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long, long time ago,” Alexis said as she willed herself not to show any emotion.

She picked up her tablet, determined to get back to work. When Elise didn’t take the hint, Alexis gave her a pointed look.

Elise scurried out of the office.

Once she was gone, Alexis slowly picked up the picture again. She gently touched her mom, who was wearing a bright red wool winter coat in the photograph. She smiled sadly, remembering how much her mom had loved

that coat. It had been a Thanksgiving present from her dad. She smiled thinking about how her dad had a habit of giving gifts at Thanksgiving that were really Christmas gifts because he was too excited to wait until Christmas to give them out. So he'd give Thanksgiving presents and then go buy more presents to give out at Christmas.

She mentally shook herself and put the picture back down again. She couldn't and wouldn't go down memory lane. It hurt too much. She had fought too hard and for too long to lock those memories away. She hadn't seen any pictures of her parents in years. She had no idea where this one had come from, but she refused to let it distract her from getting back to work. Work was always her go-to escape from anything that was bothering her.

She picked up her phone and called one of her top fund managers, Rebecca Kingsley. She answered on the fourth ring.

"Alexis, what is it? What's wrong?" Rebecca asked as soon as she answered the phone. "Is there some kind of emergency?"

"Yes," Alexis said as she sat back down at her desk and stared at a spreadsheet on her computer. "I have some questions about the Rightman Fund."

Silence.

Alexis's eyebrows knit together. "Rebecca, are you there? Rebecca?"

"Yes, I'm here," Rebecca answered, sounding less than thrilled. "Alexis, you do know it's Christmas Eve, don't you? I'm just sitting down to dinner with my family."

Alexis rolled her eyes. "I'm sure they'll understand that work always comes first, right?"

Silence again.

"Rebecca, can you hear me?" Alexis impatiently stared at her phone. "I think something's wrong with our connection..."

Rebecca sighed. "I can hear you, Alexis. What do you need?"

* * *

A half hour later, when Alexis was hanging up with Rebecca, she heard voices down the hallway. She stood up, surprised. She'd thought she was the

only one left in the office. She'd watched her staff practically run out of the office when Jeff had told them they could go home at five o'clock because it was Christmas Eve. It had happened before she could stop him, but she'd made sure to yell out that she'd see them all bright and early the next morning.

No one had responded.

Her assistant Elise was the only one who had stuck around. "Would you like me to go, too, or stay?" Elise had nervously asked. "I'm happy to stay here as long as you need me to."

Alexis had thought about it and decided the last thing she needed were more distractions or Elise bringing her more surprise Christmas gifts. "Go ahead and go. But be back here early."

"Yes, ma'am," Elise had responded cheerily before she'd run and joined the rest of the staff in the mass exodus.

So who was still here? Alexis wondered.

When the voices continued, Alexis walked out of her office to find out where they were coming from. There was no one around. "Okay, now what's going on?" she asked as she headed down the hallway. She rolled her eyes when she realized that once again, the voices were coming from the conference room. "Seriously? Do these people not learn?" She stopped just outside the conference room door when she saw it was only Lorianne and Dave. She stayed out of their line of sight because she wanted to hear what they were saying to find out what they were up to.

She watched as Dave picked up several bottles of wine and stuffed them in his backpack.

"Lorianne, you better get some wine, too," Dave said. "Looks like this will be the only Christmas bonus we'll get this year. Jeff said we could take whatever we wanted."

Lorianne looked upset as she packed up some Christmas cookies. "This is all so unbelievable."

"Well, it's not a total surprise. We didn't make our numbers," Dave said.

Alexis smiled and nodded, thinking to herself, *I knew I liked this guy.*

“Because those numbers were impossible to make,” Lorianne shot back at him. “We’re not financial wizards with a crystal ball. We can’t control the market or the economy.”

“But it’s our job to adjust,” Dave said.

Exactly, Alexis thought.

“Do you really believe there was any way we could have made those impossible goals Alexis gave us? You think we could have worked any harder?” Lorianne asked.

Silence.

Answer her, Alexis thought. *The answer is yes. Yes, of course you could have worked harder.*

But instead, Dave just sighed and shrugged. “I don’t know. I know I did everything I could.”

“Me too,” Lorianne said. “That’s what I’m talking about. But she didn’t take any of that into consideration. You heard Jeff try and explain and stick up for us, but she just cut him off like always. Why does she even have a COO if she never listens to him?”

Alexis rolled her eyes, annoyed. She was starting to have serious second thoughts about hiring Lorianne. She might have graduated at the top of her class, but she definitely needed an attitude adjustment if she was going to continue working for Taylor Investments. One thing Alexis demanded from all her employees was loyalty. Right now, she didn’t think Lorianne sounded very loyal. More like a petulant child who refused to follow the rules.

Alexis continued to watch as Lorianne snatched up a bottle of wine.

“I gotta get out of here,” Lorianne said. “I’ll see you in the morning. Early.”

“Merry Christmas,” Dave called out to her.

Lorianne held up her wine bottle as she exited. “Bah, humbug!”

Alexis’s eyes narrowed as she watched as Lorianne walked away. She didn’t appreciate her sarcastic tone, or the fact that Lorianne was taking no responsibility for not making her numbers. *This girl should be apologizing, not complaining,* Alexis thought. She didn’t appreciate Lorianne trying to make her out to be the villain in this scenario. It wasn’t her fault her staff didn’t make their numbers.

Each and every one of her employees knew what they were getting into when they agreed to work for her. She was proud of her reputation for hiring the smartest and most ambitious people in the business. She was giving them the opportunity to work at one of the top finance companies in the country. She expected them to be thankful, do their jobs, and deliver. Period.

Having to work on Christmas was on them, not her—even though, secretly, she was glad it was happening. She'd never loved Jeff's idea to shut down the office the week between Christmas and New Year's, but it was one of the few demands he'd made before he accepted her job offer. So they'd made an agreement. If they met their year-end goal, they'd get the time off. If they didn't, they'd work. She, of course, worked no matter how well they were doing. And now that her staff hadn't made their numbers, they were going to be working, too.

With a satisfied smile, she walked back to her office and started focusing on one of her giant computer screens that was monitoring the markets. Her fingers were flying on her keyboard when her computer screen suddenly started flickering on and off.

Confused, she hit a few more keys, but the screen's glitches only got worse. "Come on. Come on. Work," she said impatiently as she pushed a few more keys.

And that's when she heard a female voice that sounded like it was coming from very far away. It whispered...

"Alexis. Alexis..."

A chill went down Alexis's spine as she looked around, confused. When she didn't see anyone she shook her head, thinking she must just be hearing things.

"Alexis," the voice suddenly said, loud and clear.

Alexis gasped when her computer screen went black, and she saw the reflection of her mom staring back at her! Her mom was wearing the same red winter coat she'd been wearing in the family Christmas picture Elise had brought her.

Alexis jumped back, shocked. She whipped off her glasses. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. When she blinked, the image of her mom was

gone.

Trembling, she dropped her head into her hands and took several deep breaths. “What is wrong with me?” she whispered. “Why am I seeing things?”

She was afraid to look up.

Her heart was still racing as she tried to remember the last time she’d eaten anything. She couldn’t recall. She never ate breakfast and worked through lunch. She couldn’t even remember if she’d had dinner the night before. “That has to be it,” she said softly to herself. “I just need to eat something.”

She inhaled slowly and willed herself to calm down. When she finally looked up, she found everything was back to normal. Her computer was working perfectly. There were no more voices or images of her mom wearing the red coat.

She breathed a sigh of relief. She pinched the bridge of her nose before putting her glasses back on. She blamed her momentary confusion on lack of food, even though she was always pushing herself like this and had never hallucinated before. Even thinking about it now gave her chills, because what she had seen and heard had seemed so real.

When her phone lit up with a text from Justin saying *I’m here*, she found that for the first time, she was actually glad to be leaving the office. Clearly, she needed a break. And she knew that after she ate something, she could finish the rest of her work at home.

After she left her office, she stopped by the conference room and grabbed a few bottles of wine for herself. If she ever needed a glass of wine, that time was now. She also picked up a giant tray of Christmas cookies.

As she came down to the lobby in the glass elevator, she smiled when she saw Justin was waiting for her. The place was empty except for him and a member of the cleaning crew who was polishing the marble floors.

As soon as Justin saw her, he rushed over and took the giant cookie platter from her.

“Wow, what’s all this?” Justin asked.

“Just some leftovers from the office,” Alexis answered. “You’re seeing your family tonight, right?”

“Right,” Justin said.

“Great. So it won’t go to waste.” Alexis headed for the door. “Let’s go. I need to get home. I have a lot more work to do.”

Justin quickly followed her. “What happened to Marc and the Bali trip?”

“Not happening,” Alexis said.

“The trip?”

“Marc,” Alexis answered.

Justin looked surprised.

Alexis was thankful he didn’t ask her any questions or say anything more. She could always count on him to read her mood.

Justin held open the door for her. As she got into the back seat of the SUV, it hit her how emotionally exhausted she felt. And she hated that. For her, any time when she wasn’t feeling one hundred percent felt like a weakness, and she hated feeling weak.

* * *

As Justin drove, Alexis kept busy trying to work, texting on her phone. But she was getting more frustrated by the second. None of the fund managers she did business with were answering her texts. This after she’d emailed them earlier and had only gotten back automatic out-of-office responses. Rebecca was one of the few people who had taken her calls, and now even she wasn’t texting back.

Her patience snapped when Justin turned on the radio and the Christmas song “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” started to play...

“We wish you a Merry Christmas
We wish you a Merry Christmas
We wish you a Merry Christmas
And a happy new year...”

Alexis raised her voice over the music. “Can you please turn the Christmas music off? Thank you.”

Justin quickly turned the volume down.

Alexis glanced out her window and frowned when they drove past a large landmark sign that was sparkling with Christmas lights.

It said *Welcome to Holly Point*.

“What are we doing here?” Alexis demanded. “You were supposed to take me home.”

“Surprise!” Justin said merrily.

Alexis wasn’t amused. “Why are we at Holly Point, Justin? Why?”

“Because it’s the best neighborhood for Christmas decorations in the city,” Justin responded with enthusiasm. “Just like people come from all over to see the Christmas tree at your office, people come here to Holly Point to see all these amazing Christmas lights and decorations on the homes. It’s legendary. It’s a Christmas tradition. I bring you here every year.”

Alexis rolled her eyes. “And every year I tell you I don’t want to be here.”

Justin laughed. “I know, but look, there’s this one house—you’ve got to see it. The decorations are so cool.” He pulled the SUV up to the curb and stopped. Then he turned around and unbuckled her seatbelt. “It’ll just take a second. Just one second...”

Alexis gave him a stunned look. “Did you just unbuckle my seatbelt? Really?”

For an answer Justin just laughed as he jumped out of the SUV and hustled over to open the door for her.

“Come on,” he urged.

Alexis ignored him and went back to texting on her phone.

“Alexis, you need to see this,” Justin said, undeterred.

She gave him a look. “What *I need* to do is go home. So come on, stop messing around. Let’s go.”

She went back to texting until she realized Justin wasn’t moving. She finally looked up.

Justin, smiling his sexy smile, held out his hand to her. “Come on, Alexis. I just want to show you this one house.”

Alexis stared back at him. “Seriously, Justin, I told you I have a lot of work to do tonight.”

Justin laughed as he grabbed her phone. “*Seriously*, who are you going to call for work, huh? It’s Christmas Eve. Nobody’s working except you.”

She hated that Justin was right. “Justin, give me my phone.” She was losing her patience fast, and Justin grinning back at her wasn’t improving her mood any. She held out her hand to get her phone. “Give me my phone back, please.”

Justin gave her a pleading look. “Look, Alexis, what I want you to see is right here. It’s the Angel House. Come on. It’ll just take a second...”

Alexis was about to protest again when she looked over Justin’s shoulder and saw a woman standing a few feet behind him next to a life-size LED angel that was illuminated by Christmas lights. She was wearing a bright red wool Christmas coat.

The woman was her mom.



Chapter 5



Alexis gasped. She froze in shock as she stared at her mom. Her mother smiled a brilliant smile.

This freaked out Alexis even more.

“What’s wrong?” Justin asked, concerned. “What is it?”

Alexis pointed with a shaking hand. “It’s my mom. She’s right behind you!”

Justin turned around. “Where? I don’t see anyone.”

“Right there, by the angel,” Alexis said as her heart raced faster.

“There’s no one here,” Justin said as he looked back at her. “Are you okay?”

Alexis blinked, and her mom was gone. She struggled to catch her breath. Her whole body was shaking. The last thing she was, was *okay*. She reached into her purse and grabbed the Christmas picture of her parents and herself. Her fingers shook as she showed the photograph to Justin. She pointed at her mom wearing the red wool coat.

“My mom was right behind you, wearing this same red coat. The exact same coat that’s in this picture. She was right there, Justin.” Her voice trembled as she pointed again behind him. “Right there,” Alexis insisted. Only now the only thing she saw was the giant LED Christmas angel. “She was there. She was...”

Justin’s eyes widened. “You mean your mom who passed away?” he asked. He looked as confused as she felt.

“Yes,” Alexis said emphatically. She shook her head to try and clear her thoughts. The image of her mom standing there smiling at her was so crystal clear it sent a chill down her spine. “I’m not crazy, Justin. I’m not crazy. I saw her...” But even as she said the words, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was having some kind of mental meltdown. First, she’d heard her mom’s voice at the office and then she’d seen her on her computer screen. This was followed by a few seconds ago, when she’d seen her mom standing behind Justin, just a few feet away from her. *What is happening to me?* she wondered, and then instantly was afraid of what the answer could be. She inhaled deeply, trying to calm her skyrocketing panic.

“No, you’re not crazy,” Justin said slowly, sounding as if he was picking his words carefully. “I think you’re just tired from working too hard.”

Alexis looked into his eyes, begging him to understand. “But she was right there...” she said in a shaky voice that wasn’t much louder than a whisper.

Justin nodded. “I believe you. Whenever I miss my dad the most, I start seeing him, too. I get it. I understand.”

Alexis inhaled a deep, shaky breath. “Yeah. Okay. You must be right. I’m just really tired...”

“When was the last time you ate anything?” Justin asked.

Alexis turned away from him. “I’ve been busy...”

Justin sighed and shook his head. “That’s what I thought. You can’t burn the candle at both ends and not get burned. You need to take better care of yourself.”

Alexis nodded numbly.

“I’ll take you home,” Justin said.

“Yes,” Alexis agreed quietly. “Okay.”

As he shut her door, she looked down again at her family Christmas picture that she was still holding. She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m just tired,” she whispered to herself. She took a deep breath to try and calm her jangled nerves. When Justin got into the SUV, she said it again. “I’m just tired. That’s all.” She wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince, Justin or herself.

* * *

A few minutes later, she was relieved when Justin pulled up in front of her luxury high-rise condo building. There had been no more hallucinations on their drive. She'd also kept her eyes shut, pretending to rest, just in case.

As soon as she saw her building, she felt better. It was *the* address to have in Atlanta, and she owned the penthouse. The building always went all out at Christmas. Every window and door was outlined with white twinkle lights. There was a line of sparkling Christmas trees along the front entrance and a beautiful giant wreath with a plush red velvet ribbon over the doorway.

As Justin turned off the SUV, she was still trying to process what had happened. She was almost afraid to look outside, fearing her mom would appear again.

As soon as they'd left Holly Point, and she'd shut her eyes to try and relax, and Justin, without saying anything, had turned on some soothing jazz music. It was like he knew she was barely holding herself together and didn't want to talk. She was thankful to have the music to try and help distract her from what had just happened. But despite her best efforts, her mind kept replaying the haunting scene over and over again.

It had all been so real.

One minute, her mom had been standing behind Justin, wearing her favorite red Christmas coat, and the next minute, she had disappeared. Add this to the fact that earlier, she'd thought she'd seen her mom in her office and that her family Christmas picture had mysteriously shown up, and it was enough to leave anyone shaken.

After her parents passed away, still numb with shock, she had packed up all their photographs and personal items and put everything in storage. It had hurt too much to think about them, much less see pictures or anything else that reminded her of all she had lost. After that, she'd never seen those things again. As far as she knew, everything was still in storage, just as she'd left it.

How that family photo had ended up at her office, she had no idea. And of all the pictures to show up, it had to be *this* one—a picture that held a very special meaning. It was the very last Christmas picture she had taken with her parents before they were gone.

She hadn't thought about the day the picture was taken in a very long time. But now, all the memories were rushing back to her. She found herself remembering every detail like it was yesterday.

She'd come home from college to visit her parents for Thanksgiving when her mom had decided they needed to get a family picture to use for their Christmas card that year. But before they could take any pictures, they needed to go get a Christmas tree because they all agreed it would be the best background. While some people thought Thanksgiving was too early to put up a Christmas tree, that wasn't the case at all in the Taylor family. It was their tradition to always put up their Christmas tree the Friday after Thanksgiving. They even had the family tradition of calling the day "Christmasgiving," a combination of Thanksgiving and Christmas.

As Alexis remembered it, the tree they got that year was one of the biggest, if not *the* biggest, Douglas fir trees they'd ever had. It was perfectly shaped and stood almost ten feet high. It was a challenge to get it into the house and set up. But once the tree was up, it was impressive.

It took them hours to decorate it. Partly because the tree was so huge, and partly because her parents had collected dozens of different Christmas tree ornaments over the years. After putting up several hundred white twinkle lights and weaving a red satin ribbon throughout the fragrant evergreen branches, it was time to put on the ornaments.

There was everything from red and gold velvet balls, miniature wooden nutcrackers, and silver jingle bells to hand-painted antique rocking horses that had belonged to her dad's family and beautiful porcelain angels that had belonged to her mom's family.

It always took hours to put up all the decorations because each one came with a story that her mom and dad loved to tell.

One of the things that Alexis had always loved was how decorating the tree always came with the first Christmas treats of the season. Besides the traditional family favorites of dark chocolate peppermint fudge, sugar cookies with cream cheese frosting, and mini fruitcakes, no matter how many holiday goodies they had, Alexis always knew she could count on her mom to whip up a surprise recipe. It happened every Christmasgiving.

The idea was everyone would try the new dessert her mom invented and then vote to see if it was good enough to be added to the coveted collection of Christmas deliciousness they had every year.

By far one of her mom's biggest hits were the Peppermint Shortbread Christmas Magic Bars. Alexis smiled remembering how she'd helped her mom make up that recipe when she was just five years old. It was a twist on the traditional shortbread recipe where you sprinkled crushed up candy canes on the top of the bars before baking for a fabulous, festive, peppermint taste. She grew up proud of the fact that the candy canes were her idea and that the Peppermint Shortbread Christmas Magic Bars were one of her dad's favorites.

But suddenly, as fast as her Christmas memories had come, they were followed by a deep sense of loss that took her breath away. She shut her eyes and shook her head as she willed herself back to the present. She had spent the last twenty years of her life not dwelling on her past in order to protect herself from pain. She didn't want to go there now. The last few hours were already too much to handle. Was it any wonder she was worried that she was having a mini-breakdown after seeing and hearing her mom?

She knew there was only one thing that would make her feel better. The one thing she could always count on to lift her spirits.

Work.

When Justin opened her door, she was already running through the list of work tasks she was determined to finish before she went to bed, no matter how tired she was. She knew if she set her mind to it, she could push through for another few hours. Knowing this brought her some much-needed peace of mind.

"Okay, you're home," Justin said. He studied her closely as she took his hand and stepped out of the SUV. "How are you feeling?"

She nervously looked over his shoulder and sighed with relief when all she saw was her condo building. "Well, I'm not seeing my mom behind you this time, so I'd say better."

"Now that you're home, you can eat something and get some rest," Justin said.

When Alexis rolled her eyes, Justin gave her a sharp look. “What was that look for?”

“I will eat something,” Alexis promised.

“And?” Justin asked. “You’re going to get some rest?”

Alexis hesitated.

“Alexis…” Justin urged.

“Yes, I’ll get some rest.”

Justin smiled with relief.

“After I finish some work,” Alexis added.

Justin’s smile disappeared. “Alexis, seriously. I’m worried about you…”

Alexis held up her hand to stop him. “Justin, please, don’t start with me. I have work I need to get done.”

“No, what you have to do is rest before you start seeing things again,” Justin said.

Alexis rolled her eyes. She refused to admit to Justin or even herself that deep down, she was worried about the same thing. “I said I would eat something. That’s all I need. This is all my fault for skipping some meals. I should know better.”

“You should,” Justin agreed.

Alexis gave him a look. “Wow, you’re not going to let up, are you?”

Justin shook his head. “No, because someone has to call you out so you’ll take care of yourself.”

Alexis arched an eyebrow as she stared him down. “And that someone is going to be you?”

Justin stood his ground and locked eyes with her. “Looks like it.”

They stared at each other in silence for a moment.

Alexis had to admit, she respected that Justin didn’t flinch. He was the only employee who didn’t fear her.

“I’m going to go in, and I’m going to eat something,” Alexis said. “And we’re going to put this whole incident behind us.” That was what she’d decided to call her hallucinations—an “incident.” A momentary lapse of judgment. Labeling it made Alexis feel better, like she was in charge of her emotions again.

More than anything, she was annoyed with herself for letting something like this happen. She knew she'd been skipping meals and working around the clock, but usually, she could handle it. Her grueling work schedule was nothing new. But apparently, for some reason, this time, it had all caught up to her. She was convinced this whole "incident" was nothing a meal and a good night's sleep couldn't fix.

"I appreciate your concern, Justin, but I'll be fine," Alexis said and meant it. "I'll see you tomorrow at seven. I want to get to the office bright and early."

Justin sighed. It was clear he was still worried. "Okay, I'll be here."

Alexis was already walking toward her building.

"Merry Christmas," Justin called out.

Alexis cringed when she heard the two words she never used anymore. "Merry Christmas" was no longer in her vocabulary.

"Have a good night," Alexis called back to him as a dapper doorman rushed to open the door for her.

As she entered the lobby, she pulled her computer tablet out of her bag and started scrolling through year-end budget graphics. But her concentration was broken when she was hit with the exuberant sound of Christmas carolers dressed in elaborate, Victorian-themed costumes merrily singing "Joy to the World"...

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let Earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And Heaven and nature sing..."

"Oh, hell no," Alexis said as she stared all the carolers down. She was in no mood.

Everyone abruptly stopped singing.

All the other residents enjoying the lively Christmas party that filled the beautifully decorated lobby stopped celebrating to stare at Alexis.

This only irritated Alexis more. She'd forgotten that every year her building hosted a huge Christmas Eve party in the lobby. It was something she'd

always avoided like the plague. She frowned when she saw how everyone was dressed to impress. They'd already gone back to their mingling and chatting while sharply dressed waiters handed out glasses of champagne and Christmas-themed canapés.

Alexis rubbed her throbbing temples. All the festive fun was giving her a headache. She picked up her pace and headed for the elevator, dodging merrymakers along the way. She was almost to the elevator when the front desk clerk, Ray, came running up to her. He was holding a huge Christmas gift basket and an equally giant poinsettia.

"Ms. Taylor. A few more things came for you," Ray said, smiling.

"Not another Christmas basket," Alexis groaned. Exhausted, she took a deep breath. "You know what, Ray, I just don't have room in my place for anything else. Would you like them?"

Ray looked surprised and pleased. "Sure. That would be wonderful. My wife will love this. Poinsettias are her favorite, and this one is so beautiful."

Alexis nodded, trying to keep her patience when all she wanted to do was escape.

"Thank you so much, Ms. Taylor," Ray continued to gush.

"You're welcome," Alexis said. She started to walk away when Ray stopped her again.

"You know all the residents are having our annual Christmas Eve party. You're welcome to join us, but you probably have other plans. Something more exciting to do." Ray offered with a smile.

Alexis nodded. "I do but thank you." She turned around and hurried toward the elevator before anyone else could stop her.

"Merry Christmas!" Ray happily called out to her.

For an answer, Alexis held her tablet up over her head.

The Christmas carolers started up again, more enthusiastic than ever. This time, they were singing "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"...

"It came upon a midnight clear
That glorious song of old..."

Alexis impatiently pushed the elevator button repeatedly. "Come on. Come

on. Come on. Get me out of here,” she said under her breath.

As she waited for the elevator to arrive the Christmas carolers got louder and louder...

“From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold
Peace on the earth, good will to men
From Heaven’s all-gracious King
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing...”

Alexis wasn’t sure if it was her imagination, but every time the carolers sang the word “angels,” she felt like they were putting extra emphasis on the word and their voices grew even louder. She sighed with relief when the elevator finally came. She stepped inside quickly. The last thing she saw before the elevator door closed was one of the Christmas carolers, a distinguished older gentleman wearing a black top hat, tilt his hat at her as he smiled and winked.



Chapter 6



Alexis did a double take as the elevator doors closed, wondering what that Christmas caroler’s wink had been all about.

Normally, she wouldn’t have given it a second thought. It was probably just a happy holiday caroler. But since today had been anything but normal, she was now questioning everything.

When she finally stepped into her magnificent, modern penthouse condo, she’d never been more grateful to get home. She loved that this was her “Christmas-free” zone. There wasn’t one Christmas decoration, Christmas basket, or any Christmas flower to be found anywhere. It was just the way she liked it.

From top to bottom, everything in her condo was decorated immaculately. This was thanks to an award-winning interior designer from Manhattan she’d hired shortly after she’d moved in after a national magazine reached out wanting to feature her on the cover. Since part of the story would focus on showing where one of the most successful women in finance lived, Alexis wanted and needed everything to be perfect.

She’d spent a small fortune making sure everything was carefully curated, down to the last detail. She’d wanted to make sure that any of the photographs and videos the magazine team took projected the image she wanted the world to see—that she was a smart, successful businesswoman at the top of her game.

After the designer had worked her magic, there had been no denying her condo was impressive. Beyond her primary bedroom that was bigger than most people's entire living space, she had three other bedrooms and four bathrooms that she never used, in addition to her home office. When she wasn't sleeping, her office was the room she used the most.

But Alexis knew it was her main living spaces that were the real showstoppers. The floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room offered up incredible downtown Atlanta views. Her gourmet kitchen was a chef's dream, featuring top-of-the-line appliances and accessories. The fact that she'd never cooked anything in the kitchen didn't matter. All she cared about was how everything looked. When she took the time to eat, the meals she had at home were always delivered.

As she wandered into her gorgeous kitchen, she ran her hand along her gleaming white marble countertops. Even though she wasn't hungry, she knew Justin was right. She was running on fumes and needed to eat something to make sure there wasn't another "incident." Her other motivation was that she still had a lot of work to do. She wanted to be clearheaded when she got back to crunching the budget numbers.

She set her designer bag on the counter and took out the wine she'd taken from her office. That was when she saw the Christmas picture in her bag. She took a deep breath and slowly picked the picture up, studying it for a few seconds. When the sadness came, as it always did, she quickly put the picture face down on the counter. She just couldn't look at it anymore.

Right now, the only thing she wanted to see was a large wineglass in her hand. She opened the bottle of wine from the office and gave herself a generous pour. She then walked over to her refrigerator to try and find something to eat.

When she opened it, she frowned when the only thing she saw staring back at her was one box of Chinese takeout. That was it. The rest of her refrigerator was empty. She grabbed the takeout, opened the box, and smelled her leftover Kung Pao chicken. Since it wasn't completely offensive, she decided it would have to do. She got some chopsticks and headed for the living room.

Besides her office, it was her favorite room. One of the reasons was because she often worked out here as well. She'd get comfy on her charcoal-gray sectional couch with her computer on her lap, facing her huge television that she rarely turned on.

Adding to her list of things she rarely used was her sleek black, glass-panel fireplace that was more than fifteen feet long. There was also a giant bookcase that took up almost one whole wall. It was filled with all the most popular, bestselling novels that her designer had picked out.

It didn't bother Alexis that she'd never read any of the books. Fiction wasn't her thing. She didn't have time to live in anyone else's fantasyland. If she was going to read anything, she preferred nonfiction audiobooks about the finance industry so she could continue to learn as much as possible. Audiobooks were perfect for her because they allowed her to multitask. She would listen when she was commuting and traveling for work. She'd also been known to occasionally pick up biographies of people she admired to see if there were any life lessons and shortcuts she could learn to help her continue to climb the corporate ladder.

Walking into the living room, juggling her Chinese takeout container and her wine, she didn't even bother to turn on the lights. She preferred the darkness anyway. It fit her mood. After sitting down on the couch, she placed her Chinese food on the coffee table and then sat back and started drinking her wine.

She sighed as she savored the taste—it was one of her favorites. A dry, rich, and creamy white Bordeaux. She knew Jeff had sprung for all the food and drinks for the office party out of his own pocket. He was known for doing that, even though she'd told him countless times he shouldn't. He always argued that it was his contribution to keeping the employees happy. A small gesture that he believed paid off in the long run. She was impressed that Jeff remembered how much she liked this specific vineyard. But, on second thought, she knew she shouldn't be surprised. Jeff was the definition of thoughtful and always remembered everything. Knowing that he was an eternal optimist, she thought he'd probably hoped she'd take a minute to enjoy the party with them.

She laughed a little, thinking, *when will he learn?*

As she took another sip of wine, she closed her eyes, content. Regardless of the reason he'd bought the wine, she was thankful she had it now. She was hoping it would help her relax, even though relaxing wasn't something she was good at, with or without wine.

* * *

Time passed, and she wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting alone in the darkness. She just knew that when she looked down at her glass, her wine was gone. She put her glass down and picked up her phone. She was hoping to have some responses to all the work texts she'd sent earlier. She frowned. No one had texted her back. "What's wrong with people?" she grumbled. "Why can't people just do their jobs? You can't tell me just because it's Christmas Eve you're ignoring your phone. Or is it that you're just ignoring me?"

Her frown grew even more when she saw that the one and only text she *had* gotten was spam that said...

*Don't miss out on our exclusive holiday giveaway!
Text 'GIFT' to win a lavish holiday prize worth \$1000*

She couldn't push delete fast enough. She stood up quickly. She needed more wine. *Fast.*

As she headed into the kitchen, she froze. A chill slid down her spine.

On the counter, the Christmas picture with her parents was now standing face up, staring back at her.

"What the..." she gasped as her heart skipped a beat. She whipped around to make sure no one else was in the room. But she was all alone. Her hand shook as she picked up the picture. It was real. She wasn't hallucinating. But she could have sworn that she'd put the picture facedown so she didn't have to look at it.

She shook her head, confused. "I guess I really am tired," she said with a sigh.

She put the photograph facedown again and pushed down on it to make sure it wasn't going anywhere. Then she grabbed the bottle of Bordeaux and headed for her bedroom.

As tired as she was, she knew she needed to do at least two hours of work before she could even think about going to sleep. She was counting on work to help take her mind off all the "incidents" she kept experiencing.

As she left the kitchen, she glanced one more time at the Christmas picture to make sure it was still facedown on the counter.

It was.

She breathed a sigh of relief but still picked up her pace as she headed for her bedroom.

* * *

Two hours later, Alexis was in her blue-and-white-striped silk pajamas, on her king-size bed, leaning up against a collection of designer pillows. She was in a familiar position with her computer on her lap. Her bed was her other favorite place to work.

There were many nights when she'd get home from work exhausted and go to bed, only to wake up a few hours later with a list of things she felt like she still had to do, leaving her unable to fall back asleep. So now, she always had her laptop nearby so she could work through the night.

She knew this would be a huge disappointment to her interior designer, who had tried to turn her bedroom into a luxurious, spa-like sanctuary. The walls were a soft, eggshell white that matched the plush white bed ensemble on the king-size bed. Above her bed was a stunning, three-tier, crystal chandelier that had been custom designed just for her. Designed in the Swiss Alps, it was exactly the kind of conversation piece her designer had promised the magazine article would feature. And she'd been right.

But right now, instead of projecting a peaceful setting, Alexis's bed was a chaotic mess.

Her work files and paperwork dominated her duvet, just the way she liked them to.

When she saw the time on her phone, she couldn't believe it was almost eleven o'clock. In an hour, it would be Christmas.

She sighed.

Christmas was the longest day of the year for her. She wished she could just skip Christmas and fast-forward so it could be December twenty-sixth. Or even better, January second, so everyone would stop using the holidays as an excuse to not work.

But in the meantime, at least she knew what she needed to do if she wanted to have continued success. She happily picked up a pile of work files. "Okay, let's do this."

When her bedroom door suddenly slammed shut, her heart stopped...until her furnace started up. She breathed a huge sigh of relief. Her door always shut itself when the heat turned on. She needed to get a grip. "Calm down. You have nothing to worry about," she told herself, trying to sound more confident than she felt. She looked around her room and listened. There was nothing out of the ordinary. She shook herself mentally. *Everything's okay*, she told herself.

She just needed to get back to work.

She started to type on her laptop again when the vanilla-scented candles she had lit on her nightstand went out...



Chapter 7



After Justin dropped Alexis off at her condo, he couldn't help worrying about whether or not she'd be okay.

He'd seen Alexis stressed out hundreds of times. He knew she was the kind of woman who always pushed herself to the brink. But he'd never seen her like this. The fact that she was hallucinating and thinking she'd seen her mom, who had passed away, was entirely new territory.

The more he thought about it, the more he wondered whether, instead of taking her home he should have taken her to see a doctor. Hallucinations were nothing to mess around with. If it had been anyone else, that was what he would have suggested. But with Alexis, it was tricky.

He knew she would never let him take her to the emergency room. He could already hear her stern voice now, telling him he was overreacting and that she was "fine." He'd learned over the years that Alexis prided herself on always being "fine," no matter how she really felt or what she was going through.

He remembered last winter—even after she'd slipped on some ice and twisted her ankle to where she could barely walk, that she'd still refused to let him take her to the emergency room. The only thing she'd allowed him to do was help her get into the SUV so he could take her home. When she got home, even though her ankle had been ridiculously swollen, she'd insisted she was "fine," and after he'd helped her into her building and into the elevator, she said she could take it from there.

While he respected her need for privacy and figured she wasn't comfortable with the idea of him coming into her condo, he told her he wasn't going to leave until he knew she was safely at home. So he waited in the lobby until she texted him a thumbs-up. Her other version of "I'm fine."

He'd learned over the years that besides being determined, she was equally stubborn and independent. She never asked for help and always wanted to do things on her own. She always put on a brave front. He was never quite sure if she did this to fool everyone else because she hated the idea of anyone ever seeing her as weak, or if she did this to fool herself. Or maybe it was a little of both.

He cringed a little, imagining what her reaction would be if he suggested she go see a doctor to have a full checkup to make sure she was okay. Hallucinations didn't happen to people who were truly "fine." But he knew that if he tried then, just like in the past, she would adamantly refuse.

While he liked to think they had become friends over all these years, the fact remained that he was her employee, and she was his boss. No matter what was happening in her life, she was always the one in charge—and she never let him or anyone else forget that.

Still, he felt bad for her. He knew this time of year especially was extra rough on her. He'd never forget his first day working for her when he'd learned the hard way that she never celebrated Christmas. To say they'd gotten off to a rough start would be an understatement.

He'd just started working for a luxury car service company, and he was assigned Alexis as his first client. The dispatcher had warned him that she'd already gone through a string of other drivers she hadn't liked and that she could be "difficult and demanding" to work for. He'd been warned that he could never be late picking her up. If he was late, she'd fire him on the spot. And if she fired him, he was done and would have to find another job.

Since he really needed the job after the last company he worked for laid everyone off, he'd accepted the challenge. He was never late. As an upbeat, positive person, he also prided himself on having the kind of personality that got along with everyone.

Eager to impress on his first day driving Alexis, he'd shown up an hour early at her condo to take her to work.

It had been the week before Christmas.

Wanting to do something special to celebrate the holidays, he painstakingly decorated the inside of his SUV with some white twinkle lights on the ceiling and silver sparkling snowflakes. He made sure it was classy but festive. He even got an air freshener that smelled just like a freshly cut Christmas tree. He also had a playlist of his favorite Christmas carols ready to go.

He thought everything was perfect.

Alexis hated it.

He shuddered, remembering how badly their first meeting had gone.

The morning started out great. He did just as his boss had told him. He texted Alexis ten minutes to seven to let her know he was waiting for her out front. He texted...

*Happy holidays! This is your new driver, Justin.
I'm out front.*

He added a Christmas tree and Santa emoji for good measure.

When she didn't respond after five minutes, he got nervous that maybe she didn't get the text, so he called her. When she didn't answer her phone, he got even more nervous. He texted her again and then called her again. Still, there was no response.

With only a few minutes until it was seven, and with his boss's warning of not being late ringing in his ears, he quickly went inside the building to see if the front desk could ring her up and make sure everything was okay.

He just finished explaining to the front desk attendant that he needed his help when he saw Alexis for the first time.

He would never forget how she took his breath away. She was stunning. She walked toward him like she owned the world. She wore a flawless black business suit, a beautifully cut, long, black cashmere coat, and sky-high designer heels. But she didn't see him because she was texting on her phone.

The time was exactly seven o'clock.

He recognized her instantly because his boss had sent him a profile of her

that included her picture. Not that he needed it. He already knew who she was. She was like a celebrity in Atlanta's business world.

Everyone who was anyone knew Alexis Taylor.

In the photographs he'd seen of her, he always thought she was beautiful. But when he saw her in person for the first time, he found her even more stunning.

He was so captivated that he didn't say a word as she breezed right by him.

He chuckled a little remembering everything that happened next, although at the time, there was nothing to laugh about. It was disastrous.

"Ms. Taylor," he called out as he raced after her through the lobby. "Hello. Hi. Are you looking for me?"

She froze and then turned around and gave him an icy stare.

He happily grinned back at her, clearly not reading the room. "Hi! I'm Justin, your new driver."

Her expression was impossible to read as she stared back at him.

Nervous, he rambled on. "I wasn't late. I've actually been here for an hour. I made sure to get here early because I heard you hate people who are late. I get that. I do, too. So I was here, calling and texting you. But maybe I have the wrong number because I never heard anything back. So I came into the building to see if someone could help me find you. But I didn't have your condo number, and they wouldn't give it out—of course, for privacy and all that—and..."

"Stop," Alexis said in a commanding tone.

He still cringed, remembering that tone and how she had impatience written all over her face.

"If you're my driver, you should be waiting for me in the car," she said in a voice that made it clear that she was losing her patience, fast. "You do not ever come into my lobby. You don't ever call me. Understand?"

Justin nervously walked with her. "Yes. I'm sorry, Ms. Taylor..."

When she glared at him, he quickly stopped talking. He knew he was two seconds from getting fired unless he turned things around.

At that moment, he remembered being so thankful that he'd put in all the extra effort to decorate the SUV for Christmas. He was sure that would help

turn her mood around.

He couldn't have been more wrong. It was when they got to the SUV that things really went off the rails.

He winced, reliving the moment. How could he have known Alexis Taylor hated Christmas? That wasn't in her file anywhere.

What happened next would go down in the history books as the worst first impression ever.

Alexis got into the SUV where he had "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" playing and immediately got out of the vehicle.

"No," was the only word she said, but the way she said it spoke volumes.

She was livid as she marched back to her building.

He ran after her. "Ms. Taylor, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

She ignored his questions as she walked through the door the doorman was holding open for her.

When he anxiously followed her inside the lobby, the doorman gave him a look that said, "follow at your own risk." But he ignored it. He saw Alexis was already on the phone to his boss, complaining about him. He needed this job and was determined to fix whatever was wrong.

He raced to get in front of her. "Ms. Taylor, if you'd just give me a chance to explain..."

She locked eyes with him.

"I don't think you're being fair," he said with conviction.

He watched as her eyebrows shot up with surprise and she folded her arms in front of her chest.

"I don't know what I've done to upset you, but whatever it is, I'm sorry," he said. "I really need this job. That's why I came an hour early to make sure I was on time for you. I even decorated the SUV to bring some extra joy and share some Christmas spirit..."

That was when she stopped him and incredulously explained how unprofessional it was for a driver to show up with a car that looked like "Christmas had thrown up inside it." He was so shocked that the rest of her rant was a blur.

Things then escalated from bad to worse when his boss told Alexis he could send a new driver, but they couldn't be there for fifteen minutes. The delay meant she was going to be late for an important meeting.

Trying to prevent a complete meltdown, he jumped in and told Alexis if she just gave him a minute, he'd fix everything and clean out the SUV of any signs of Christmas.

As much as it was clear that she wanted absolutely nothing to do with him, it was also clear that she desperately needed to get to work, so she begrudgingly told him he had one minute and one minute only.

He never moved so fast in his life. He ran out to his SUV and ripped down all the Christmas decorations, grabbing the air freshener and stuffing everything into the truck.

As promised, Alexis marched out of her building and toward the SUV after exactly one minute.

Justin remembered holding his breath as she approached.

That's when he heard it. The Christmas song "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" was still playing loudly...

"We wish you a Merry Christmas
We wish you a Merry Christmas
We wish you a Merry Christmas
and a happy new year
Good tidings we bring to you and your kin
We wish you a Merry Christmas
and a happy new year..."

Alexis froze.

He felt himself die a little inside before he sprang into action and dove into the SUV to turn the music off. Only he accidentally ended up turning it up even louder...

"Oh, bring us some figgy pudding
Oh, bring us some figgy pudding

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding
And bring it right here..."

Alexis instantly pivoted and started walking back into the building. When he finally got the music off, he ran after her. "It's gone. It's all gone. There's no more Christmas."

When she tried to walk around him, he blocked her path.

"If we leave now, I can still get you to work on time," he said with more confidence than he felt. He held his breath. He knew this was it. Do or die.

"Fine," she said. "But if I'm late, you're fired."

He rushed back to the SUV to open the door for her while mentally trying to figure out how in the world he was ever going to get her to work on time.

"I understand," he said. "And please know I'm truly sorry. I was trying to do something special for you to start the morning off right. Obviously, I failed miserably. I really do apologize. I wanted this morning to be perfect."

Alexis's eyes narrowed as she studied him.

He'd never forget what she said next.

"Are you going to bring me figgy pudding?" she asked, dead serious.

He was completely confused. "What?"

"Like the song. It talked about figgy pudding," Alexis added, still serious. "If I get in this SUV, am I going to find *figgy pudding*?"

Their eyes locked. Alexis didn't blink.

At that moment, he had no idea if she was joking or not, but one thing was for sure—he was beginning to think she was a little nuts.

"No," was all he could come up with. "There is no figgy pudding inside."

"Good," she said as she got in. "Then let's go. You don't have any time to waste."

She then shut her own door, and that was it.

Despite his best efforts, Atlanta's traffic got the better of him. They arrived at Alexis's office five minutes late. He knew he was doomed. He already started trying to figure out how he was going to find another job.

The entire ride, Alexis was on her phone with work calls. Listening to her, he became even more impressed. She was whip-smart, driven, and didn't

suffer fools. She was all business. On all the calls, there was never any chitchat. She got to the point, kept calls short, and moved on to the next one seamlessly.

As he pulled up to the Taylor Investments office building, he braced for what he knew was coming. When he opened her door, she got out, still talking on the phone. He waited for her to fire him, but she started walking away. That was when he felt really defeated, thinking she wasn't even going to say the words. He was just done.

Depressed, he was getting inside the SUV when he heard her call out to him.

“Pick me up at seven,” she said.

He was shocked. “What?” he called back to her as he glanced around. “Are you talking to me?”

The look she gave him was one he'd end up seeing many times over the years.

It was her look that said, *seriously?*

She then turned and disappeared inside her building.

He remembered standing there for several minutes trying to process what just happened. Even though he wasn't sure if he still really had the job or not, that night he showed up, just in case, a half hour early. He parked his SUV out front, in the same place where he dropped her off and just waited. While he waited, he kept looking around for another driver to show up for her.

But right at seven—not a minute late—Alexis walked out of her office and up to his SUV. He stood next to her door and opened it for her. She was on her phone but paused, looked into his eyes, and said, “Thank you, Justin.”

And that had been it. He had been driving her ever since. He never knew why he wasn't fired that day. He'd never dared ask. But that was how they'd started their working relationship fifteen Christmases ago.

It wasn't until several years later that he'd learned how she'd lost both of her parents at Christmas. It hadn't been a long, emotional conversation. Quite the opposite. He'd been talking about his family at Christmas and asked how she celebrated. She simply stated that she didn't celebrate because the only family she ever had, her parents, had passed away at Christmas.

Before he could even offer his condolences, she had changed the topic. He then understood for the first time that the reason she didn't celebrate the holidays wasn't what she let most people believe. He'd heard her tell people countless times over the years that she didn't celebrate Christmas because she was too busy working, wrapping up things for the end of the year. And while Justin knew that was true, he also knew that as an only child, with her parents gone, she didn't have any family left. That had to be especially hard at the holidays.

He'd always felt bad for her. He couldn't even begin to imagine how hard it must have been on her to lose both her parents in a tragic accident, much less at Christmas. But he knew how much she would have hated his pity. She was proud and always put on a brave front.

Even though they rarely talked about Christmas, that didn't stop him from subtly trying to help bring some Christmas joy back into her life. That included driving her by Holly Point every Christmas Eve.

The first time he'd driven her through the famous Christmas-decorated neighborhood, he hadn't said a word, and she never noticed because she'd been too busy working. The following year when he took her to Holly Point again, she had questioned what he was doing. He'd quickly come up with the excuse that he was just driving through to see how busy it was because he wanted to bring his niece and nephew by after he dropped her off. The third year when he'd driven through Holly Point on Christmas Eve, she'd called him out on it. That was when he'd confessed it was one of his favorite Christmas traditions and that he thought she might enjoy it, too. When she had given him that look, he'd let the topic drop, but that didn't stop him from driving through the neighborhood with her every Christmas Eve after that.

This year was the first year he actually stopped the SUV, got out, and tried to get her to come see one of the homes. The Angel House. While he didn't expect to have much luck, he certainly never dreamed his innocent gesture would turn into a nightmare when Alexis thought she saw her mom.

He thought of the phrase "no good deed goes unpunished." That was how he felt.

He certainly meant no harm. His tradition of driving her through Holly Point had become a joke between them, just like the other tradition he'd started of giving her a Christmas tree ornament every year on Christmas Day.

This was inspired by his own family tradition of his mom giving all the children new Christmas ornaments every year. His mom said she'd started the tradition so that when all the children grew up and had their own Christmas trees, they would already have a head start on decorating with their very own ornament collection.

Of course, his mom was known for always picking out the perfect ornaments that had a special meaning. He remembered when he was in the first grade, he'd been obsessed with fire trucks, so she had found him a bright red fire truck ornament. The next year, she'd given him an adorable baseball ornament when he'd started playing baseball. His sister had gotten ballet slippers when she'd started ballet and a sparkly crown ornament when she'd gone through her princess stage.

All the ornaments he'd gotten from his mom were like having a special holiday scrapbook of his life. And in his family, the tradition didn't stop just because you grew up. Last year, his mom had given him a gingerbread man ornament because gingerbread cookies were his favorite Christmas cookie. It was always a highlight of every Christmas, seeing what ornaments his mom had come up with that year.

The first year he'd shared his mom's Christmas tradition with Alexis, he'd gotten her a sparkling gold star to signify the star she was in the financial world. While she liked the meaning behind the gold star and thanked him for the gesture, she was quick to tell him that she didn't do Christmas trees and never decorated for Christmas. When she tried to give him back the gift, he told her to keep it. He said she never knew, maybe someday she'd find a use for it.

It wasn't until after he dropped her off at her condo that he found out she'd left the ornament on the seat. Even though he knew she left it there on purpose, he didn't give up. He left the ornament right where it was, so it was waiting for her when he picked her up the next morning. He pretended he didn't know she'd done it on purpose and told her he wanted to make sure

she didn't forget it this time. He smiled remembering how she'd reluctantly put the ornament in her bag without saying another word.

In the following years, he'd given her a different ornament every Christmas Day. Just like with his family, each ornament had a special meaning and a story attached to it. Even though every year she reminded him she didn't decorate for Christmas, she eventually stopped trying to give the ornaments back when he refused to take them. One year, he'd gotten her a beautiful glass globe ornament after she'd expanded her company globally. All the continents were etched on it. He remembered that time, he'd gotten a brief smile and she'd said it was beautiful. He liked to think that was a big win in his column because with Alexis he rarely got a win.

The following year, he'd gotten her a Santa Claus ornament because she'd been part of a children's gift drive for children in need. She always said she did the charity events to get good press coverage, but he believed she also did it because she had a Christmas heart somewhere deep down inside her.

He never had any idea what she did with all the ornaments. He figured she probably threw them away, knowing how she felt about Christmas. But that wasn't going to stop him. The ornaments were hers to do what she wanted with. In case there was even a glimmer of hope that they'd bring her some joy and help her find her Christmas spirit, he was going to keep up the ornament tradition.

He wasn't giving up on her, ever.

As he pulled up to his new house, he couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. This was the first house he'd ever been able to buy, and he'd done it right, making it worth the wait. It was his dream home.

Before going inside, he grabbed the giant Christmas cookie platter Alexis had given him. He knew Alexis hated to waste anything, but he still felt touched that she thought of him and his family. With Alexis, he had learned to appreciate the little things.

As he walked up the path to his front door, he smiled at the giant Christmas wreath that was on it. It was made up of fresh evergreen, pine cones, and sprigs of holly with bright red berries that were the same color as the wreath's huge red velvet bow.

As busy as he was, he made sure to make the time to put up Christmas decorations. Unlike Alexis, he loved decorating for the holidays because all the decorations always brought so many good memories. His family felt the same. The more decorations, the merrier. He'd also put them up for his neighbors to enjoy. All their houses were beautifully decorated and shimmering with Christmas lights. He wanted to be sure his new neighbors knew they could count on him to also bring the Christmas spirit.

He was pleased at how his Christmas lights had turned out. For this, he had hired a professional that one of his neighbors had recommended. The results were spectacular. His entire home, front to back, was outlined with white twinkling Christmas lights. In every window, there were smaller versions of the gorgeous wreath that was on his front door. The door was also framed with an evergreen garland that had dozens of little white twinkle lights woven through it.

All the holiday decorations and Christmas traditions always reminded him of what mattered most at Christmas—the family he loved, his friends, and the community where he always did whatever he could to give back and help others. He couldn't wait to start celebrating Christmas Eve with his family, knowing that they were waiting inside for him.

He was just reaching for the front door when he paused before opening it. He couldn't stop worrying about Alexis. He knew he wouldn't be able to enjoy Christmas Eve until he knew she was okay. He sent her a quick text. With Alexis he knew less was always more so all he texted was...

You okay?



Chapter 8



Justin was relieved when Alexis immediately texted him back, saying *I'm fine. Working.*

Since this sounded exactly like what Alexis would always say, he felt like he could finally relax and start focusing on celebrating Christmas with his family.

As soon as he opened his door, he could smell his mom's famous Christmas sugar cookies baking in the oven. He inhaled deeply, savoring the nostalgic scent that felt like a warm, familiar hug.

For as long as he could remember, his mom had never missed making her famous sugar cookies every Christmas Eve. They were always decorated with her special cream cheese frosting and glittering red and green sprinkles.

He smiled remembering the countless times he'd helped make the cookies. It wasn't that he had any baking skills, but he'd do whatever it took to get closer to his mom's legendary frosting. His idea of decorating the cookies meant piling the frosting on as high as he could. He'd always believed the cookie itself was just a vehicle to hold the frosting. Ditto for the sprinkles. His trip down memory lane continued when he heard one of his favorite Christmas songs playing...

“Deck the halls with boughs of holly
Fa la la la la, la la la la

'Tis the season to be jolly
Fa la la la la, la la la la..."

He happily hummed along to the song as he entered the living room. His smile grew when he saw his mom, Clara, and his older sister, Shauna, decorating the magnificent Christmas tree. They always got a real Douglas fir tree, loving the fresh, fragrant smell. But what made their Christmas trees even more special was another tradition. While they always had real trees, they never cut a tree down. All the Christmas trees they bought were planted in pots so they could be replanted after the holidays.

He loved his family's tradition of always decorating their Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. Then they would leave the tree up through January as a festive, fun way to start off the new year.

He held up the cookie platter with a huge smile. "Hey, everyone. I'm here. Sorry I'm late."

His mom stopped decorating the tree for a moment to smile back at him. "Better late than never. You got here just in time. We've been waiting for you to finish the tree."

Justin barely had a chance to give his mom a kiss on the cheek before his niece and nephew ran up to him. They were both eagerly eyeing the cookie tray he was holding. His nephew snatched up a snickerdoodle, while his niece went for an emerald-green macaroon.

Justin laughed. "Hey, hold on there. I'm going to drop this. And save me the gingerbread man," Justin said as he put the tray down on the table.

"Thanks, Uncle Justin!" the kids called out as they ran off.

Justin chuckled as he watched them go. He loved his sister's kids. They were smart, kind, funny, and always full of life. They kept him on his toes, that was for sure.

His sister, Shauna, came up and gave him a hug. "Come here, Little Brother. Finally, you're home. You're late."

"I was working."

Shauna gave him a knowing look. "Let me guess. You were driving Alexis around." It was a statement, not a question.

“Yeah,” Justin said as he took off his coat. “Because that’s my job.”

“Uh-huh,” Shauna said with a sly smile. “You just keep telling yourself that’s all it is.”

Shauna was only a few years older than he was. They’d been best friends their whole lives. She could read him like an open book. Unfortunately, that meant he could never hide anything from her, including now.

His mom came over to join them and gave Justin a curious look. “But you’ve just expanded your company by buying all those new cars. I thought you weren’t going to drive anyone around anymore. You’ve hired drivers to do that. You said you need to focus on managing your company and continuing to grow your business.”

Shauna jumped in. “That’s right, Mom. That’s exactly what he said. Justin’s not supposed to be driving anyone around anymore. But he’s still driving Alexis.”

Justin’s mom arched her eyebrow. “What does Alexis think about you adding one hundred new cars to your fleet and buying this beautiful new home? After all, she’s the one who encouraged you to start your own company in the first place.”

“She did encourage me to do that,” Justin agreed, while avoiding his sister’s knowing look.

Justin’s mom looked at her son with love and pride. “You’ve worked so hard, Justin. You’ve always put your family first. You’ve taken such good care of us, especially after your dad passed away. I’m so proud of you, Son.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Justin said as he gave her another hug. He was touched. His mom’s praise meant the world to him. After his dad had passed away, he’d stepped up as the man in the family. It hadn’t been easy. They’d struggled financially, but he always made sure his family came first. He’d been planning to go to college but had to give up that dream so he could work two jobs to try and help pay the bills and keep his family together. He never regretted being there for his family. They meant everything to him. He would do it again in a heartbeat. He was very thankful that all his hard work was finally paying off and that his family was in a good place.

“So answer Mom’s question,” Shauna said.

“What question?” Justin asked, pretending he didn’t know what his sister was talking about.

Shauna put her hands on her hips and stared back at him.

“I asked you if you told Alexis yet about expanding your company,” Justin’s mom chimed in. “Have you told her that you won’t be able to drive her around anymore?”

When Justin hesitated, Shauna pounced. “You haven’t told Alexis yet, have you?”

Trying to avoid his sister’s stare, Justin picked up a red satin ball ornament and walked over to the Christmas tree. “I work for Alexis,” he said as he searched for the perfect branch to hang the ornament. “She doesn’t care about my life. We keep things professional. She doesn’t talk about her private life, and I don’t talk about mine.”

Shauna laughed. “That’s because she doesn’t have a private life to talk about.”

“She was going to Bali this Christmas with her boyfriend,” Justin shot back.

Shauna’s arched her brows. “Seriously? I can’t believe it.”

“What part?” Justin asked. “That she was going to Bali or that she had a boyfriend?”

“Both,” Shauna said. “And you said *had* a boyfriend?”

Justin nodded. “She did. It didn’t work out.”

Shauna laughed. “Of course it didn’t. Because it’s Christmas. She breaks up with any guy she’s dating at Christmas.

Justin’s eyebrows shot up. “Did I tell you that?” He couldn’t believe it. He was always very careful not to reveal anything about his clients. He considered anything they told him private. But his sister had been hounding him for years about Alexis, especially about the fact that he always had to work on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, so he must have let some things slip.

Instead of answering his question, Shauna asked another one of her own. “So is Alexis going to Bali alone? I don’t believe it.”

Justin shook his head. “No. She canceled the trip. She’s working.”

Shauna laughed. “Now *that* I believe. So let me guess. You have to pick her up tomorrow morning and work on Christmas again. I thought with your new company, this would be the first year you didn’t have to work on Christmas and could be with us all day.”

Justin could see the disappointment in his sister’s eyes. As much as they always gave each other a hard time, there was real love between them. He hated disappointing her and his mom.

“You can’t drive Alexis around anymore. You’re not going to have the time,” Shauna said. “You’ve got to tell her.”

“I know. I will,” Justin said. He avoided eye contact with his sister.

“When?” Shauna asked, not letting up.

“Soon,” was all he said.

The truth was, he didn’t like thinking about it. But he knew his time was up. He’d put off the conversation for as long as he could.

“I just want to get through the holidays first,” he said to both his mom and sister, who were staring at him. “It’s always a tough time of year for her. She always says she’s ‘fine,’ but I know at Christmas, she’s not—whether she wants to admit that to herself or not.” Justin sighed because he was genuinely worried about her. “I’ve always been there for her. I’m not going to let her down now.”

His sister and mom exchanged a look.

“What?” he asked. “It’s Christmas. I know you want me to just abandon her. That’s not what this holiday is all about. We’re supposed to support and uplift each other.”

“We know,” Shauna said. “But it seems to us that you’re the one doing all the giving and she’s the one doing all the taking.”

His mom nodded. “We know you’re worried about Alexis, but we’re worried about you. You can only do so much, Son. We don’t want you burning yourself out.”

“I promise I won’t, Mom,” Justin said. “Trust me. I’ve worked too hard to get my business to where it is now.” But even as he said the words, he felt conflicted. He didn’t know what he was going to do about Alexis. He knew

he was one of the few people in her life that she trusted, and he never wanted to jeopardize that trust or their friendship.

“So you’re working tomorrow, driving Alexis?” his mom asked.

He nodded. “Yes. I told her I’d be there. She’s counting on me.”

Shauna sighed. “I just hate seeing you being taken advantage of.”

Justin gave his sister a sharp look. “Alexis has never taken advantage of me. I’ve worked for her all these years because I wanted to. I had a front row seat to watching her continue to build her empire. I might not have been able to go to business school as planned, but I’ve learned so much from Alexis, more than any university could have ever taught me. You’re right, she’s the one who encouraged me to start my own business. She gave me books to read and encouraged me to ask her questions. What she has taught me about running a successful business has been invaluable. I’m grateful to her. I’m the winner here. Trust me.”

Shauna still looked concerned. “I hope you don’t follow everything she does. You better give your employees Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off.”

“Don’t worry,” Justin said. “After all these years, I think it’s fair to say I’ve also learned what not to do from Alexis. Remember, some people—like Alexis—like working on Christmas, but if my employees work holidays, I’ll make sure they get paid extra. We all have to take care of each other.”

“That’s right,” his mom agreed with a bright smile. “And that’s why we’re taking care of you, Son, so you don’t work too hard. What your sister is trying to say is that we love you.”

Shauna nodded. “What Mom said.”

Justin laughed. “I love you guys, too.”

Shauna picked up three gingerbread Christmas cookies from the platter Justin had brought in. She handed one of the cookies to her mom and one to Justin.

“And once you tell Alexis you can’t be her driver anymore, you can finally ask her out.”

Justin almost dropped his cookie.

Shauna rushed on. “You won’t be able to use that excuse anymore that you can’t date her because she’s your boss. It’s time to make your next move, Little Brother. You’ve waited long enough.”

Justin laughed. “Okay. Okay. Message heard loud and clear.”

“But will you listen to it this time?” Shauna asked as she locked eyes with him.

He couldn’t remember the exact moment he’d started having feeling for Alexis. It had been a slow burn. The more he’d learned about her, and the more he was able to slowly peel back the layers of her prickly exterior and see her vulnerable heart, the more he’d found to fall in love with over the years.

Like he’d just told his sister, he’d always admired Alexis’s strength and dedication. He knew how hard she’d fought to be in the position she was in today. Her fearlessness was one of the things he admired most about her along with her unwavering dedication. He knew Alexis had given her whole life to her career. As her driver, he’d seen firsthand just how much she sacrificed on a daily basis. He also knew that even when she dated or did anything social, it was always somehow connected to her career.

He’d been with her through every breakup. It was a surprise, though, the first time he’d witnessed her end a relationship. He’d actually been driving her and her boyfriend when it happened. While he never meant to eavesdrop, it had been impossible for him not to hear their conversation. Alexis had been the one to end the relationship. She told her boyfriend it was her not him, and that she needed to stay focused on her career. She said she knew he deserved someone who would make him a priority and put him first and that she would never be able to do that. She then ended it, telling him that the breakup was the best for both of them, and she knew he’d find someone who could love him like he deserved to be loved.

He’d thought it was a beautiful speech. It turned out to be a speech he would ultimately end up hearing over and over again for every boyfriend she broke up with. But what ended up surprising him the most was that although Alexis always seemed relieved once each relationship was over, after the boyfriends were gone, she would seem... sad.

Of course, she always acted like everything was “fine,” but he could tell something was off. He didn’t think she had any regrets. From what he’d seen, all the relationships had been pretty superficial. He believed her sadness was deeper than that. It was almost as if she was mourning the loss of not having anyone to love in general, more than losing her latest boyfriend.

So even though he knew Alexis always insisted the breakup was the right thing to do, he could see it took a toll on her. In the rare moments when she wasn’t on her phone or laptop, he’d noticed her looking a little lost and melancholy.

Alexis had told him something once that he’d never forgotten. After one of her breakups, she’d said some people just weren’t meant for love. She said dating and relationships were a full-time job and that she already had a full-time job she loved—her company—so there wasn’t room for anything or anyone else.

Over the years, and the thousands of hours they’d spent driving together, he knew he was the one person she could let her guard down with. It had taken several years, but slowly, she’d started to trust him and confide in him about her frustrations with work and her relationships.

That was when he’d noticed that she never spent any time talking about the things that brought her joy outside of work. She usually only talked about things that were stressing her out. It didn’t take long for him to realize that it was because she didn’t have a life outside of work. Since she lived one stressful day after another, that was all she had to talk about.

In all the years they’d been together, she’d never asked for his advice. But he knew, even if she didn’t always say it, that she appreciated him listening to her.

Despite everything, through the good and bad, at the end of the day, the truth was she captivated him. When he saw those rare glimpses of vulnerability that showed what a loving heart she actually had buried beneath all her bravado, it gave him hope that someday he’d be able to tell her how he really felt about her. He knew if his sister had her way, he’d be telling Alexis immediately.

As if she knew his thoughts, his sister walked up to him and looked into his eyes. “So when are you going to ask Alexis out?”

To avoid his sister’s question, Justin took a big bite out of his cookie.

His mom stepped in front of him and surprised him by snatching his cookie away.

“Hey, my cookie,” he called out. “What are you doing?”

When he tried to get his cookie back from his mom, she held it out of his reach.

“How come you can fight for the cookie but not the girl?” his mom asked. “I raised you better than that. If you want something, you need to go after it.” She took a big bite of his cookie.

Justin gave his mom an incredulous look. “Seriously, Mom?”

She grinned back at him while his sister laughed.

Justin folded his arms in front of his chest and gave them both a pointed look. “You don’t need to worry. I have a plan.” He flashed his million-dollar smile.

His mom’s eyebrows arched with interest. “You’d better.” She picked up a beautiful angel Christmas tree-topper and handed it to him. “But right now, how about taking care of our angel here? She’s been waiting.”

Justin carefully took the angel from his mom. This angel tree-topper had been in his family for as long as he could remember. His father had given the angel to his mother on their first Christmas together. It had a flowing white gown that sparkled with silver sequins and was trimmed with a delicate lace. The angel’s porcelain face had a serene expression. She was smiling slightly, almost as if she knew a special secret.

Justin walked over to the Christmas tree and climbed the ladder so he could reach the top. He carefully placed her on the tree, making sure she was secure on her perch. “What do you think?” he asked. “Is she on straight? Do I need to move her a little to the right? The left?”

His mom and sister both smiled up at him.

“She’s perfect right there,” his mom said.

“She sure is,” his sister agreed.

When he slowly let go of the angel, she glowed in the light.

“And now it feels like Christmas,” Justin’s mom said as she put her arm around her daughter.

Justin nodded. He was grateful to his family for always adjusting their Christmas celebrations around his challenging work schedule. He loved that his mom always said the important thing wasn’t the exact time they got together, but that they got together whenever they could at Christmas. That was what mattered most.

As he looked over at his mom and sister, he smiled watching them happily add some candy canes to the tree. He knew they were right. The moment he’d been waiting for all these years with Alexis was now. But the truth was, he was scared—though not of getting rejected. That he could handle. He was scared of not having Alexis in his life anymore. He couldn’t imagine starting and ending his day without her.



Chapter 9



Alexis was sitting on her bed, feverishly working away on her laptop. She felt like the more work she got done, the more she needed to do.

She took a break just long enough to look up, stretch her arms above her head, and wiggle her cramped fingers. She blinked several times. Her eyes were burning and getting blurry. She knew it was time to call it a night. The last thing she wanted to do was make any mistakes that she'd have to go back and fix in the morning.

With a sigh, she shut her laptop and started gathering up all her papers and files from her office. She pushed them to the other side of her bed. She checked her cell phone one last time before putting it on the charger that was on her nightstand. She never slept more than five feet from her phone. She didn't want to miss anything in case someone tried to reach her overnight. Even though it was almost midnight on Christmas Eve, she was still disappointed that no one had gotten back to her, answering her texts or calls.

She picked up her black silk eye mask and rubbed her sore neck before turning off the light and getting under the covers. Her room was completely dark, except for a moonbeam streaming through her window. The last thing she thought about before she drifted off to sleep was how much she needed a good night's sleep because she had a full day of work planned for Christmas Day.



Alexis woke from a deep sleep when she heard the ringtone on her phone play the song “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

Groggy, she took off her mask. She grabbed her phone, thinking someone was calling her.

“How? What?” she asked, dazed. She couldn’t figure out why her phone was playing Christmas music. She never used any songs for ringtones, and she never used Christmas songs for anything. Period.

When she heard a phone ring again, playing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” even louder this time, she stared at her phone, confused. The song wasn’t coming from her phone. Her screen was black.

Alexis sat up, rubbing her eyes. Still half asleep, she looked around her room, trying to figure out what was going on.

That was when she saw a woman sitting at the end of her bed wearing a red wool coat. The woman was her mom. Her mom who died twenty years ago...

Alexis screamed and then went numb with shock. She fought to breathe. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She stared at her mom in disbelief.

Alexis’s mom, Lydia, was holding an old-fashioned flip phone that rang again, playing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” Frowning, she held out the phone to Alexis. “Alexis, honey, can you turn this thing off for me?” Lydia asked. “I can never figure out these phones. Why do they make them so complicated?”

Alexis, freaking out, squeezed her eyes shut. “No, no, no. I’m just seeing things...”

But when Alexis opened her eyes, her mom was still there, and she didn’t look a day over forty. She looked exactly like she did in the Christmas photo. Lydia was even wearing the same red coat as in the picture. Alexis couldn’t believe any of it.

Meanwhile, Lydia was hitting her phone against the bed. “Why won’t you turn off?”

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” kept playing louder and louder.

Lydia gave her daughter a pleading look. “Please, help me with this thing.”

Alexis stared back at her like she was nuts. She took two deep breaths and willed herself to stay calm and get a grip. *Obviously, I'm having a nightmare*, she told herself. That was it. She just needed to wake up. Now. She patted her cheeks with both hands, hoping to snap out of it.

When her mom took off her red coat and tossed it on the bed, Alexis tentatively touched the coat. She jerked back her hand like she'd been burned. The coat was real. A chill ricocheted down her spine.

"No. No. No!" Alexis exclaimed. Panicking, she almost fell out of bed. She ran into the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind her. Breathing hard, she leaned against the door to block out whatever was happening in her bedroom. She felt shocked and numb at the same time. "You need to get ahold of yourself," she told herself. She was a grown woman. She needed to start acting like one instead of behaving like a frightened child who thought there was a monster under her bed. Or, in this case, their mom sitting on the bed.

Alexis stood up straighter, lifted her head high. She was determined to get a grip. "This is just another hallucination," she said. She hated hearing her voice shake. "It was probably just bad chicken in the Chinese food. That's all. That's it. Everything is fine. I'm fine..."

Holding her breath, she slowly turned around and opened the door. She peeked out, praying her hallucination would be gone.

"No!" she screamed when she saw her mom was still sitting on her bed, playing with her phone. She shut the door quickly and locked it. Overwhelmed, she leaned her forehead against the door.

"Oh, I love this perfume," a woman's voice said behind her.

Alexis whipped around and was stunned to see her mom was now in the bathroom with her. "How did you get in here?!"

Lydia spritzed some perfume on her neck and inhaled the scent with a sigh, "Ah, yes."

Freaking out, Alexis fought to open the bathroom door to escape, but the door wouldn't budge. "Come on! Open up!" Alexis pleaded.

"You locked it," Lydia said nonchalantly before spraying more perfume on her wrist and rubbing her two wrists together. Lydia then picked up some of

Alexis's makeup and started touching up her appearance in the mirror.

Alexis mentally shook herself. "This is all in my imagination. Justin's right. I've been working too hard."

Lydia stopped to study her daughter. "You know, you do look tired. I know just what you need..."

When Lydia held up some face powder and headed for Alexis, she immediately tried to back up. But she was trapped by the door. Alexis squeezed her eyes shut as Lydia got closer. She could smell the perfume Lydia had put on. It was getting stronger and stronger.

"This is not real. You are not real..." Alexis whispered to herself.

Lydia playfully tapped Alexis with the powder puff, sending powder flying everywhere.

Alexis's eyes flew open.

Lydia studied her daughter and frowned.

"No, this color is all wrong for you and me. What else do you have?" Lydia asked as she went back to the counter and started rummaging through Alexis's makeup drawers.

Alexis shook her head adamantly. "You are *not* my mom. My mom and dad died *twenty* years ago."

Lydia smiled back at her. "Okay, go ahead. Ask me anything."

Alexis gave her an incredulous look.

"Come on," Lydia said as she stared back at her daughter. "I'm waiting. Ask me anything you like."

"No," Alexis shot back at her. "I'm not going to play your games. What I'm going to do is call the police unless you tell me who you are and how you got in here."

Lydia laughed as she checked out several of Alexis's lipsticks. "Really? The police? I see you haven't lost your sense of drama. Okay, look—I'll start. Your favorite food is Mexican."

Alexis rolled her eyes. "Everyone loves Mexican."

Lydia shrugged. "True."

Alexis's eyes narrowed. "Okay, fine. What was my first pet?" She crossed her arms in front of her chest, waiting for an answer.

Lydia wrinkled her nose. “That smelly little rabbit. Fifi.”

Alexis inhaled sharply. “Fluffy.”

“Whatever,” Lydia laughed.

“Who was my first kiss?” Alexis shot back at her.

“Uh...” Lydia grimaced. “That boy with those unfortunate braces...
Ralphie...”

Alexis shuddered, remembering. “Ronald. He always got food—”

“—stuck in his braces,” they said in unison.

Alexis’s eyes widened with surprise as she tried to process what was happening.

“That’s right, Ronald,” Lydia agreed. “And your favorite ice cream is Rocky Road. You hate pizza and hamburgers, but you love, like I said, Mexican, especially chicken enchiladas with—”

“—the mole sauce,” they said together.

Lydia smiled back at her. “That’s right.”

Alexis clutched her heart as her disbelief turned to wonder. Her eyes welled up with tears as a flood of emotion washed over her. “Mom?” she whispered. “Is it really you?” She held her breath.

Lydia nodded. “In the flesh... sort of.”

Overwhelmed with love, Alexis rushed into her mom’s open arms. They were both laughing and crying at the same time as they hugged each other like they never wanted to let go.

Alexis couldn’t believe this was really happening. For once, she didn’t want to overthink it and try to figure everything out. She wanted to savor this moment for as long as she could. When her heart ached, Alexis wondered if it was because, after all these years, her frozen heart could finally feel again. She was suddenly overcome with a flood of emotions she’d buried a long time ago.

When Lydia gently pulled away, Alexis looked into her eyes. “Mom, how is this possible?”

Lydia took her hand and silently led her back into the bedroom. They sat down next to each other on the bed. The chandelier was on and the lighting

was soft. There was a beautiful golden glow throughout the room as mother and daughter were reunited.

Alexis shook her head in wonder as she fought back grateful tears. “If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake up. I’ve missed you so much, Mom.”

Lydia looked into her daughter’s eyes and gently wiped a tear from Alexis’s cheek. “I’ve missed you more. Every day.”

Alexis reached out and softly touched her mom’s face. “It really is you...” Her voice wasn’t much more than a whisper. She still couldn’t believe it.

Lydia took her daughter’s hand. “It really is.”

Alexis, still in awe, studied her mom’s face. “And you look exactly like I remember. You don’t look twenty years older. You haven’t aged at all.”

Lydia smiled a radiant smile. “I know. That’s one of the perks. Amazing, right?”

They shared a laugh.

Lydia put her hand underneath Alexis’s chin and tilted her face up so she could get an even better look at her. “And you, my daughter, are just as beautiful as I always knew you would be.”

Overcome with emotion, Alexis hugged her mom again. She’d missed her mom and dad beyond comprehension. After they had both died so suddenly in the car accident, she had to completely shut down emotionally to survive the pain.

She’d spent several weeks in a daze, devastated and alone, unable to talk to anyone. When anyone tried to reach out and comfort her, she had pushed them away. She’d known they wouldn’t be able to understand her pain. She hadn’t wanted to hear anyone’s condolences because they made everything too real. To get through it, in survival mode, she’d flipped a switch, turning off her emotions. That choice had catapulted her into a darkness she sometimes feared she’d never escape from. At the time, she hadn’t cared if she escaped or not.

She hadn’t cared about anything.

She’d been on automatic pilot, in fight-or-flight mode, twenty-four seven. Since she didn’t have any energy or strength to fight, she’d run from

everything and everyone. At the time, she'd felt like it was the only thing she could do.

Her life had continued to spiral when it turned out her parents' estate was bankrupt due to some risky investments and the volatile stock market. To pay off her parents' debt, she'd been forced to sell their beloved home and everything in it. Since her parents had also been paying her hefty Ivy League tuition to attend Columbia University, once there was no money left she'd been forced to drop out of the prestigious writing program she'd been accepted into and loved.

Finding herself broke, all alone, and with an uncertain future had been terrifying. That was when she'd decided to drastically change her career course from majoring in writing to majoring in finance. She didn't want to risk being a starving artist as a writer. She wanted a sure thing. A job that would bring security. A job where success would mean she'd never have to worry about money again.

She'd been inspired by a friend a few years older than her, who had just graduated with a master's in business administration. He had his first job lined up at a top financial firm even before he'd graduated, making four times more than the people she knew who graduated with writing degrees.

Going forward, she didn't care about following her passion anymore. After that, all she'd wanted to do was follow the money. She'd learned after her parents died that money was power. Without money, you didn't have a chance. You didn't have anything. You were nothing. So her new motto became, "Show me the money."

From that day forward, Alexis had kept her eye on the prize. She'd taken two bartending jobs because the tips were good, and after a year of saving up, she enrolled in a local community college and started taking every business class she could. When it turned out she had a knack for numbers, that had been just icing on the cake. While she was excelling in community college, she applied for every student loan and grant she could find.

Even while in college, with a full slate of classes, she had to continue bartending to make ends meet. Looking back, she still couldn't believe she'd managed to juggle everything. But the one thing she had discovered was that

she was a lot stronger than she'd ever known. Where there was a will, she found a way. No matter what happened, she kept a positive attitude, and her ambition fueled her forward.

Even before she'd graduated with an MBA, she was offered a position with one of the top financial firms in the city. From the moment she started working, she set her new goals even higher. She didn't want to just work in finance. She wanted to own her own company and to dominate the industry. From that moment on, every single decision she made helped her get where she was today. When her mom touched her arm, she was brought back to reality.

"Are you okay?" Lydia asked.

Alexis nodded and smiled. "I'm better than okay. I'm great—because you're here."

"Good," Lydia said. She was suddenly all business. "Because we really need to get going. We don't have a lot of time."

Confused, Alexis stared back at her mom. "What do you mean? Go where? You just got here."

Lydia took a deep breath. "And I'm here because you're in trouble."

Alexis raised her eyebrows. "What are you talking about? I'm fine."

Lydia sighed. "The fact that you think you're okay is the problem."

Alexis laughed a little. "What do you mean?"

Lydia looked into her daughter's eyes. "When your dad and I left you twenty years ago, it broke our hearts to see you in so much pain. But we raised you to be strong."

Alexis's smile faded and her body stiffened. She stared down at the bed. She didn't want to talk about twenty years ago. She couldn't—it hurt too much. "Mom, please..."

But Lydia continued. "We hoped, with time, you would heal and let love back into your life. But every Christmas, you're alone."

Alexis looked up at her mom. "I have a great life, Mom. Look around you. I'm successful. I have all this." Alexis picked up a pillow and ran her hand over it. "These are Egyptian cotton. The best of the best." Smiling, she laid her face against the pillow.

“Um, yes, very nice, but who are you sharing them with?” Lydia asked as she looked into her daughter’s eyes.

Alexis’s smile faded.

“Where is the love?” Lydia asked. “The only people you have left in your life are your employees. You’re ruining their Christmas. You’re taking away their family vacations. And you’ve canceled bonuses...”

Alexis immediately sat up straighter. “No. No. Wait. Hold on, Mom. You need to get the story straight. I took away their Christmas bonuses because they didn’t meet their goals. That is not my fault.”

Lydia gave Alexis a sympathetic look. “I know you don’t see it. That’s why I’m here. To show you. But first, you need to get changed.” Lydia looked Alexis up and down. “You can’t wear pajamas. Go look in your closet. I left a little something in there for you.”

“Seriously?” Alexis asked in awe. “You did?”

Lydia nodded and smiled brightly. “Of course. It’s Christmastime. My girl needs to sparkle.”

Alexis, part excited, part nervous, stood up. “So, you want me to go in the closet. You’re going to be here when I get back, right?”

“Of course,” Lydia said. “I’ll be waiting for you in the living room. But now hurry. Go. I can’t wait to see this dress on you.”

When Alexis tentatively entered into her impressive walk-in closet that was the size of most people’s bedrooms, she gasped when she saw the beautiful, gold, shimmering cocktail dress her mom had left for her. Speechless, she walked over to the dress, hardly believing it was real. It was one of the most gorgeous dresses she’d ever seen. She reverently held the dress to her as she stared at her reflection in a wall of mirrors. She felt like Cinderella going to the ball.

* * *

Taking her mom’s words to heart, Alexis didn’t waste any time changing.

A few minutes later, she held her breath, praying her mom would be there when she walked into the living room wearing the golden, glittering creation.

She let out a sigh of relief when she saw her mom sitting on the couch, holding the Christmas picture that had shown up at her office. Alexis heard her mom say softly to the photograph, “This better work.”

Lydia quickly put the picture down as soon as she saw Alexis. Her face lit up with joy.

Alexis held her arms out and looked down at her dazzling dress. “Okay, Mom, are you happy now?”

When Lydia stood up and circled her, not missing one detail of the dress, she was smiling brightly. “Alexis, you look so beautiful. That dress is perfect on you. Just like I knew it would be. Now you sparkle like you were meant to.”

“And it’s gold,” Alexis said.

“Your favorite color,” Lydia replied. “Blue used to be your favorite, but you changed...” her voice trailed off.

Alexis nodded. “After you and Dad left, I changed almost everything. I had to.”

Their eyes met. Lydia nodded. “Are you ready?”

Alexis gave her a questioning look. “I don’t know how to answer that, because I don’t know what we’re doing.”

Lydia held out both hands for Alexis to take. “Trust me.”

Alexis inhaled deeply. She had no idea what was going on, but this was her mom. She’d always trusted her parents more than anyone else in the world. The only thing she feared more than the unknown was that her mom would disappear again. She knew she couldn’t bear to lose her mom a second time.

So she looked into her mom’s eyes, took a deep breath, and held out both her hands.

When their hands touched, a flash of white light flooded the room...



Chapter 10



Seconds later, Alexis found herself standing with her mom in the living room of a modest, cozy apartment where every inch of available space was filled with Christmas decorations. Christmas music was softly playing in the background.

“What’s happening? Where are we?” Alexis asked. As she looked around, her eyes widened, and she blinked several times trying to take it all in. She knew exactly where they were. She whipped around to face her mom. “Wait. No. Mom, you didn’t. This looks just like...”

“Your old college apartment in Washington Heights,” Lydia finished for her. “I did. Welcome to your Christmas past.”

Alexis gave her an incredulous look. “Are you *Christmas Caroling* me?!”

Lydia laughed a little.

But Alexis wasn’t laughing. She locked eyes with her mom. “Mom, seriously. I know that’s your favorite book...”

“And if you’d ever read it, we wouldn’t be here now,” Lydia said.

“I can’t believe this,” Alexis said. She walked over to a light switch and flipped it on. When nothing happened, she shook her head in amazement. “This really is my apartment because this light never worked...” But the rest of what she was going to say was cut off when she heard a man’s voice. Her heart started racing. She recognized the voice instantly. When she caught a glimpse of the man going into the kitchen, he took her breath away. “Is that...?”

Lydia nodded. “Steve. Your old fiancé.”

Alexis froze as a tsunami of guilt hit her. She shook her head adamantly. “I don’t want to see him. I don’t want to do this. I want to go home. We need to go home. Now.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Lydia said as she took Alexis’s hand and took her into the kitchen.

As they entered the kitchen, it wasn’t her old fiancé, Steve, who she couldn’t take her eyes off of. It was seeing a younger version of herself that had her feeling weak in the knees. She grabbed the counter to steady herself as she watched Young Alexis, who was just twenty years old, take an impressive turkey out of the oven. She was blown away by how beautiful, carefree, and happy Young Alexis looked. She was wearing a cute, simple cotton dress with a frilly apron over it and was happily humming, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” as she basted the turkey.

Alexis struggled to process everything she was seeing. She’d forgotten she’d ever made a turkey. Now she remembered this had been the one and only time she had made an entire Christmas dinner. She had done it to try and impress her parents. After her parents died, she’d never made another holiday meal or celebrated Christmas again.

Still reeling, Alexis slowly walked up to the younger version of herself. She leaned in closer, so she was just inches from Young Alexis. Young Alexis didn’t blink as she kept concentrating on basting the turkey while she continued humming “We Wish You A Merry Christmas.”

“She can’t see me?” Alexis asked her mom.

“Or hear you,” Lydia said. “We’re only here to watch and learn.”

“But what about...” Alexis’s voice trailed off, and she forgot everything she was going to say when she watched Steve walk up to Alexis and give her a loving kiss on the cheek. When Young Alexis smiled up at him, you could see how much she adored him.

Alexis’s own heart beat faster as she watched Steve. How could she have forgotten—or, more accurately, blocked out—how handsome he was? He’d always had a smile that could melt any girl’s heart. It had certainly done the trick and melted hers.

The memory of how they met came rushing back to her. It had been her freshman year of college. She had been so proud and excited to get accepted into her dream school, Columbia University. When she'd worried at first about the astronomical tuition, her parents had assured her this was what they had saved for. They supported her one hundred percent. They also didn't want her to worry about working her freshman year, so she could concentrate fully on her studies. Her parents had paid for everything. She promised that she'd pay them back someday, but they told her not to worry about it. They said the best way to pay them back would be to work hard and do well in school.

So when she started struggling in her freshman math class and her professor had suggested a tutor, she was on board. She was determined to get straight A's because she had her eye on a very competitive MBA program. So if that meant getting a tutor, her only question was *how fast could she find someone?*

Within forty-eight hours, she was matched up with Steve. He was a year ahead of her, majoring in economics and accounting. He was the top student in his class, tutoring on the side to help pay his tuition. Before she knew it, they were meeting almost every night. They hit it off instantly.

She smiled thinking about how Steve had been the perfect tutor. He was smart but had a way of not making you feel inadequate when you didn't understand something. He was patient, encouraging, and kind. With his help, her math scores started to improve.

And Steve didn't just help her with her math class. Because she was a freshman, he looked over her entire schedule and gave her advice on the best courses she could take. He told her what professors he liked best and warned her about the ones she should avoid. His guidance was invaluable. He quickly became her trusted mentor and friend. It wasn't until the semester was over and she got her coveted "A" in math that Steve asked her out and they took their friendship to the next level.

Once they started dating, they never looked back. They complemented each other perfectly. They both believed in living each day to the fullest and that the most important time was the time you spent with the people you loved

most. While she was generally more serious by nature, Steve always made sure to help her relax, have fun, and enjoy life. Their relationship was filled with laughter and love. While they did fight, as all couples do, Steve was a great communicator. They always found a way to solve their problems together. When she was with Steve, he always made sure she knew how much he loved her. She felt like the luckiest girl in the world. Her life with Steve always felt like one blessing after another.

She could still remember the day they decided to move in together. They'd already talked about getting married after she graduated, and it just made sense to live together and save money since they were always together anyway. She planned to move into his apartment because it was bigger, but then Steve had another idea. He thought that since they were starting a new chapter of their lives together, they should pick out a new place for a fresh start.

And that was exactly what they did.

Alexis looked around the kitchen and smiled, remembering how much they loved their small but cozy apartment. Every weekend, they went thrift store shopping to find cheap furniture and anything else they needed. Steve called it "treasure hunting." She loved how he had a way of making even the most mundane things feel like an adventure. When they were thrifting, if something was a little banged up, he never minded. He always looked at it as an "opportunity." He liked fixing things up and giving them new life and purpose. The home they created together was nothing fancy, but it was put together with love.

Alexis held her breath as she watched Steve put his arms around Young Alexis's waist and nuzzle her neck. She shut her eyes for a moment, remembering how Steve's arms had felt around her. With Steve, she had always felt safe, happy, and loved. Alexis shivered as a pang of longing took hold of her heart. The love she'd felt for Steve had been so strong. Feeling it again now was a jolt to her senses. It was a feeling she had buried and forced herself to forget a long time ago.

When she heard Steve's deep, rich voice again, she opened her eyes and watched her past play out right in front of her.

“Babe, the turkey looks great,” Steve said, impressed. “For your first turkey, this is amazing.”

Young Alexis’s hopeful smile lit up the room. “It looks good, right? It’s my mom’s recipe.”

“Ummm,” Steve said as he kissed her neck.

Young Alexis smiled at Steve but then went back to concentrating on the turkey. “I hope the turkey tastes good, because she can be so picky.”

Alexis saw her mom give her a look.

“What?” Alexis asked. “You know it’s true.”

“I prefer to call it *particular*,” Lydia said with a self-satisfied smile.

They both went back to watching Steve and Young Alexis.

Alexis remembered how nervous she had been that Christmas Eve. She’d wanted everything to be perfect. As she watched Steve look into Young Alexis’s eyes, she also remembered how great he had been at being so encouraging and helping her to relax.

“Don’t worry about your mom. She’ll love it,” Steve told Young Alexis. “The turkey looks fine. But I do think there’s a problem with this pie here.” He picked up a delicious-looking pumpkin pie.

Young Alexis panicked. “Oh no. What’s wrong with the pie? It’s my mom’s favorite.”

“I think I’m going to have to taste test it just to be sure it’s okay,” Steve said with a grin as he picked up a fork.

Young Alexis laughed as she tried to get the pie away from him. “No. Stop. Don’t you dare touch that pie.”

Steve playfully held the pie out of Young Alexis’s reach. They were both laughing.

Lydia turned to Alexis. “Can you remember being that much in love?”

As Alexis continued to stare at the couple, her heart hurt. She had tried so hard over the years to forget about this life she’d had with Steve. She never allowed herself to think about it. But now that her mom was making her relive her past, she couldn’t escape any of it, and that terrified her.

Alexis turned to her mom. “I’ve seen enough. We need to go.”



Chapter 11



Even though Alexis desperately wanted to go, her mom merely turned her back around so she had to continue watching.

Alexis saw Young Alexis finally get the pie from Steve. “Steve, you need to get out of the kitchen. Go. Come on. You’re distracting me. I need to get ready. Can you go get the candles?”

Steve pouted playfully. “But I really wanted pie.”

“You can have as much pie as you want later,” Alexis said and kissed him quickly. “But right now, I could use your help with the candles. I bought a bunch of new ones just for tonight. I need them all lit before my parents get here.”

For an answer, Steve kissed her again. “If you insist.”

Alexis smiled up at him. “I do,” she said. “Thank you.”

Steve was smiling and humming the new Christmas song that was playing, “Silent Night,” as he left the kitchen.

When Steve passed her, Alexis felt a crushing guilt. “Steve, I’m so sorry...”

He breezed right by.

“Remember, they can’t hear you,” Lydia reminded her gently as she followed Steve into the dining room.

Alexis reluctantly joined them. She was impressed by how beautifully decorated the dining room table was for the Christmas Eve dinner. There was a pretty red table runner, sparkling crystal glasses, and gleaming white china plates.

Lydia picked up the snow-white plate and traced her finger around the fine gold line that circled it. "I remember these plates."

Alexis nodded. "You gave me all the china when I moved in with Steve as our housewarming gift."

"I remember," Lydia said as she smiled and put the plate back on the table. "They were your grandmother's. The tradition was whenever a new member of the family got married, they would be passed on to the next generation to enjoy."

"And even though I wasn't married yet, you wanted me to have them," Alexis said with a grateful smile. "It meant a lot to me. I loved them so much."

Lydia nodded. "I remember thinking you might not even want them. Your generation doesn't exactly entertain with china."

Alexis arched an eyebrow. "Says who?" she asked, challenging her mom. "Some of us have some class."

"Really?" Lydia asked. "Because I didn't see the china at your place."

Alexis's smile instantly faded. "They're not there. I don't use them."

"Why not?" Lydia asked.

"Because they're in storage somewhere with everything else," Alexis responded. "After you and Dad were gone, I had to sell almost everything with the house..."

"To pay off our debt," Lydia said sadly. "We felt so horrible about that."

"It wasn't your fault. You couldn't have known the stock market was going to crash," Alexis said. "Honestly, I was okay with selling almost everything or giving it away to charity. It was too hard to have around. But I did keep our photos and some personal mementos, even though I haven't seen any of it in years."

"And you kept Grandma's china," Lydia said.

"Yes, I did," Alexis replied. "Even though the woman running the estate sale had her eye on it. She said it was very valuable and I could have made a lot of money if I'd sold it."

Lydia nodded and smiled. "But you kept it."

“I kept it,” Alexis said, then she tilted her head as she looked at her mom. “But didn’t you already know that? I mean, it seems like you know everything...”

Lydia nodded. “I knew. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

Alexis and her mom continued watching as Steve lit all the white candles that were on the dining room table and around the room. The room started filling up with the scent from the candles—cinnamon and cloves.

Alexis closed her eyes for a moment. “I remember that smell.”

“You loved your cinnamon candles,” Lydia said.

“I sure did,” Alexis agreed.

“But you haven’t bought any since this night,” Lydia said. It was a statement, not a question.

Alexis nodded and then her attention turned back to Young Alexis who entered the dining room biting her lower lip, looking nervous. She was carrying a small crystal bowl that was filled with a bright red cranberry sauce.

“I remember that bowl,” Alexis said softly.

“Also your grandmother’s,” Lydia said. “Also something you kept.”

They both watched as Young Alexis set the bowl on the dining room table and adjusted the red velvet table runner that had a pretty, emerald-green trim. Young Alexis moved one of the water glasses a little to the right. Then she moved the same glass to the left before ultimately deciding to put it back where she’d found it in the first place.

“You were so nervous,” her mom said.

Alexis took a deep breath and nodded. She felt the same way right now.

Young Alexis picked up a crisp white napkin and refolded it before setting it back on the plate. Then she started fussing with the centerpiece of candles that was surrounded by fresh holly and fir sprigs. She stood back and smoothed her hair before running her shaking hands down her apron.

When Alexis looked down at her own hands, they were also shaking.

Lydia walked over to the table centerpiece and carefully picked up a holly branch. It was gleaming green with bright crimson berries. “I love fresh holly.”

“I know,” Alexis said solemnly. “That was why I bought it.”

They both turned their attention back to the couple.

Steve walked over to Young Alexis, smiling. “Babe, you can relax. Everything looks great.”

Young Alexis took a deep breath as she surveyed the table. “I know, but I just want everything to be—”

“—perfect,” Alexis and Young Alexis said together at the exact same time.

Steve took Young Alexis’s hands and looked lovingly into her eyes. “It is perfect. You’re perfect. Your parents are going to love it. It’s all great.”

“Are you sure?” Young Alexis asked, looking anxious.

Steve kissed her quickly. “Absolutely sure. Now come here.” He led her over to the wonderful Christmas tree that was in the living room.

The tree was twinkling with red and green lights. There was also a glistening, silver garland woven in and out of the branches. There was an assortment of ornaments from vintage to modern. This was no fancy, designer Christmas tree. This tree was a well-loved, eclectic mix of all kinds of different styles. There were traditional round glass ball ornaments along with silver bells and gold stars. There were also candy canes and a string of popcorn and cranberries that circled the tree.

Seeing the tree brought back so many memories for Alexis. She remembered how she’d come together with Steve to blend their different Christmas traditions. When they both had different ideas on how to decorate the tree, they’d tried to compromise and pick and choose their favorite traditions. But ultimately, when it proved too hard for them to give anything up, they decided not to limit their creativity. They put everything they loved on their special tree.

It hadn’t mattered if it all didn’t go together. What mattered was that they both honored what they loved most about their Christmas decorations and bringing their lives together.

While Alexis was all about traditional touches like candy canes, garlands of popcorn and cranberries, and adding some of her family-favorite ornaments of wooden nutcrackers and cute rocking horses, Steve and his family were sports fanatics. Since they always displayed ornaments of their favorite sports

teams, Steve continued his family's tradition by adding fun sports memorabilia to their tree.

As she watched Steve pick up a pretty present from underneath the tree, she smiled when she spotted one of his favorite New York Giants ornaments proudly hanging front and center on the tree.

"I got you a special little Christmas Eve gift," Steve said to Young Alexis as he smiled brightly and handed her the present.

"We're not supposed to be opening gifts yet," Young Alexis said with a laugh, but she eagerly took off the red satin bow and tore off the silver wrapping paper to reveal a small red velvet box. When she opened the box, her smile grew. She held up a gorgeous crystal angel ornament that was hanging from a gold ribbon.

Watching, Alexis put her hand over her heart as she fought back tears.

"Oh, it's a Christmas angel," Young Alexis exclaimed, excited. "She's so sweet. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Steve said as he smiled back at her. "Where do you want to put her?"

Young Alexis walked closer to the Christmas tree. "Ah, let's see. How about right there?" She pointed at a spot high up that was right next to the New York Giants ornament in the center of the tree.

"Great choice," Steve said with a wide grin.

Young Alexis handed him the angel. "Here you go. Can you reach?"

"Absolutely." Steve smiled back at her. After hanging the angel from the branch, he made sure to adjust one of the lights just right so it illuminated the angel, making it look like it was glowing. "An angel always needs her light," he said.

Alexis couldn't help but smile. She'd always thought Steve had a way with words. His "An angel always needs her light" expression was such a beautiful thing to say.

Steve stood back and put his arm around Young Alexis as they admired the tree together.

"I love it," Young Alexis said as she looked up at Steve. "And I love you."

“I love you, too,” Steve said as he pulled her closer for a kiss. This time, the kiss wasn’t quick. It was a slow, lingering kiss that was filled with longing.

Alexis blushed a little and turned away to face her mom.

“Steve was such a great guy,” Lydia said. “You two were really good together.”

Alexis’s eyes grew wide when she saw the Christmas picture with her parents on the fireplace mantel. It was the same one that had shown up at her office. She walked over and picked it up.

“This is us,” Alexis said as she lightly touched the picture of her mom wearing the red coat.

Lydia nodded as she joined Alexis. She admired the photograph. “I always loved that picture. It’s the last one we took together.”

A flash of understanding hit Alexis. She looked at her mom. “You sent the picture to my office.”

Lydia smiled back at her. She took her daughter’s arm and turned their attention back to watching Young Alexis and Steve.

The young couple had just ended their kiss and were still in each other’s arms, gazing into each other’s eyes.

“This is going to be the best surprise engagement party ever,” Steve said.

Young Alexis beamed back at him. She held up her hand and admired the way her modest diamond engagement ring caught the light and sparkled. It had a simple gold band with one small diamond. “But what time is it?” Young Alexis asked. “My parents should be here by now. We’re going to be late for church.”

When the house phone rang, Young Alexis blew Steve a kiss before hurrying to answer it.

Alexis froze. This was the moment she’d been dreading. She suddenly felt sick to her stomach. She inhaled sharply as she watched Young Alexis head for the phone. “Don’t answer it!” she yelled out to Young Alexis as a chill ran down her spine. “Don’t answer it...”

But Young Alexis, of course, couldn’t hear her and happily answered the phone with a smile that lit up the room. “Hello. Merry Christmas! This is Alexis Taylor.”

Watching, Alexis felt the room spin. “No...” She desperately turned to her mom. But Lydia didn’t take her eyes off Young Alexis. In anguish, Alexis grabbed her mom’s hand. “Mom, I can’t do this. I can’t do this again...” She struggled to breathe. “I have to go...”

Lydia didn’t move. Instead, she pointed for her to keep watching Young Alexis.

Filled with dread, Alexis watched the younger version of herself, wishing there was something, anything, she could do to protect her from what she knew was about to happen next.

She wouldn’t wish this moment on her worst enemy. She had spent her entire adult life trying to forget this phone call, and now it was playing out in front of her all over again. It was her worst nightmare.

As Young Alexis listened on the phone her expression changed suddenly. She looked shocked. “Okay, okay,” she said in a shaky voice. She looked over to Steve. “We gotta go. We gotta go *now*.” She fumbled to hang up the phone. She gave up and let the phone dangle on the cord. She was already rushing off. “My parents. We gotta go...”

Alexis felt her heart shatter all over again.



Chapter 12



Before she knew what had happened, Alexis was with her mom, standing outside a hospital. She was numb as they both watched Steve’s car race up to the entrance.

Frantic, Young Alexis jumped out of the car. Her tearstained face looked terrified.

“Go! Hurry. I’ll park the car,” Steve said.

“Okay,” Young Alexis answered in a shaky voice as she ran into the hospital.

Alexis watched as Young Alexis accidentally ran into a guy, spilling the contents of her purse all over the floor.

“Oh no,” Young Alexis exclaimed.

“Here, let me help you,” the guy said as he scrambled to help her pick up her things.

Alexis did a double take when she saw that the guy Young Alexis had run into was Justin, her driver. She shook her head in disbelief. “Justin?”

Justin was casually dressed, wearing jeans and a backward baseball hat. He looked twenty years younger, but Alexis had no doubt it was him. She would recognize his silky-smooth voice anywhere. She didn’t even know how to begin to process that on the most devastating night of her life, Justin had been at the same hospital and that when she ran into him, he’d helped her.

Stunned, Alexis watched Young Justin scoop everything off the floor and put it back into Young Alexis’s purse.

“Thank you,” Young Alexis said breathlessly, never really looking at Justin’s face, before she took off running again down the hospital hallway.

Young Justin, Alexis, and her mom watched her go...

* * *

Standing inside the hospital chapel, the only thing Alexis wanted to do was escape.

The lights were low in the small, serene space. There were several rows of candles next to the altar that was framed by white poinsettias.

The only person inside the chapel was Young Alexis. She was sitting alone in the front row of pews, hunched over, rocking back and forth, hands clenched together, whispering her prayers.

As Alexis watched the heartbreaking scene, a tear slid down her cheek. She wished she could run up to the younger version of herself and wrap her arms around her to comfort her and tell her it was going to be all right.

But she couldn’t do that. She couldn’t do anything. And she knew telling Young Alexis everything was going to be all right would have been a lie, because nothing was ever going to be all right again.

When she glanced at her mom, Lydia also had tears in her eyes.

The breath caught in Alexis’s throat when the doctor entered. As he walked over to Young Alexis, she felt her heart race with dread. She shivered as she reached out for her mom’s hand. “Mom, please, I can’t,” Alexis whispered in a shaky voice as she gazed up at her.

But Lydia kept looking straight ahead, watching...

The doctor bent down to talk to Young Alexis. “Alexis, I’m Dr. Arnold.”

As Young Alexis looked at him, tears streamed down her face. She was shaking.

Alexis felt faint. Seeing Young Alexis so afraid and filled with pain brought all the same feelings rushing back to her.

They mirrored each other in their grief.

As Alexis watched the doctor start talking, she went numb and blocked out his voice. She was too heartbroken to hear what the doctor was saying. Those words had destroyed her the first time. She couldn’t hear them again. The

room swayed. Everything was a blur. *Am I going to pass out?* she wondered. Then, instead of being worried she might, she actually hoped she would. She would do anything not to have to relive this devastating night all over again. She jumped when her mom put her hand on her shoulder. It jarred her back to the moment. She saw the doctor walk away as Steve ran into the chapel.

Young Alexis, devastated, was standing up sobbing when Steve, who was also crying, put his arms around her and hugged her tight.

“Alexis, I’m so sorry,” Steve said, his voice was filled with anguish. “It’s going to be okay...”

Young Alexis, spiraling, pulled away from him. Overcome with grief, she looked at Steve like he didn’t understand anything.

“It’s never going to be okay again,” she said in a hoarse voice that cracked with pain. “Never!” Inconsolable, she ran out of the chapel right past Alexis and Lydia.

* * *

Alexis hit her breaking point. She couldn’t handle another moment. Desperate to escape all the pain and heartache she was feeling, she ran out of the chapel and kept running as fast as she could.

She heard her mom call out for her, but she didn’t care. She couldn’t stop now. She needed to get out of the hospital and away from the most devastating night of her life.

She was panting and sweat was dripping down her brow by the time she finally made it to the lobby. She was just about to race out of the hospital’s glass doors when her mom suddenly appeared in front of her, blocking her path. She almost ran right into her.

“Mom, get out of my way,” she exclaimed as she tried to get around her. But Lydia kept stepping in front of her, not letting her get by.

Lydia looked worried but firm. “Alexis, I brought you here because this is the night everything changed.”

Alexis gave her mom an incredulous look. “Don’t you think I know that? I lost you and Dad. I lost everything.”

“But you still had Steve,” Lydia countered. “He loved you. He was your fiancé, but you pushed him away.”

Alexis stared back at her mom. “You saw me. I was a mess. I couldn’t love anyone.”

“And you still can’t,” Lydia said sadly.

Shocked, Alexis locked eyes with her mom. “That’s not true. I’ve had boyfriends.”

Lydia’s eyebrow arched as she looked into her daughter’s eyes. “Boyfriends that you break up with every Christmas. The closer you get to Christmas, the more you push people away.”

Alexis laughed sarcastically. “What? I don’t do that.” Trying to get by her mom, she weaved to the right, then the left, then back to the right again. She finally found her chance and took off like her life depended on it.

And in that moment, she felt like it did.

As she ran outside, there was a flash of white light.

* * *

The next thing Alexis knew, she was at a park, standing inside a little white gazebo that lit up the night sky with its white twinkling Christmas lights.

With all the dazzling lights, the gazebo looked luminous, ethereal, like something from a dream. As Alexis looked around, she couldn’t believe this was where she had ended up. This gazebo used to be her favorite place to go to sit and dream about her future before her parents passed away. But she hadn’t been back to this park or this gazebo since that fateful night at the hospital.

“How did I end up here?” she asked herself, bewildered.

That was when she heard her mom’s voice behind her.

“I got you a hot chocolate and put extra cinnamon in it, just the way you like it,” Lydia said cheerfully.

Alexis whirled around and saw her mom sitting on a bench on the other side of the gazebo. Lydia was holding two glass mugs of hot chocolate.

While she felt a rush of relief to see her mom again, it was quickly replaced with dread since she didn’t know what her mom was planning and plotting

next. The first *Christmas Carol* trip to her past had been a disaster.

As she stared back at her mom in silence, she felt emotionally exhausted. She didn't know how much more she could take.

"Do you remember how this used to be your favorite place to come when you were a little girl?" her mom asked.

Alexis didn't answer, wondering if it was a trick question.

Lydia set the two hot chocolates she was holding down on the ground. She stood up and faced her daughter.

"I'm sorry I had to make you go through that again," Lydia said softly.

Alexis stared back at her. Her shoulders slumped. "Then why did you, Mom?"

"So you could see and remember..."

Alexis gave her mom a startled look. "Remember? I've spent all these years trying to forget that night."

Lydia nodded. "I know. That's the problem."

Alexis looked away. She already knew she didn't want to hear whatever her mom was about to say next. She braced herself as Lydia continued.

"You've been running away for so long, you haven't been facing your pain," Lydia said.

Alexis took a deep breath. She was right. She didn't want to hear any of this.

Lydia, undeterred, continued, "The last thing I want to do is hurt you." She stepped closer to her daughter. "But for twenty years you've been hurting yourself, and it's getting worse. I'm worried about you," Lydia said, looking into her daughter's eyes. "Your dad and I know what happened to us is the reason you're afraid to love."

Alexis met her mom's gaze. "I'm not afraid."

"Then who do you love?" Lydia asked.

Alexis stared back at her mom as she struggled to find an answer. Surely, she loved someone. But for the life of her, at that moment, she couldn't think of one person.

"Exactly," Lydia said. "The only thing you love now is money."

Alexis stood up straighter. Those were fighting words. “Money is the only thing I’ve been able to count on,” she said with conviction. “I’ve worked hard to be where I am. You should be proud of me and congratulating me, but all you want to do is give me grief about making money.” She paused to take a deep breath. She didn’t get it. She couldn’t understand why her mom wasn’t excited about all her accomplishments. “Mom, you should be celebrating my success.”

Lydia’s eyes widened with surprise. “You think success is money?” She shook her head sadly.

When Alexis saw pity in her mom’s eyes, she snapped. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She threw up her hands, exasperated. “What’s wrong with making money?”

“Sweetheart, I’m trying to help you here,” Lydia said.

“I don’t need *your* help,” Alexis said defiantly. “I’m fine.” She stubbornly turned away from her mom and walked to the other side of the gazebo so she could put some distance between them. She was done trying to defend herself. It felt like no matter what she said, her mom wasn’t going to get it.

“Okay,” Lydia said.

Alexis breathed a sigh of relief that her mom was finally going to let up on her. When she turned back, her heart stopped.

Her mom was gone.

Alexis started to panic. “Mom? Where are you?”

Silence.

Alexis did a full circle as she looked around, but her mom was nowhere in sight.

“Mom, come on. Stop messing around. You can come back now.”

Alexis held her breath while she waited. When her mom didn’t return, she started to panic. “Okay, seriously, Mom. I’m sorry,” she said in a voice that was thick with emotion. “I was upset. I shouldn’t have said that I don’t need your help. I do. I do need your help. I need you. So much. Please, don’t go. Come back...”

Alexis waited, but her mom never came. She was left in the gazebo all alone. Heartbroken and scared, she collapsed onto the bench and buried her

face in her hands. “What have I done...”



Chapter 13



Alexis tossed and turned in her bed. She woke herself up by talking in her sleep.

“Come back...come back...” she called out into the darkness.

Gasping for air, she bolted up in her bed. Once she realized she was safe and in her own bedroom, her racing heartbeat slowed. She breathed a huge sigh of relief. Then she looked around her bed, half expecting to see her mom again.

But there was no one there.

She was all alone again.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged herself as she rocked back and forth and fought back tears. “It was just a dream,” she said sadly. “Only a dream.”

Heartbroken, missing her mom even more than she could’ve imagined, she dropped her head to her knees. When her phone rang, her head jerked back up. It was her regular ringtone. Her phone screen was lit up with the words *No Caller ID*. She answered it immediately. “Mom?” she asked hopefully. Her smile faded when she heard a man’s voice.

“Merry Christmas. You have just won a timeshare opportunity in sunny Bermuda,” the man said cheerfully.

“Excuse me?” Alexis asked. She stared at her phone, confused. “What are you talking about?”

The man continued. “We’re happy to offer you a—”

Alexis interrupted him. “No,” she said, upset. “I don’t want a timeshare in Bermuda. Please take me off your call list.” She hung up, disappointed. She took a deep breath, laid back down against her pillow, and stared up at the ceiling.

She doubted she could fall back asleep. Her mind was whirling with so many unanswered questions. Frustrated, she threw off her covers and got out of bed. Deciding she didn’t want to be alone in her bedroom, she forlornly headed into her dark living room. She didn’t even bother turning on the lights before she plopped down onto the couch. Trying to relax, she sat back and closed her eyes.

“You really need to turn the heat up in here. It’s freezing,” Alexis’s mom said.

When Alexis’s eyes flew open, she saw her mom walking toward her. She had a pretty red cashmere throw blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

“Mom!” Alexis exclaimed with joy as she jumped up and ran over to hug her tightly. “I thought you were gone. I thought I’d lost you again,” Alexis said through her tears. She was so overcome with emotion she could barely talk. “I’m so sorry, Mom. I shouldn’t have said I don’t need you. I’ve just been on my own for so long I’ve convinced myself that I don’t need anyone. But you’re different, Mom. I do need you. I’ve always needed you...”

Lydia lovingly draped the cashmere blanket around Alexis’s shoulders. “It’s going to be okay.”

Alexis stared back at her mom as she wiped away her tears. She wanted to believe what her mom was saying so badly.

“I have more to show you,” Lydia said as she put her arm around her daughter.

“Oh...” Alexis said, taken aback. Her happiness was instantly replaced with worry. “Can’t we just stay right here and... catch up?” Even as she asked the question, she knew what her mom was going to say.

Her mom smiled back at her. “It doesn’t work—”

“—that way,” Alexis finished for her. “I figured you were going to say that.”

Lydia smiled at her. “But first, what do you have to eat? I’m starving.”

Alexis gave her mom an incredulous look. “You can eat?”

Lydia laughed as they headed, arm in arm, into the kitchen. “You have a lot to learn.”

* * *

A half hour later, Alexis couldn't believe she was making pancakes with her mom. They were working side by side, just like they used to do every Christmas, whipping up their famous gingerbread cinnamon pancakes. Alexis knew she shouldn't have been surprised when all the ingredients had suddenly appeared in her usually empty pantry.

Lydia sprinkled some more cinnamon into the batter and then did the same with the nutmeg. As the first set of pancakes bubbled up on the grill, Lydia flipped them over like a pro.

Alexis was impressed. “You haven't lost your touch.”

Lydia grinned back at her. “Thank you. Do you want to try?” When Lydia held out the spatula to her, Alexis shook her head.

“Oh no, thanks. Unless you want those pancakes to end up on the floor, because I'm definitely out of practice. I haven't made pancakes since...” Alexis's voice trailed off.

“Since our last Christmas together,” Lydia said.

Alexis nodded solemnly. Pancakes were just one of the many things she had stopped enjoying after her parents were gone.

For the last half hour, she'd been having so much fun in the kitchen with her mom that she'd forgotten the pain that always surrounded Christmas after she'd lost her parents on Christmas Eve. This was the first time she'd done anything even remotely related to Christmas since that tragic night.

Lydia, as if sensing her daughter's sudden mood shift, quickly put the perfect pancakes on a plate and handed it to Alexis. “These pancakes do look pretty amazing, if I may say so myself.”

Alexis couldn't help smiling at her mom's enthusiasm and pride.

“Try them,” Lydia said, excited, as she handed Alexis a fork.

Alexis had to admit the nutmeg and cinnamon smell alone was making her mouth water. She eagerly cut into the first fluffy pancake and took a big bite.

Her eyes grew wide. “Mmmm...” she said, savoring the rich taste. She never ate breakfast and rarely ate carbs. She’d forgotten how delicious these pancakes were. No wonder she’d always insisted on having them at Christmas.

Lydia’s smile grew. “You like them?”

“Love them,” Alexis said. “You always made the best pancakes.” She grabbed the blueberry syrup, another tradition, and drizzled it generously over her pancakes. “I’ve missed this. I’ve missed you. Sunday brunches. Family dinners. All the things we used to do and all our Christmas traditions.”

“Remember our special Christmas shortbread cookies?” Lydia asked.

Alexis laughed and nodded. “You mean our Peppermint Shortbread Christmas Magic Bars? How could I forget? Dad would eat them faster than we could make them.”

Lydia joined in the laughter. “We always had to make an extra batch and hide them from him.”

“That’s right,” Alexis said, remembering. “I was almost as bad as he was. Half the time, he was stealing them out of the cookie jar for me.”

Lydia smiled. “I know.”

“How is he? Dad?” Alexis asked. “I didn’t know if I was allowed to ask. I really don’t know anything about what I’m supposed to do. I’m so afraid if I say the wrong thing, you’ll disappear again.”

“Your dad is worried about you. Just like I am,” Lydia said.

“Maybe we should make him some of our Christmas magic bars,” Alexis said, wishing more than anything else in this world that she could actually do that for her dad.

“Do you remember how we made that recipe up?” Lydia asked.

Alexis nodded. “Now that you say it, yes—it was because we wanted something unique that would be just for us.”

“And you came up with the secret ingredient,” Lydia said as she started putting their breakfast dishes into the dishwasher.

“That’s right,” Alexis said, laughing. “I almost forgot about that.”

“You were going through your candy cane phase,” Lydia said. “You had to have candy canes with everything that Christmas.”

“How old was I? Seven?” Alexis asked, trying to remember.

“Five,” Lydia said. “And you were one determined little girl.”

“And you indulged me,” Alexis said, smiling at the memory. “You made special candy canes dipped in dark chocolate as hot cocoa stir sticks.”

“But then you insisted on adding candy canes to the eggnog,” Lydia added. Alexis laughed. “Yeah, that was kinda gross.”

“So gross,” Lydia agreed.

“Oh, wait, remember the candy cane water I made?” Alexis asked, excited. Lydia shuttered. “How could I forget?”

“And the candy cane scrambled eggs,” Alexis added. “I thought I was really on to something there.”

They both laughed.

“But then we discovered the perfect place for your candy canes,” Lydia said.

Alexis’s eyes lit up. “You were making dad’s favorite shortbread cookies, just the regular recipe.”

“And you decided to dump a bunch of candy cane pieces into the batter right before I put it in the oven. There was nothing I could do, so I figured we’d see what happened.”

Alexis beamed back at her mom. “And they turned out delicious.”

“So good,” Lydia agreed. “And our unique Christmas cookie family recipe was born.”

“I think after that, you finally convinced me that we should leave the candy canes for the Christmas tree.”

“And the stockings,” Lydia added.

“Of course, the stockings,” Alexis agreed. “And we had to leave some candy canes out for Santa and Rudolph.”

“Naturally,” Lydia agreed.

They shared a laugh.

“Those are good memories,” Alexis said and meant it.

Lydia put her arm around her. “They are the best. And you know another great memory?”

Alexis shook her head.

“Decorating our Christmas tree,” Lydia said. “That was always one of your favorite things to do. When you were little, you never understood why we couldn’t get a tree in July at the halfway point to Christmas and keep it up until Christmas.”

Alexis laughed. “I remember Dad telling me it would be impossible because we always got live trees, and a live Christmas tree would never last that long.”

Lydia nodded. “And then you, being my very smart child, told Dad that we didn’t have to cut down a tree. You said we could just decorate one of the trees in the front yard.”

“I was a smart kid,” Alexis laughed.

“Quite the problem solver,” Lydia agreed.

“And that’s really come in handy owning my own company where it seems like I’m putting out fires every day,” Alexis said.

Lydia put her hands on her hips as she looked around. “Well, one of the problems I see here is that you don’t have a Christmas tree. And it’s not just this year. You never have trees or decorate for Christmas anymore. You don’t make cookies. You don’t do any of our Christmas traditions. You don’t celebrate Christmas at all,” Lydia said sadly. “That breaks my heart. You used to love Christmas so much.”

Alexis didn’t meet her mom’s gaze. Instead, she focused on her pancakes and loaded her fork up with another bite. “I don’t have time to decorate. I work through the holidays.”

“And on Christmas Day,” Lydia added in a voice that made it clear she didn’t approve.

“Christmas Day is the best day to work,” Alexis said. “You wouldn’t believe how much I get done without all the distractions of people calling and emailing me. I tell this to my staff every Christmas, but they never seem to get it. Working the holidays is a great way to get ahead. It’s my thing.”

Alexis held up her plate to her mom. “You didn’t have any pancakes. Here, you gave me too many.”

Lydia shook her head. “I shouldn’t. Too many carbs.”

Alexis’s eyebrows arched. “Seriously? You still have to worry about carbs in Heaven?”

Lydia nodded.

“Wow, well, whatever you’re doing up there, you look amazing,” Alexis said. “You look more like my sister than my mother.”

Lydia smiled a radiant smile. “I bet we would have had fun as sisters.”

“We had a lot of fun as mother and daughter,” Alexis said as she smiled at her mom.

“We sure did,” Lydia said as she took the plate from Alexis and set it down on the counter. “But now we need to get going.”

Alexis immediately felt anxious. “Go where?” she asked as she picked her plate back up and dumped more syrup on her pancakes. She could stress eat with the best of them.

Lydia took the syrup from her and the plate. “Hey, enough sugar. I need you clearheaded. Now go get dressed. Come on. We don’t have a lot of time.”

When Alexis didn’t move, her mom gave her a gentle nudge.

“Go on. You’ll find another dress upstairs in your closet,” Lydia said.

Alexis’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Really,” Lydia answered, laughing. “But you need to hurry.”

* * *

This time when Alexis came downstairs, she was wearing a fantastic sparkling silver cocktail dress that fit her like it was made for her. She had to admit her mom’s taste was impeccable. She usually didn’t wear anything too bright or flashy, but this dress, while it glittered with sequins, was still a classic cut that made it an elegant showstopper.

Lydia clapped her hands in delight when she saw Alexis. “I love this on you.”

Alexis spun around to show off her dress. “So it’s mom-approved?”

“Absolutely,” Lydia said, enthusiastically. “I should have been a designer. I’ve got skills. You look fabulous.”

“Ah, thanks, Mom.”

“Now it’s my turn,” Lydia said, excited.

Alexis laughed. “What do you mean?”

Lydia looked down at her black dress. “I’ve been wearing this for twenty years. What do you have in that huge closet of yours that I can wear, besides all those boring business suits?”

“Hey,” Alexis shot back. “I’ll have you know those are all designer suits. They cost me a fortune.”

Lydia rolled her eyes. “I don’t care how much they cost. They’re boring.”

Alexis laughed. “Can’t you just ‘Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo’ and whip something up for yourself?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Lydia said.

“Seriously?” Alexis asked. She was surprised. Her mom could pop back into her life after twenty years but couldn’t change her own clothes. It didn’t make any sense. But then, none of this did.

“What about one of those cute leather miniskirts you used to wear?” Lydia asked hopefully. “I could wear that.”

“Mom! No. You’re sixty-five, not sixteen,” Alexis said with a laugh. “Besides, I don’t have any miniskirts anymore, or anything remotely close to that.”

Lydia frowned. “Well, that’s a shame. You have great legs.”

Alexis gave her mom an incredulous look.

Lydia smiled back at her. “What? You do. And a reminder to you—you’re *not* sixty-five. You should have some fun clothes to wear, not just those straitjacket suits.”

Alexis’s eyebrows arched. “Straitjackets? I hope you’re talking about the impeccable cut of my suit jackets and not the other kind of straitjacket...”

Lydia shrugged with a look that made it clear she was talking about the latter.

Alexis laughed. “You’re impossible.”

“And you need a better wardrobe,” Lydia shot back.

As Alexis rolled her eyes, she had to admit she couldn't remember the last time she wore something fun and sexy like the stunning cocktail dress she was wearing now. Anytime she had to attend a party for work, she always went with a basic black designer dress. She didn't own anything that sparkled. Not one thing.

"Okay, so no miniskirts. What about those black skinny jeans you used to wear and that black motorcycle jacket?" Lydia asked. "I would look great in that."

"Uh, no and no," Alexis said.

Lydia raised her eyebrows. "I wouldn't look great in that?"

"No, I meant, no, I don't have any of that stuff anymore. That's what I wore in college," Alexis said.

Lydia tilted her head and studied her. "And your point?"

Alexis laughed. "My point is I only have work clothes now."

Lydia sighed. "Because all you do is work. I get it. But I don't like it. Don't worry, I'll go see what I can find. There has to be something."

"Good luck," Alexis called out as she watched her mom walked away.

"I'm going to need it," Lydia answered back.

As silly as it sounded, Alexis had an urge to run after her mom to make sure she didn't disappear again. Instead, she walked back into the kitchen where she quickly poured more syrup on her pancakes and took another big bite.

Alexis didn't even have a chance to have her second bite of the pancake before Lydia appeared wearing a pretty black cocktail dress.

"Well, I guess this will do," Lydia said. "Even if it's a little conservative for my taste."

Alexis did a double take. "Wow. You look amazing."

Lydia smiled. "Okay, I'll take that reaction."

"I forgot I even had that dress. It looks great on you," Alexis said. While the dress didn't have any sparkle, it was cut beautifully, and on her mom, it was spectacular. "But how did you do that so fast? You just left a second ago."

Lydia flashed a smile. "Another perk." She held out both hands to Alexis. "Are you ready?"

Alexis didn't immediately take her mom's hands. They were having such a great time. She didn't want anything to spoil it. She wished they could stay like this forever. But on this journey, unfortunately, she didn't get three wishes. She already knew what her mom would say—*it doesn't work like that*.

"Come on," Lydia said.

Alexis tried to stall some more. "Okay, wait. I just need to prepare myself. First you showed me my past, and now I'm guessing you want to show me the present. We're already here in the present. I don't understand."

Lydia looked into her eyes. "You don't have to understand. For the first time in twenty years, you're not in control. I am."

Alexis felt a chill run down her spine. After she'd lost her parents she'd done everything she could to try and protect herself, and that meant always being in charge and in control. Hearing her mom now say she had to give up that control made her even more nervous.

Lydia wiggled her fingers at Alexis. "Come on. We have to go."

Alexis took a deep breath and then tentatively took her mom's hands.

As soon as their hands touched, a flash of white flooded the room...



Chapter 14



A moment later, Alexis found herself standing in the living room of the boyfriend she'd just broken up with. Marc.

The sleek, sophisticated room had magnificent views of Atlanta's skyline. There were vaulted ceilings, making the space even more impressive, and a collection of modern art hanging on the walls. This was the kind of room that was designed to impress. It didn't really look lived in. There were very few personal touches.

There wasn't a Christmas tree or any sign of holiday decorations anywhere.

Alexis's attention went immediately to the two men sitting on the couch. She could only see the back of their heads, but she knew one of the men was Marc. She turned to her mom.

"What are we doing in Marc's condo?"

Lydia motioned for her to move forward. "Go see."

Nervous, Alexis walked toward the two men.

Her mom followed her.

Before Alexis could even see who the second man was, she was practically blinded by a dazzling display of diamond engagement rings on the coffee table.

She gasped when she saw her favorite jeweler, Don, showing Marc a stunner of an engagement ring. She whirled around to face her mom. "What's my jeweler doing here?"

Lydia gave her a look. "I think that's pretty obvious. It looks like those are all engagement rings."

Alexis's mouth dropped open. "No," she said in disbelief.

"Yes," Lydia replied as she happily tried one of the rings on. She held it up so the giant diamond caught the light. "Not bad."

"Why is he looking at rings?" Alexis asked, incredulous. "I just broke up with him."

"Obviously, this is before you talked to him. Honey, you really need to keep up," Lydia said as she continued to admire the diamond ring she was wearing.

"Oh no," Alexis said in full panic mode. "He was going to propose. I had no idea. I have to stop him." Frantic, she got right in his face. "Marc, you can't buy that. I'm not going to marry you! I'm going to break up with you. Don't waste your money."

"He can't see or hear you," Lydia said as she put the ring back and picked up another one to try. "Remember, you just need to listen and learn."

Alexis was speechless as she listened to Marc talk to Don.

"I'm taking Alexis to Bali for Christmas," Marc said, excited. "That's where I'm going to propose. I've been planning this for months. I want everything to be perfect, starting with the ring."

"Well, that's what I'm here for," Don said. "We will make sure to find something that Alexis will cherish. Proposing in Bali. That's very romantic. She's going to love it."

Alexis jumped in front of Don. "No, I won't! This trip isn't going to happen. Don't encourage him, Don. I'm not going to marry Marc. Don't sell him a ring!"

Don handed Marc a ring with a breathtaking four-carat, emerald-cut diamond. "I think she'd love this one. It's classy and timeless. It's flawless. One of a kind. Just like she is."

Marc's face lit up as he took the ring and started studying it closer.

Alexis was freaking out. She had to stop this insanity. She waved her hand in front of Marc's face desperately. "No, Marc, don't listen to him! I don't like this ring. I don't like emerald cuts, especially not in a diamond." Alexis

mentally shook herself. She needed to refocus. She took a deep breath. “And it doesn’t matter what ring you pick. I don’t want it because I’m not going to marry you. Ever.”

“They can’t hear you,” Lydia reminded her again.

Don opened a second jewelry case that had spectacular diamond necklaces and bracelets. He selected a stunning necklace and held it up for Marc to see. It was set in platinum and had a cascade of diamonds leading to a pear-shaped diamond that was surrounded by smaller diamonds that sparkled from every angle.

“And a necklace like this would be perfect for your wedding gift. Or Alexis’s birthday coming up,” Don said.

When the men weren’t looking, Lydia eagerly picked up one of the dazzling necklaces where brilliant-cut diamonds were set in the shape of delicate flower petals. She walked over to a mirror that was hanging on the wall to try it on. “Sparkle looks good on me.”

Alexis marched over to her mom and stared at her in the mirror. “Sparkle looks good on everyone, Mom. Put it all back. The ring, the necklace, and whatever else you grabbed that I didn’t see.”

Undeterred, Lydia put her arm around her daughter as they looked in the mirror together. “Look at us. We *do* look like sisters.”

Alexis’s frustration grew. “Seriously, Mom. I don’t have time for this.” She quickly glanced over to Marc who was still looking over the rings. “I need your help to stop Marc from buying an engagement ring.”

Lydia watched Marc pick up another spectacular ring. “Wrong ring?”

“Wrong everything,” Alexis said.

She had absolutely no idea that Marc had been planning to propose in Bali. They’d never talked about marriage being down the road for them. Not once. In fact, she remembered telling him about a study that showed that while married men had a longer life expectancy, it was the opposite for women. That alone should have shown Marc how she felt about marriage. She couldn’t even begin to imagine what he was thinking. They hadn’t even gone on a vacation together. How did he think they’d be able to spend their lives

together? He couldn't buy a ring or anything for her. She was ending their relationship. They were done.

But it was too late.

Don and Marc were already shaking hands.

"Oh no," Alexis groaned. "Marc, please. Stop!"

But the only person who heard her was her mom.

Don smiled at Marc. "You made the perfect choice. I'll have it polished up and beautifully wrapped. A messenger will bring it by later today."

"That would be great," Marc said. His eyes were filled with anticipation. "Thank you so much for all your help. I can't wait to propose to Alexis and start a new chapter of our lives together."

Alexis felt like she was going to be sick. She rushed over to Marc. "Please, Marc. Don't do this!"

Marc kept smiling. He couldn't have looked happier.

As Don started packing up, Lydia reluctantly put back her ring and necklace. She sighed, admiring the jewels one last time before turning her attention to Alexis.

"It's time to go," Lydia said.

Alexis looked back at her mom like she was nuts. "I can't leave and let this happen." She looked over at Marc who was admiring the huge diamond engagement ring he had selected.

Lydia locked eyes with her daughter. "Remember, you have no control here. The sooner you realize that the better. Come on. We have to go." Lydia took one of Alexis's hands and led her toward the door.

"Wait," Alexis said as she tried to resist. "Where are we going? Haven't we done enough?"

For an answer, Lydia took Alexis's other hand—and as they stood facing each other, a flash of white light filled the room.

* * *

The next thing Alexis knew, they were standing inside a swanky bar that was festively decorated for Christmas.

The Christmas song "O Come, All Ye Faithful" was playing...

“O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem
O come and behold Him, born the King of Angels
O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
Christ the Lord...”

There was a giant Christmas tree in the corner that was covered with white lights and all silver decorations. There were also white twinkle lights outlining all the bar windows and a string of lights above the bar.

When a waitress passed them carrying a tray full of drinks, Lydia snatched a glass of champagne and took a sip.

“Nice,” she said, savoring the taste, and took another sip.

“Mom, why are we here?” Alexis asked. She looked around, confused. “I’ve never been to this bar before.”

All around them, people were celebrating Christmas Eve. Everyone was drinking and laughing and having a great time. Except for one guy who was sitting alone.

Marc.

“Oh no,” Alexis said as she covered her mouth with her hand. She felt a rush of guilt when she saw Marc looking miserable. He was staring at the engagement ring he’d just bought. There was an empty cocktail glass next to him.

Lydia sighed. “Poor Marc.”

Alexis rushed over and sat next to him. “Marc, I’m really sorry about Bali. About us. About everything.”

Marc continued to stare at the ring.

“Did you hear me?” Alexis asked, waving her hand in front of Marc’s face.

Lydia shook her head as she sipped her champagne. “I’ve told you he can’t hear you. No one can. Nothing has changed.”

Frustrated, Alexis took her mom’s champagne and drank the rest of it.

Lydia frowned when Alexis handed her back the empty champagne flute.

“I had no idea Marc was going to propose,” Alexis rushed to try and explain.

Lydia nodded. “Yes, you’ve said that.”

“I just don’t know what got into him,” Alexis said. “What was he thinking?”

“He was *thinking* that he loved you,” Lydia answered. “It’s as simple as that. He looks like a really good guy.”

Alexis sighed as she looked back at Marc. “He *is* a really good guy.”

A pretty waitress interrupted their conversation when she came over to pick up Marc’s empty glass and give him a new drink. The waitress smiled at Marc. “This one’s on the house.”

Marc looked surprised and touched. He smiled back at the waitress. “Thank you.”

“I’m telling you, it’s her loss,” the waitress told Marc. “If some guy like you wanted to take me away to Bali and give me a big rock like that, I’d be all over it. She must have some serious problems...”

Alexis’s eyes narrowed as she gave the waitress an annoyed look.

“She’s actually a really good person,” Marc said. “She’s smart and driven. She just puts work above everything else.”

The waitress gave him a look. “Even you?”

Marc sighed and smiled a sad smile. “Yeah, even me.”

When the waitress walked away, Lydia rolled her eyes. “Oh, she’d be all over it all right. All over *him*.”

“Right,” Alexis said. “Did you see the way she was looking at him? And she gave him a free drink. How obvious can you get?”

Both women nodded.

“It’s time,” Lydia said with a gentle smile.

“Wait, what? Already?” Alexis asked. “That was it?”

For an answer Lydia took both of Alexis’s hands and the room filled with white light.



Chapter 15



This time when Alexis opened her eyes, she found herself standing in the family room of an upscale home that had a warm and inviting feel. The room was beautifully decorated for Christmas with all the classic touches.

In the corner of the room there was a sparkling Christmas tree that stood proud and tall. It was adorned with colorful vintage ornaments in shades of red, green, and gold. There was even an antique train set circling the base of the tree that was zigzagging around delightfully wrapped presents.

The room was filled with seven exuberant people who were all wearing silly Santa hats and colorful, festive Christmas outfits. They were all adults except for one adorable little girl who Alexis guessed to be around eight years old. The child was wearing a charming red-and-green plaid Christmas dress that had a big red satin bow in the back.

Everyone was gathered together, sitting on the couch, floor, or in chairs. All the focus was on the one person standing before them—Jeff, Alexis’s chief operating officer.

“What’s going on?” Alexis asked her mom who was standing by her side. “Why are we at Jeff’s house?”

“Just watch,” Lydia said.

Alexis grew even more confused when she saw Jeff standing in front of a giant easel. It stood about four-feet tall and had white paper on it. Jeff was holding a marking pen and laughing.

“Are they playing a game?” Alexis asked.

Lydia smiled and nodded.

Alexis crossed her arms in front of her chest as she stared at Jeff and waited for him to do something. When she glanced at everyone else, she couldn't help but see a feast of Christmas treats covering the coffee table. She arched her eyebrows with interest. There was fudge, gingerbread cookies, nuts, and even fruitcake.

As she looked around and took in the impressive home, she didn't know what surprised her more—seeing Jeff wearing a casual outfit of khaki pants and a striped shirt with his own Santa hat, or that she was standing in Jeff's home at all. In all the years they'd worked together, she'd never been inside his home, just like he'd never been inside hers.

When she heard a crackle and pop from the fireplace, she turned around and saw it was surrounded by fresh garland and holly. Her eyes were then drawn to a cheerful line of plush red velvet stockings hanging from the mantel. Displayed on the mantel were Christmas pictures of all the people that were in the room, who Alexis guessed must be Jeff's family.

One thing that didn't surprise her was seeing Jeff's house covered with Christmas decorations. She'd always known Jeff was a Christmas lover, just like he knew that she wasn't.

Every year, he fought to get the employees paid time off between Christmas and New Year's Eve, and every year, she pushed back. She thought it was bad enough that she gave out Christmas bonuses if the staff met their goals.

She frowned, thinking about how this year, those goals hadn't been met. She knew how upset Jeff had been about the staff not getting their bonuses. But clearly, he was over it, because he was now wearing a Santa hat, goofing around, and having a great time with his family.

She turned to her mom again. "I don't get it. I never dated Jeff. He's just my COO. He was never my Christmas boyfriend." Alexis was growing more confused by the second. So far, her little journey with her mom had been all about her boyfriends of Christmas past.

"No, but he is your work husband," Lydia answered her.

Alexis burst out laughing. "My *work husband*? What?"

“It’s true,” Lydia said, totally serious. “You’ve spent more time with Jeff at work than with any boyfriend you’ve ever had.”

Lydia walked closer to where all the action was happening in the family room.

“So?” Alexis asked, still confused.

“So,” Lydia answered, “you need to see this.” She pointed at Jeff.

Alexis’s eyebrows knit together as she placed her hands on her hips. “You brought me here to see game night?”

“Just watch,” Lydia said.

“Okay,” Alexis said with a reluctant sigh as she joined her mom in watching Jeff.

“Is everybody ready for our next Christmas game?” Jeff asked his family cheerfully.

“Yes!” everyone answered back, laughing.

Alexis rolled her eyes. She hoped whatever this was wouldn’t take long.

With a flourish, Jeff took the cap off the black marker he was holding. “Okay, before I start drawing, here’s your clue. It’s a Christmas song.” He moved closer to the easel and started drawing. “Here we go!” he said excitedly as he quickly drew three small circles.

His family all looked at each other, confused.

Alexis and Lydia gave each other the same baffled look.

A pretty woman sitting next to the little girl laughed as she looked at Jeff’s drawings. “Uh, Dad? What is that?”

Jeff laughed. “I can’t tell you. You have to guess. That’s the game.”

“Reindeer droppings?” another family member shouted out.

Everyone laughed.

“Okay, that’s just gross,” Alexis said.

Lydia nodded. “But imaginative.”

Alexis gave her an incredulous look. “Who wants to imagine reindeer poop?”

Lydia laughed.

The little girl turned around and grinned at Alexis.

Jeff waved his hands around frantically to get his family's attention. "Everyone. Come on. Pay attention to what I'm drawing. It's a Christmas song. Keep guessing!"

Jeff added a curve underneath the other dots and started adding wiggly lines under the curve.

The pretty woman groaned. "Why did we let Dad start? He can never draw anything. Dad, your granddaughter could do better than this."

The little girl giggled.

Everyone laughed louder.

"No. No, no. Wait a second," Jeff said, laughing. "I can do it," He drew faster. The more he drew, the worse it got.

"Oh, no you can't," Alexis shouted back at him.

When Jeff just kept drawing, she sighed impatiently and looked at her mom. "They can't see or hear me either?"

"Nope," Lydia said.

Alexis cringed as Jeff continued to try and draw something. While she knew Jeff had many talents when it came to running her office, clearly, from what she was seeing right now, when it came to drawing, he was terrible.

She tilted her head to one side and looked closer at his drawing. If she squinted, she could almost see a face—and the squiggly lines looked like a beard. A lightbulb went off for her. "It's Santa Claus!" she called out, excited. "So it has to be a song that has Santa Claus in it."

Jeff's daughter was laughing so much she could hardly talk. "Dad, come on. Give up. Let someone else draw."

Two of the guys in Jeff's family looked equally confused as they watched Jeff draw.

"Do you know what it is?" the first one asked.

The second guy shook his head. "I have no idea."

"It's Santa Claus," Alexis shouted back at everyone, more adamant than ever. "It's not a very good one, but it's Santa."

"They can't hear you," Lydia said.

But Alexis was too caught up in the game to pay attention to her mom.

When everyone continued to look equally perplexed, Alexis marched up to the easel. She impatiently tapped the picture Jeff was drawing. “It’s Santa Claus! See the hat? Here’s the beard,” she said as she pointed at the beard. “Santa Claus!”

A woman Alexis recognized as Jeff’s wife, Sandy, spoke up next, talking to her husband. “Sweetie, maybe I should take over.”

Jeff shook his head. He looked determined as he kept drawing. “No, it’s okay. I got this. Keep guessing, everyone. Just start guessing Christmas songs.”

“‘Frosty the Snowman’?” someone shouted.

“‘Silent Night,’” another person shouted. “Are those stars?”

Jeff laughed. “No.”

“Those aren’t stars, those are Santa’s eyes,” Alexis shot back. “Are you serious? Come on people! That’s Santa Claus...” Alexis was jumping around impatiently. She ran over to each person and waved her hands in their face. She begged for someone to listen to her. “It’s Santa. How can you not see it?”

The little girl giggled as she watched Alexis.

“It’s Santa Claus,” Alexis called out one more time, exasperated.

The little girl looked back at Jeff. “It’s Santa Claus.”

Alexis threw up her hands in victory. “Finally!”

“That’s right, Sydney,” Jeff said, excited. With a bright smile, he scooped the little girl up and twirled her around. “I have the smartest granddaughter in the whole wide world.”

Sydney laughed and hugged her grandpa tight.

When Jeff carefully put Sydney down, she ran back to sit by her mom. “Okay, we need to keep going,” Jeff said. “It’s Santa, but Santa what? Here’s the second word—and remember, it’s a song,” Jeff said before he got back to happily drawing again.

Everyone groaned and laughed when Jeff drew a little stick figure.

“What in the world is that?” one of the guys asked, laughing.

Alexis’s eyes grew huge. “It’s a baby!” she shouted triumphantly. “It’s ‘Santa Baby’! That’s the song. ‘Santa Baby.’” She did a little victory dance.

One of the guys yelled out, “Santa Dog?”

Alexis froze. She gave the guy a stunned look. “Seriously?” She ran over and got in his face. “Dog? Really? What are you talking about?” She pointed at what Jeff had drawn on the board. “That’s a baby! A baby! Do you need glasses?!”

Alexis’s mom gently pulled Alexis away from the guy. “And this is why we never had game night.”

Alexis, still fired up, tried to get back into the game, but Lydia held her back so all she could do was watch.

Indignant, Alexis stared at her mom. “Mom, I was winning.”

“‘Santa Baby!’” someone shouted. “It’s ‘Santa Baby!’”

Alexis threw up her hands. “See! I told you. ‘Santa Baby.’”

The little girl, smiling, looked back at Alexis again.

Jeff started proudly high-fiving everyone. “Great job. See, I told you I could do this. You just needed to have a little faith in me.”

This brought on even more laughter.

“Should I go again?” Jeff asked with an excited grin.

“No!” everyone exclaimed at the same time.

Jeff pretended to look hurt until his wife came up and kissed him on the cheek.

“You did great, sweetie,” she said.

Jeff put his arm around her. “Thank you. I thought so, too.”

Everyone laughed again.

Alexis, hot from all her jumping around, eyed a crystal punch bowl. She headed toward it. She needed a drink. When she peered inside the bowl, she was surprised to see lemon slices and cranberries floating around in the pink punch. She picked up one of the pretty punch glasses and a cranberry-mint skewer that was put out for a garnish.

She filled her glass only half full and took a tentative sip. She was surprised—it was delicious. It wasn’t too sweet like she had feared. Instead, she savored the tangy, refreshing mix of what she guessed to be cranberry, pomegranate, and lemon juice mixed with some sparkling water. She filled her glass to the top.

When two of Jeff's family members joined her at the punch bowl, she stepped back to get out of their way.

"Your brother Jeff is so good with Sydney," the one woman said as they watched Jeff pick up Sydney and help his granddaughter put an ornament on the Christmas tree.

The man, Jeff's brother, nodded as he filled both of their punch glasses. "He really is. He has been from day one. He loves her so much. He's the best grandpa ever."

Alexis watched the woman's smile fade as she lowered her voice. "Is Jeff really going to lose this house because he didn't get his Christmas bonus?"

Alexis almost choked on her punch. Shocked, she looked over at Jeff. He was a money genius. She couldn't imagine him ever getting in a position to lose his home. She put down her punch and waited for Jeff's brother to answer the question.

"He's in a tough spot," Jeff's brother said, looking gloomy. "The last thing he wants to do is sell this house. It's their dream home. But when Sydney got sick, and my insurance wouldn't cover the astronomical medical bills, Jeff took out a second mortgage to make sure she got the care she needed. I wish I could help him out, but I'm still trying to find a new job."

The woman shook her head sadly. "And now that he didn't get his bonus..."

Jeff's brother looked worried and upset. "He's going to lose his home."

"I didn't know Jeff's granddaughter was sick," Alexis jumped in, feeling terrible. "Jeff never told me she was having any problems. He never told me any of this."

When she paused to think about it, Jeff never really told her anything about his personal life. Besides his wife, Sandy, who was always bringing Jeff dinner when he worked late at the office—as happened most nights—she hadn't met anyone else in his family.

She never held any functions for her employees that family members would be invited to. She even had a policy at work that no one was allowed to clutter their workspace with personal items like family photos. She wanted to be sure to keep things strictly professional in the office. She believed

anything that had to do with families and relationships only distracted people from focusing on what she was paying them to do—work.

She was a firm believer that when you were working, you were working. Period. The office was no place for anything else. She certainly never shared anything about her personal life with anyone who worked for her. Frankly, she was surprised she'd even told her assistant Elise about her parents earlier. Clearly, the photograph showing up at her office had unsettled her.

They all watched as Sydney wrapped her little arms around Jeff's neck and gave him a sweet kiss on his cheek.

There was no doubt in Alexis's mind that Jeff was a wonderful grandpa. It also didn't surprise her to hear that he'd do anything for his family. She could see that Jeff was a kind and caring person who had a good heart just by the way he always treated their employees. She knew her staff loved him as well. She'd always felt they made a good team. He was the good guy to her bad guy. Whenever she had to come down hard, he always softened the blow.

While it was her rule to always keep personal business out of the office, she couldn't believe that Jeff had an emergency in his family and he didn't tell her about it. Alexis's ears perked up when she heard the woman talking again.

"I'm so glad Sydney's okay now," the woman said back to Jeff's brother.

"But my brother's bank account isn't," Jeff's brother said with a sigh. "He was counting on his Christmas bonus to pay off his debt by the end of the year. Without it, he's in big trouble."

The woman looked upset as she shook her head. "I can't believe Alexis would do this to him after all the years he's worked for her."

Alexis tried to fight off her feelings of guilt as she stared back at them. It wasn't working. "I didn't know," she said to them both. She kept going because she needed them to understand. "I swear to you, Jeff never said a word. He didn't tell me anything. I didn't know about any of this until right now." She shook her head, frustrated, knowing they couldn't hear her.

"Alexis, check this out," her mom called out.

When Alexis turned around, she was surprised to see her mom drawing an excellent reindeer on the game board. It had impressive antlers and large,

expressive eyes that conveyed a sense of curiosity and intelligence.

Her mom grinned back at her. “Not bad, right? My art classes are paying off. Another perk.”

Alexis had no words.

When Jeff walked up to the punch bowl, Alexis braced for the worst.

“Don’t blame Alexis,” Jeff said.

Alexis did a double take. She was surprised and relieved to hear Jeff defend her.

“It’s not her fault,” Jeff continued. “We didn’t make our goals, and I’m the chief operating officer. So, this one is on me.”

They all looked over at tiny Sydney who was sitting on her mom’s lap, cuddling with her.

Jeff took a deep breath. “I might be running out of money, but at least I have all of you. Right now, everyone in my family is healthy, and that’s what matters most.”

“That’s true,” the woman said.

“I actually feel sorry for Alexis,” Jeff’s brother added.

Alexis jerked her head around to stare at Jeff’s brother. His words hit a nerve. “Why would you feel sorry for me? No one needs to feel sorry for me,” she said. The last thing Alexis wanted from anyone was pity. She’d worked her entire career to project an image of power and strength. She needed the world to believe she was invincible. She refused to have anyone see her as weak or vulnerable. If that happened, her power and credibility would be diminished, and she couldn’t afford for that to happen, ever.

Alexis’s mom sighed as she joined Alexis at the punch bowl. “Alexis, I told you. You’re supposed to just be listening. Remember, you’re here to observe and learn. No one is going to answer your questions because they can’t hear you. Just take it all in.”

Alexis frowned, feeling even more frustrated. “What if I don’t want to *take it all in*? Am I just supposed to stand here and listen to everyone talk about me and not be able to defend myself?”

Lydia looked into her daughter’s eyes. “Yes. That’s exactly what you’re supposed to do. Now listen to Jeff. I don’t want you to miss any of this.”

Alexis reluctantly turned back to him.

“Alexis isn’t a bad person,” Jeff said, sounding like he meant it.

Alexis nodded, feeling better. “Right, I’m not.”

“But...” Jeff started.

Alexis’s smile faded. Her shoulders slumped. “But?”

“But she just doesn’t get it,” Jeff finished.

Alexis’s eyes widened as Jeff continued.

“Money is all Alexis has,” Jeff said. “And the saddest thing is she thinks that’s okay. Can you imagine not having anyone who loves you?”

The woman shivered. “That would be terrible.”

Alexis didn’t even try to fight back. She was too shaken. Jeff’s words had cut deep.

She picked up a glass to get some more punch so she could focus on something besides Jeff’s haunting words, but her hand was shaking.

“So don’t feel sorry for me,” Jeff continued with conviction. “Feel sorry for Alexis.”

Alexis opened her mouth to say something but closed it quickly when her mom gave her a warning look. She wanted to shout back at them that they shouldn’t feel sorry for her—that she was great, better than great. She was fantastic. She had built a successful business. She had achieved her goals. No one needed to feel sorry for her. She couldn’t understand why no one could comprehend that.

She was grateful that Jeff had stood up for her. She’d always believed he was a loyal employee, but now she knew for sure. Even when she wasn’t there to defend herself, he’d stood up for her. However, she was surprised by how much it had hurt when he’d said that work was all she cared about and that there was no one who loved her. Deep down, she was scared that maybe Jeff was right.

Jeff lifted his glass of punch. “I want to make a toast. To Alexis.”

Everyone lifted their glasses, including Lydia, and waited for Jeff to continue.

“May Alexis someday find the kind of love our family is blessed with,” Jeff said as he looked around at his family with a grateful smile.

“To Alexis,” Jeff’s brother said.

“To Alexis,” everyone joined in.

“To Alexis finding love,” Alexis’s mom added as she smiled a hopeful smile.

Alexis was suddenly hit with a wave of panic. As she looked around the room, she realized that everyone, including her own mom, wasn’t seeing her as a successful businesswoman who had built her own empire. They were only seeing her as someone who was flawed and needed to change. They were seeing her as someone that no one loved.

It broke her heart. She always said she was fine being alone. It was her choice. But now—hearing everyone else talk about her this way, saying that no one loved her—made her feel like something was wrong with her. She took several deep breaths, fighting back tears. She knew she needed to go before she had a complete breakdown. She had to get away from all of them.

As she ran for the front door, she didn’t know where she was going. She just knew she couldn’t spend another second surrounded by people who were judging her and who thought she was unlovable. She would have preferred them being angry at her and calling her names. Their pity was something she couldn’t deal with. She needed to get out of Jeff’s house. Away from his family. Away from her mom. Away from the truth.

But when she yanked open Jeff’s front door, she found her mom standing there staring back at her.

Alexis jumped back, startled. Her hand flew to her heart.

“Mom, you have to stop doing this,” Alexis exclaimed. “You can’t just keep popping up everywhere. You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

Lydia held out both of her hands. “It’s time.”

Alexis stared back at her mom. She wasn’t sure what she was more afraid of—asking her mom the next question or hearing her mom’s answer. She took a deep breath and asked anyway, “Time for what?”

“To see your future,” Lydia said softly.

When Alexis saw a flash of pain in Lydia’s eyes, it scared her to her core.

She quickly put both hands behind her back so her mom couldn’t touch them. “No. I’ve seen enough. I don’t want to see my future. I’m not going

anywhere unless it's back home."

When Lydia was silent, every protective instinct inside Alexis warned her that whatever her mom wanted to show her in the future wasn't going to be something she wanted to see. She was in serious fight-or-flight mode. Right now, she knew she was too emotionally exhausted to fight. All she wanted to do was take flight and fly as far away as it took to forget this Christmas Eve had ever happened.

Lydia looked deep into her eyes. "I've told you it doesn't work that way."

Alexis fought to pull herself together. She stood her ground. "And I'm telling you I'm not going with you to see the future."

For a moment, they just stood staring at each other silently.

Finally, Lydia nodded slowly. "You're sure this is what you want?"

Alexis answered quickly. "Yes, I'm sure. One hundred percent. I don't need to see the future. I'm good. I'm fine."

"Okay," Lydia said, looking sad. She then shut the door, so Alexis was still inside the house, and she was outside.

Alexis was left staring at the door. "Seriously, Mom, did you just shut the door on me? Now who's being dramatic?" Alexis laughed as she opened the door.

But Lydia was gone.

Alexis looked around. "Nice one, Mom. Okay, you can come back now. You can do your thing and pop back here."

Silence.

Alexis could hear her heart pounding in her chest as she waited for her mom. When Lydia didn't appear, Alexis walked further outside and looked around. "Mom?"

The door slammed shut behind her.

Alexis whipped around and tried to open the door again, but it was locked. "Okay, Mom, this isn't funny. Let me in." She kept trying the door, but it stayed locked. Growing more anxious by the second, she pounded on the door and rang the bell three times.

Nothing.

"Mom! Jeff! Anyone? Please, let me in," she yelled louder.

She finally gave up at the door and rushed over to the living room window to peer inside. She tried to stay calm, telling herself that her mom was probably hanging out with everyone else, drinking punch and eating Christmas cookies and was just trying to teach her a lesson.

But when she looked around, all she could see was Jeff's family gathered around the Christmas tree, merrily opening presents.

Everyone was there.

Everyone... except her mom.

Alexis stepped away from the window. She willed herself to be calm. "Okay, Mom. You win. I'll go wherever you want." She held out her hands and wiggled her fingers. "See, I'm ready. I'm sorry I wouldn't go before, but if you want to show me my future, let's do it. Let's go."

She waited in silence.

But her mom never came.

Fear started to creep in. "Mom? You are coming back, right?" Her voice trembled.

Alexis's shoulders slumped. Everyone had talked about her being all alone, and right now, she'd never felt more alone in her life. She fought back tears. "Mom? If you can hear me, please come back. I'm scared. You keep saying time is running out. I don't know what to do. Please. I need you..."

More silence.

Alexis felt devastated for a million different reasons she didn't want to deal with. She looked up at the sky as her tears started to fall.

"What have I done?"



Chapter 16



Surrounded by darkness, Alexis thrashed around in her bed. She woke herself up by calling out in her sleep.

“No! No!” she cried in anguish as her eyes flew open.

She stared at the ceiling, trying to catch her breath. Her heart was beating so fast that she felt like it was going to jump out of her chest.

Her phone rang, shattering the silence. The ringtone was “Joy to the World.”

She bolted up. “Mom?” she asked hopefully.

But when she looked around the room, she didn’t see her mom. Instead, she saw the shadow of a man in the corner.

A chill ran down her spine. She wanted to scream, but fear kept her frozen.

“Your mom’s not here,” the man said in a deep, rich voice.

Alexis squinted in the darkness. She knew that voice. Her fear turned to wonder.

“Daddy?” Alexis asked as her eyes filled with tears. “Is that really you?” She scrambled out of bed and ran toward her dad. Overcome with joy, she threw herself into his waiting arms. “I can’t believe it’s really you.”

As her dad’s arms wrapped tightly around her, she didn’t care about anything else because she felt safe and loved. It was a moment she never wanted to end as father and daughter were reunited.

“Dad, I wanted to see you so much, but I was too afraid to hope that I’d get to see you, too,” Alexis said as she felt a rush of gratitude. She pulled back

from their hug, just enough so she could look up into his eyes. “But you’re here. You’re really here. You came.” She lovingly touched his cheek. Just like her mom, her dad, James, hadn’t aged a day since the last time she’d seen him. He looked as handsome and distinguished as ever.

He smiled back at her. “You’re my Baby Girl. Of course I came. I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too, so much,” Alexis said as she hugged him again.

She’d always had a special relationship with her dad. He was a man of strong character who always put his family first. While he wasn’t as outgoing as her mom, Alexis always knew her dad’s thoughtful silence meant he was processing everything that was going on. He preferred to sit back and listen while everyone else was talking. To be sure, when he had something to say, everyone listened.

Alexis knew from experience it was never wise to underestimate her dad. He was a force to be reckoned with. She couldn’t remember a moment in her life when he hadn’t been there for her, supporting and encouraging her in everything she did. She always appreciated how much he had believed in her, even before she had believed in herself. He had always been her biggest cheerleader, pushing her to be the very best version of who she could be. He had been loving and caring and always took the time to listen to her. He not only treated her with kindness—he treated her with respect.

She also loved how when she was growing up, her dad never made her feel like a silly child. He never dismissed her ideas and plans for her future. Quite the contrary. From the time she was very young, she remembered how her dad would always encourage her to pursue her dreams, no matter how big or small. Even when she’d gone off to college, he’d constantly called her, reminding her that anything she wanted to do was possible. She just had to believe.

She smiled, specifically remembering a time when she was just seven years old. It was right after one of her dad’s *anything is possible* speeches when he’d told her the sky was the limit. She had taken his words literally and announced that she was going to be an astronaut. Since the sky was the limit, she wanted to shoot for the stars.

Instead of laughing at her lofty goal, her dad had enthusiastically planned a special father-daughter trip, for just the two of them, and had taken her to the Kennedy Space Center. He'd even enrolled her in a space camp where she got to experience all kinds of hands-on science projects. Her eager young mind had soaked everything up, learning about everything from engineering to the power of mathematics and the critical role it all played in being an astronaut.

The more she learned, the more she wanted to know. It was a magical summer she would never forget. But after that summer, she decided she didn't want to be an astronaut anymore. She had a new dream. She didn't want to be *just* an astronaut. She wanted to run the entire NASA program.

The following year, when she learned more about NASA and how NASA also had a boss, she became determined to be that boss. At nine, she'd announced to her mom and dad one night after dinner that she had a new plan. She was going to be the president of the United States of America.

Had her parents laughed? No. Instead, they'd changed their summer plans. They traded in their tickets to Disneyland and booked a trip to Washington, D.C., instead. Alexis had been thrilled when they got to tour the White House.

She laughed, remembering the little white notebook she'd taken with her on her tour. In it she had written down notes about all the things she wanted to change when she moved into the White House—starting with painting her bedroom pink, of course.

As she grew up, no matter how far-fetched her career dreams were, Alexis loved that her parents always supported her. They never put any limits in her head about how far she could go in life. They'd both always believed that she could do anything she set her mind to—and because of their faith in her, she had grown up believing anything was possible. At least, that's what she'd believed until the Christmas Eve when she'd lost the two people she loved most in this world.

Alexis didn't realize she was crying until her dad gently brushed a tear off her cheek. When she looked into his eyes, she saw so much love, it made her

cry more. She took a deep breath and looked around her room. “Where’s Mom?” she asked. “I hope she’s not still mad at me.”

Alexis’s dad shook his head. “She was never mad at you. She only wants what’s best for you. We both do.”

Alexis nodded. “I know. This is just a lot to take in. You and Mom being here. Every time I blink, I’m afraid you’re going to be gone.” Her voice shook with emotion. She took two long, deep breaths and tried to compose herself.

She knew having this chance to talk to her dad again was a priceless gift. After he was gone, there had been so many things she’d wished she’d said to him, so many things she’d wanted to ask him. There were so many times over the years she’d wished she could call him and ask for his advice. Now that he was actually there with her, she didn’t want to waste a moment of this precious time with him.

She struggled to decide what to say first. She wanted her dad to understand how important he was in her life, and how so much of her life had stopped because he was no longer in it. She needed him to know how much she truly loved him.

When she just kept staring at him, he gave her a questioning look. “Are you okay?”

Alexis nodded quickly. “Yes. I’m sorry. I’m still trying to process that you are really here with me. I have so much I want to talk about. So much I want to say.”

He smiled back at her. “Okay.”

“I love you,” she blurted out and then laughed at herself for practically shouting the words.

He laughed with her. “I love you, too, Baby Girl.”

“You were... *are* the best dad ever,” she continued as she fought back tears. “I am who I am today because you always helped me believe I could be anyone I wanted to be. I’ve made something of myself in my career only because you taught me to always work hard and to never give up on my dreams. Mom taught me that, too. You were the best parents anyone could ever have.”

She took a deep breath and then rushed to continue. She didn't want to forget anything.

"I know I made Mom mad tonight. I know she was only trying to help me. But I got so scared. You know how much I hate being scared..." Alexis stopped to catch her breath and then looked into her dad's eyes and rushed on. "Mom was right. When I get scared, I push people away, just like I pushed her away at Jeff's house. But that was the last thing I wanted to do. I love Mom. I love you." Alexis knew she was repeating herself, but she didn't care. For once, she wasn't stopping to pause to think about the perfect thing to say. She was speaking from her heart, a heart that had been locked away for far too long. "I just love you both so much."

Her dad looked into her eyes and smiled. "And we love you, too, Baby Girl. Forever and always."

"Forever and always." Alexis repeated the words, remembering how they'd always say that to each other. She took a deep breath and held out both of her hands to her dad. "Okay, I'm ready."

Her dad chuckled. "Not so fast."

Alexis tilted her head and stared back at her dad, confused. "Why not?"

"Your mom left you something in your closet," her dad replied. His eyes twinkled as his smile grew. "She's been having the best time picking out your outfits."

Alexis laughed. "Seriously? She got me something else to wear?" Even as she asked the question, she couldn't believe she was having this conversation about her mom picking out her clothes. "I don't think she approves of all my business suits."

"I'm sure your suits are fine," her dad said with a smile.

"But she got me something better, right?" Alexis asked, excited.

Her dad's smile lit up the room. "Your mom has always had impeccable taste. Why don't you go find out? I think you're going to like it. Only the best for our daughter. Now go and change. We don't have a lot of time."

Alexis's smile faded a little. "How much time do we have?" She was already worried about her dad leaving just like her mom had.

“Enough time for you to change,” her dad said. “Now go and see what your mom picked out for you this time.”

Alexis kissed her dad on the cheek before hurrying over to her closet. Right before she went inside, she turned back around to her dad. “You’ll still be here when I get back? You’re not going anywhere, right?”

“Right,” her dad said with a smile that warmed her heart. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

Relieved, Alexis hurried into her closet. She gasped with delight when she saw that this time, her mom had picked out a stunning white cocktail dress for her. With its formfitting silhouette, it epitomized elegance and sophistication, while its subtle, sparkling beadwork gave it a touch of romantic whimsy.

“Wow! Mom’s done it again,” Alexis called out to her dad as she continued to admire the dress. “She’s amazing.”

She heard her dad chuckle and say, “She sure is.”

* * *

In record time, Alexis was standing in front of her dad, spinning around to show off her glittering new gown.

“So what do you think?” she asked. But she already knew by the huge smile on her dad’s face that he liked it.

“You look beautiful, Baby Girl,” her dad said with pride.

Alexis ran her hands down the side of her dress. “Thank you. I just can’t believe how perfectly it fits. It’s like it was made for me.”

Her dad nodded.

Alexis’s eyes widened. “Was it made for me?”

For an answer, he just chuckled.

Alexis laughed. “With all these new dresses Mom keeps giving me, I feel a little like Cinderella. Only instead of going to a ball...”

“You’re going to see your future,” her dad finished for her.

Alexis was suddenly hit with a rush of nerves. Her heart beat faster.

“Are you ready?” he asked solemnly.

Alexis could tell by his tone that there would be no more playing around. He had that “I mean business” look on his face. He didn’t get it often, but when he did, you knew he was serious and not messing around.

As frightened as she was to see her future, she was even more frightened of her dad disappearing like her mom had if she refused. So even though she was scared, she nodded and held out her hands. “I am. I’m ready.”

When her dad looked into her eyes, she felt better. She trusted that as long as she was with him, she’d be okay. He’d protect her. She’d be safe.

As his hands touched hers, she held her breath and a flash of white light filled the room.

* * *

A moment later, Alexis found herself standing outside in the dark on a city street sidewalk that was lit up with Christmas lights.

She blinked several times when she saw both her dad and mom facing her.

“Mom,” she whispered in awe. Her heart filled with joy as she reached out and took her mom’s hand. “You came back.”

“Miss me?” her mom asked with a bright smile.

“So much,” Alexis said as she threw herself into her waiting arms. She hugged her mom with tears of joy. She waved her dad to come over. “Dad, come on. You have to get in on this hug, too. Just like we always used to do. Our family hug.”

“The best hugs ever,” Alexis’s mom said.

“Absolutely,” Alexis’s dad agreed as he came over and hugged them both.

It was a moment Alexis wanted to last forever. She still couldn’t believe it was really happening. After all this time, her family was finally back together again. She didn’t understand how any of this could be possible, but for once, she didn’t try and figure everything out. She just let herself feel the love she’d been missing for so long.

Overjoyed and grateful, she took both of her parent’s hands. “Mom, Dad, I just want to say, in case I don’t have another chance, that I love you both so much.” Her voice cracked with emotion. “I was just telling this to Dad, and I know I told you earlier, Mom, but I don’t feel like I told you enough when I

was growing up. You were amazing parents. I didn't know how lucky I really was until you were both gone. I've always worried that you didn't know how much you meant to me, how much I appreciated everything you did for me. How grateful I am that you always believed in me and taught me how to believe in myself."

She gave her dad a loving look. "I always remember what you said to me, Dad. That no matter how hard you worked for someone else, there was no guarantee that they were ever going to respect you and appreciate you. You always said if I was going to bet on someone, to bet on myself—because that was the only way I could be sure to succeed. You teaching me that, Dad, helped me start my own finance company."

She turned to face her mom. "And Mom, by being a strong, independent woman, you always taught me never to take no for an answer and that women could do anything they wanted to do.

"I always wanted to tell you both this and so much more. But just know that I'm grateful that you *were*... that you *are* my parents..." As her voice trailed off, her dad gently wiped a tear off her cheek. She struggled to find the perfect words to continue. Finally, she gave up and just went with what was in her heart. "I've missed you both so much. I love you."

"We love you too, Baby Girl," her dad said.

"So much," her mom added.

Alexis was thankful and smiling, but her smile faded when she saw the look on her parents' faces.

They weren't smiling anymore. They didn't look happy. They looked... worried.

Alexis frowned as she tilted her head to one side and studied them. "Mom, Dad, what's wrong? What is it?"

When she saw her parents exchange a concerned look, a sense of dread started to build inside her. She knew her parents. She could feel how tense they were. She braced herself, because her gut instinct told her whatever was coming wasn't going to be good.

"It's time to see your future," her mom said in a worried voice that made Alexis's stomach twist into a knot.

When her mom motioned behind her, Alexis hesitated. She didn't want to look at whatever her mom was pointing at. Her dad gently took her shoulders and turned her, so she had no choice but to face an office building.

When she saw the building, she felt an immediate sense of relief. It was her office, one of her favorite places in the world.

She laughed as she glanced back at her parents. "You brought me to my office. Great. Of course it's part of my future. Everything I have, I've invested in my company. What I've built here means everything to me."

"Look closer," her dad said.

Alexis turned back to her office—and that was when she noticed her *Taylor Investments* sign was gone. In its place was a giant sign that said *Johnson Law Office*.

Alexis's eyes narrowed. "What happened?" She was upset. "Where's my sign? Did my office move? I really loved this location. It's on the best block in the city. I can't imagine moving unless I found something bigger and better in the future, and..."

Her voice trailed off as she caught the sad look her mom and dad exchanged. Her heart skipped a beat. Something was wrong—very wrong.

"What is it? Show me," she urged. She grabbed her parents' hands. "Show me now."

A flash of white light surrounded them.



Chapter 17



In an instant, Alexis found herself standing with her parents back in her penthouse condo. They were in her living room. All the lights were off. She squinted as she looked around.

“Why are we back at my place?” Alexis asked. “Did we forget something?”

Her mom, looking uneasy, took a deep breath.

Her dad silently pointed to her bedroom.

Alexis’s heart started to beat faster. The way her parents were acting was making her anxious. Confused, she started walking toward her bedroom.

Her parents followed right behind her.

When Alexis opened her bedroom door, she was stunned to see an older version of herself lying in her bed with her eyes shut. She looked frail. Something was wrong. There was a nurse next to the bed putting a blanket on the woman’s body. The woman didn’t move. She was barely breathing. The nurse quickly left the room.

“What’s this?” Alexis demanded. She tried to mask her fear with annoyance.

“Your future,” her mom answered quietly.

“My future?” Alexis asked incredulously. “What are you talking about?” Alexis stepped closer so she could get a better look at the older version of herself in the bed. Her eyebrows knit together. Her frown grew. “What’s wrong with me? Why is a nurse here?”

“You’ve had to pay for someone to come and take care of you,” her mom replied.

“You’ve been sick,” her dad added.

“What do you mean *sick*?” Alexis asked as she turned to face her parents. She then turned back to the bed. She couldn’t wrap her head around what she was seeing. The older version of herself didn’t look like she had long to live. It was alarming. “What happened to me?”

“You worked too much, and you didn’t take care of yourself,” her dad answered.

“You weren’t eating right or sleeping enough,” her mom added.

“No...” Alexis said as she stepped closer to the bed. The woman she saw in bed looked like a shell of a woman. She wasn’t strong or powerful. She wasn’t anything. “How did this happen?”

“All your stress caught up to you, and your body just shut down,” her mom said.

Alexis, scared, looked at Old Alexis. “How can this be me?” she whispered. She tried to make herself go numb so she wouldn’t feel anything. But her go-to move wasn’t working.

Right now, all she could do was feel, and what she was feeling was tearing her heart into a million pieces. It terrified her. She took a deep breath to steady herself before asking the question she was afraid to get the answer to.

“How long have I been like this?” she finally asked.

“A while,” Lydia said. Her own voice was filled with sorrow.

Alexis looked around her bedroom. “But I don’t see any get-well cards or flowers. Who’s coming to see me?”

Her mom and dad shared a worried look.

“What?” Alexis jumped in. “You keep giving each other these looks. It’s killing me. Just tell me. Trust me, my imagination is likely far worse than anything you’re going to say.

“No one comes to see you,” her dad said.

Alexis’s shoulders slumped. She hadn’t been expecting that.

“Except the nurses you pay to be here,” he finished.

Alexis felt like someone kicked her in the stomach and stabbed her in the heart with a butter knife. She didn't want to believe what she was hearing. It hurt too much. She forced herself to stand up straighter. She lifted her chin high. "There has to be someone in my life who has come to see me," she said. "Someone who is worried about me..." She held her breath as she looked at her mom and dad. She waited for them to answer.

Their silence was deafening.

The butter knife in her heart twisted again, deepening the dull ache.

Alexis rushed on. She was desperate to find something more positive, "Mom, I thought this whole journey, or whatever you want to call it, was all about helping me learn to love again. So who do I love in the future? Who loves me?"

Alexis's heart sank as she watched her mom take a deep breath. Alexis locked eyes with her. "Mom, please, just tell me."

"You don't have anyone who loves you in the future. You're all alone," her mom finally said.

Alexis inhaled sharply. Her mom's words were like a slap across her face. Alexis shook her head. She refused to believe it. There had to be some mistake.

"No," was all she could say as she walked closer to the older version of herself. It broke her heart to see how helpless and weak the woman looked as she peered down at her.

The question that consumed her was how this could be her fate when she'd fought her entire life to be strong. She'd vowed never to feel helpless after what had happened with her parents. Everything she'd sacrificed and done had been to make sure she was a respected, successful businesswoman. But now, she was finding out that in the end, none of what she'd done would matter. She wouldn't have anything. She would be sick and all alone. It was too devastating to think about.

Alexis, distraught, quickly looked away from the bed and stared back at her parents. "There has to be something I can do. This can't be me."

"But this is the life you've chosen," her dad responded.

Alexis felt like she was spiraling. She frantically pointed to herself on the bed. “I did not choose *this*. No one would choose *this*, to be sick and all alone, with no one to love them.”

“Every day, you had a choice,” Alexis’s mom said as she joined her. “You decided your own future. You decided *this*. You said all that mattered to you was your career and money.”

“Yes, but...” Alexis started, but her mom kept going.

“You’ve spent all your time making money, not memories,” her mom said. “Your bank account might be full, but your life is empty.”

Alexis’s dad nodded as he joined them. “This is not the life we wanted for you, Baby Girl.”

Alexis broke down. As she stared at her parents, her tears fell. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have left me,” she said in a voice filled with pain. “Every time I think of love, I think of losing you all over again.”

Devastated, Alexis ran out of the bedroom.



Chapter 18



The next thing she knew, instead of being inside her condo, Alexis was surprised to find herself back at the park. She was standing inside the gazebo again.

The only light was from the moonlight and the gazebo's hundreds of white twinkling Christmas lights. When she looked around and saw she was alone, she didn't know if she was relieved or disappointed. Right then, she just felt numb. She was emotionally drained after seeing her devastating future.

She sat down on a bench and buried her head in her hands. She wanted to forget everything that had just happened, but she couldn't get rid of the image of the older version of herself lying in bed, too weak to even open her eyes. She also couldn't stop seeing the concern on her parents' faces.

She wished she could have told them not to worry, that she was going to be "fine." But for the first time, she didn't believe it was true. She wasn't going to be fine. Far from it, and that scared her. What scared her even more was how helpless she felt to do anything about it.

That was when she heard her parents' voices in the distance as they walked toward her.

"She always comes here," her mom said.

"And she's always alone," her dad added with a sigh.

When her parents finally stood in front of her, there were tears in her eyes as she looked up at them.

"It's going to be okay," her mom said as they sat down next to her.

Alexis shook her head. “It hasn’t been okay since the day you both left.”

Alexis’s mom took her hand. “You deserve to live a joyful, happy life. A life full of love.”

“I don’t know how,” Alexis said. They were simple words, but they were the truth. And Alexis realized she hadn’t been truthful with herself in a very long time.

“Love is all around you,” Alexis’s dad said. “You just have to accept it and let people in. They’re waiting to love you if you’ll let them.”

Alexis looked into her dad’s eyes and saw the love. More than anything in this world, she wanted to believe him and trust in his words, but she was afraid.

“I don’t know if I can,” she said in a voice that was almost a whisper. When her parents died, she’d shut down emotionally to survive the pain. That was no secret. But instead of healing over time, she’d stayed closed off to everyone and buried herself in her work. As the years went by, the more success she saw in her career, the more she became convinced that her company was all she needed in her life to be happy.

The last thing she wanted was to truly love someone again and risk losing them like she’d lost her parents. She’d decided a long time ago that she’d rather be alone than to ever experience that kind of pain again. Loving and losing someone was not a risk she was willing to take. She honestly thought she’d planned out the perfect life for herself. It was a life she was proud of. She’d thought she was happy. She’d thought she had it all figured out.

Until tonight.

After seeing what was in store for her future, she didn’t know what to do—and that terrified her.

“Do you know why your dad and I are here at Christmas?” her mom asked.

Alexis shook her head.

“Because anything is possible at Christmas,” Lydia said. “This is the one time of year when miracles can happen. Everything can change. You just have to believe.”

Alexis looked into her mom’s eyes. “You know I stopped believing a long time ago.”

“And you haven’t stopped running since. Aren’t you exhausted?” Lydia asked.

Alexis looked over at her dad. “I’ve gotten really good at running. It’s how I feel safe.”

“Do you feel safe now after seeing your future?” Alexis’s dad asked.

A chill ran down Alexis’s spine. She shook her head. Her parents were right. She was exhausted. She was constantly setting personal goals that were impossible to live up to. Her intense work schedule barely allowed her any time to eat, much less sleep. If she was being honest with herself, her definition of success was killing her. Alexis took a deep breath. “Right now, I feel like I’m on a runaway train that’s accelerating. I don’t know how to get off or how to slow down. And now it’s too late...”

“It’s never too late,” her mom interrupted with conviction. “It’s your choice, Alexis. Choose love.”

Alexis slowly got up and walked to the edge of the gazebo. She was afraid if she opened herself up to being vulnerable that all the emotions and the feelings she’d fought so hard to block all these years would hit her like a tsunami, drowning her. When she leaned against the railing, she looked out into the park and saw a line of Christmas trees lit up with lights. “I’m scared,” she said, barely loud enough for even herself to hear.

“And we’re scared for you if you don’t try to change your life now while you still can,” her dad said.

“You just have to believe,” her mom added.

“And you can start by letting Christmas back into your heart,” her dad said.

Alexis turned back around to face her parents.

But they were gone.

“Mom? Dad?” she called out anxiously. *Not again*, she thought. This time, it hurt even more because she’d lost both of them. She hugged herself as tears streamed down her face. “Please come back,” she begged in a voice that sounded more like a whimper. “I don’t know what to do...”

Then suddenly, she heard her dad’s deep, rich voice echo through the gazebo. “Love is all around you. You just have to accept it,” he said.

“It’s never too late,” her mom’s voice followed.

Alexis, overcome with emotion, shut her eyes. She needed to be brave. She had to show her parents and herself that she could do this. She wasn't going to give up. She was Alexis Taylor. She'd spent her whole life turning noes into yeses. Somehow, some way, she was going to fight for her future.

She stood up straighter. "I promise I'll try," she said in a voice that still sounded unsure. She took a deep breath and tried again with more conviction. "I'm going to try. I promise."

* * *

Tossing and turning in her bed, Alexis woke herself up by shouting, "I'll try. I'll try!"

For a second, breathless, she didn't move. She stared at the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. She waited to see if a phone would ring and play a Christmas song.

But nothing happened.

There was only silence.

She slowly looked around her room, expecting to see her mom and dad.

They weren't there. She was all alone.

She shut her eyes for a few seconds and counted to five. But when she opened her eyes again, she was still alone. Instead of feeling crushed, she was surprised to realize that she felt okay. She couldn't explain why or how, but she felt lighter and happier than she had since when her parents had passed away.

She sat up in bed. Her bedroom wasn't dark anymore. A ray of sunshine was streaming through the window.

Alexis quickly jumped out of bed. She ran into her bathroom to look at herself in the mirror. She touched her cheeks, her lips, her hair.

She looked and felt normal.

She wasn't Young Alexis or Old Alexis. She was just herself. She sighed with relief and gratitude.

"I'm okay," she said, laughing, relieved beyond belief. She felt like the weight of the world had just been lifted off her shoulders. She also felt something she hadn't felt in a very long time...

Hope.

When she ran back into her bedroom, she saw two new things on her nightstand. The first thing she saw was the Christmas picture with her parents. This time, it didn't freak her out. She picked it up and smiled at the photograph. When she put the picture back down, she saw a vintage blue book. The book's title was written in gold.

It read, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

Alexis smiled as she picked up the book. "Oh, Mom." When she opened the cover, she was overwhelmed with emotion to see the message that was written inside. She read it out loud.

The greatest gift at Christmas is love.

Love is all around you.

It's never too late.

We love you,

Mom and Dad.

Fighting back tears of gratitude, Alexis turned to the page where there was a bookmark and read a passage from the story...

"I will honour Christmas in my heart,

and try to keep it all the year...

I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future.

The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me.

I will not shut out the lessons that they teach."

Alexis reverently touched the words on the page. They were words she silently vowed to never forget—and words she promised herself she would live by from this day forward. She closed the book and held it to her heart. "Thank you, Mom," she whispered.

When her phone rang, it was her regular ringtone, not Christmas music.

She happily picked it up when she saw it was Justin calling. "Justin, hi!" Her smile grew when she heard his voice.

“Good morning, Alexis,” Justin said. “I’m waiting downstairs, so anytime you’re ready.”

“What day is it?” Alexis asked.

Justin laughed. “December twenty-fifth. Christmas.”

Alexis, exuberant, ran over to her window to look out. “I didn’t miss it! I didn’t miss Christmas!” Her smile lit up the room. “How did Mom and Dad do all that in one night? Of course, they’re my parents. My mom and dad can do anything. They’re amazing, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” Justin answered, sounding confused. “Did you drink that whole bottle of wine you brought home from work last night?”

Alexis laughed. “No. Sorry. I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Are you okay?” Justin asked, sounding worried.

“Everything’s great,” Alexis answered, laughing. She couldn’t contain her joy. “It’s better than great—it’s wonderful. I’ll be down in just a second. Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” Justin said back, sounding surprised.

Alexis was hanging up when she heard him mutter, “Must be the wine.”

She laughed as she quickly brought up Jeff’s number in her phone. She had him listed as only “COO.” When she called he answered on the first ring.

“Hi,” he said, sounding concerned. “Is everything okay?”

“Have you left for the office yet?” Alexis asked.

“I’m just leaving now,” Jeff answered. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Stay home,” Alexis said as her smile grew. “I’m coming over.”

There was a second of silence before Jeff spoke. “Okay,” he said, sounding worried.

As Alexis hung up, she saw a gorgeous red dress draped across a chair. It was fun and flirty with flouncy, three-quarter, bell-shaped sleeves. Grinning, Alexis picked up the dress and held it up to herself. Excited, she spun around. “Yes. Yes. Yes. I love it. Thank you, Mom. It’s perfect.”

* * *

A few minutes later, Alexis felt like a million dollars when she stepped out of the elevator in her building and found Justin waiting for her in the lobby.

He did a double take when he saw her.

“Merry Christmas,” she called out to him merrily.

“Merry Christmas,” he said as he smiled back at her. “Wow. You look amazing.”

Alexis flashed him a sexy smile as she looked him up and down. “So do you.”

Justin looked sharp in his custom-tailored, black suit. He’d paired the crisp white shirt with a classy red tie that had faint emerald-green stripes running through it.

Her smile grew when she saw how surprised Justin was by her compliment.

His eyes narrowed as he studied her. “You look... different.”

Alexis laughed as she spun around playfully. “Yeah? Well, I feel different.”

They smiled back at each other.

“Maybe it’s the dress,” Alexis said.

Justin chuckled. “No, it’s more than the dress.”

The compliment made her blush. She looked into his eyes. “Justin, are you sure you’re okay working today? It’s Christmas. You should be with your family.”

Justin looked surprised. “I always drive you at Christmas. It’s fine. Look, after all these years, you’re like family. Plus, I’ll see them later, okay?”

“Okay,” Alexis answered, feeling grateful. “Thank you for always taking such great care of me.”

“Always,” Justin said as he put his hand on the small of her back to guide her out the door. “Let’s get going. I know you don’t like being late.”

Alexis was still smiling as they walked out of the building together. It was a glorious, bright, and sunny Christmas Day. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

Justin opened the SUV’s door for her. “Here you go.”

“Thank you, Justin,” she said as she slid into the back seat.

He nodded and smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Alexis got out her phone and texted Jeff.

Heading there now. See you soon!

Jeff immediately texted back a thumbs-up emoji.

Alexis put her phone away and settled back to enjoy the drive. She caught Justin watching her in his rearview mirror. “What?” she asked with a smile.

“You’re just usually on your phone, or your computer, or both,” he said.

Alexis laughed. “Yeah. Not today.”

Justin looked intrigued. “So how was your Christmas Eve?”

Alexis let out a deep, satisfied, sigh. “It was life-changing.”

Justin’s eyebrows arched. “Yeah?”

Alexis nodded. “Yeah.”

“I should have come to your place,” Justin said with a laugh.

Alexis smiled back at him. She moved up in her seat so she was closer to him. “Do you think you could put on some Christmas music?”

Justin’s eyes widened. “Okay, who are you and what have you done with Alexis?”

Alexis laughed again. “I’m serious.”

“So am I,” Justin said with a grin. He pushed a button on his console. “Okay, how about this?”

The song “Joy to the World” started to play...

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let Earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare Him room
And Heaven and nature sing...”

Alexis shut her eyes for a second and sighed contently. “I love this song,” she said softly.

Justin continued to look surprised. “Really?”

Alexis nodded as she opened her eyes. “Really.”

“Okay, we’re off,” Justin said as he pulled away from the curb. “To the office.”

“Actually, no,” Alexis corrected him. “We need to make a stop first.”

“Really?” Justin asked. “Wow, you’re just full of surprises this Christmas.”

Alexis smiled brightly. “I hope so.”



Chapter 19



For the rest of the ten-minute drive to Jeff’s house, Alexis, for the first time that she could remember, didn’t write one email or text, or talk on her phone. She just sat back, relaxed, and enjoyed the Christmas music. Her smile grew when her mom’s favorite Christmas song came on.

“Silent Night.”

In the past, “Silent Night” and any Christmas song made her feel sad by reminding her of the parents she had lost. But not anymore. Now, all the Christmas carols were bringing back so many wonderful memories she had with her parents. Listening to “Silent Night” made her feel connected to her mom and brought her comfort. She shut her eyes and enjoyed the music as “Silent Night” played...

“Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child
Holy infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace...”

A few seconds later, when she opened her eyes, she caught Justin watching her in his mirror again.

She laughed. “What now?”

He smiled back. “Nothing. It’s just nice.”

She waited for him to continue.

“It’s nice to see you looking so happy,” he finished.

They shared a smile as the song continued to play...

“Sleep in heavenly peace...”

* * *

A short time later, they pulled up to Jeff’s house.

Alexis couldn’t wait to get out of the SUV. “Don’t worry, Justin. I’ve got the door,” she said even before he stopped.

As soon as he parked, she jumped out.

“Okay,” Justin said, sounding surprised again.

Alexis, excited, rushed up to Jeff’s front door. The night before, she’d been so stressed out after getting locked out of the house that she hadn’t noticed how beautifully the outside of Jeff’s home was decorated for Christmas. The front porch was flanked by elegant white columns that were wrapped with sparkling Christmas lights, and a garland of fresh, fragrant evergreens framed the entryway. There was a gorgeous matching wreath with a red satin bow on the front door.

Alexis was just about to knock when Jeff surprised her by opening the door.

Jeff looked impeccable as always in one of his signature classic business suits. But she noticed right away that he looked tense and nervous to see her. His brows were furrowed, creating deep lines on his forehead.

“Is everything okay at work?” he asked, almost as if he was afraid to hear her answer.

Alexis matched his serious look. She shook her head. “No, it’s not. We have a big problem at work. A huge problem.”

Jeff stuffed his hands in his pockets and took a deep breath. “You’re going to fire me, aren’t you?”

There was silence as the two stared back at each other.

Then Alexis broke the tension by laughing.

Jeff, surprised, blinked twice.

Alexis reached out and touched his arm. “No, I’m not here to *fire you*. I’m here to promote you.” She patted his chest playfully. “Now, come on. Invite me in.”

Jeff looked stunned as she breezed past him and entered his house as if she owned the place.

Alexis only had to walk a few feet before she saw all of Jeff’s family gathered in the family room. They were the same people she had seen the night before, on Christmas Eve, when they were playing the drawing game. Now, everyone was gathered around the tree, opening more Christmas presents.

They all stopped and stared when they saw Alexis. Their happy smiles disappeared.

“Hey, everyone. Look who stopped by,” Jeff said with a forced cheerfulness.

“Hi, everyone,” Alexis said with a small wave. She saw Jeff’s wife’s worried look.

There was an awkward silence when only Sydney, Jeff’s adorable granddaughter, smiled back at her.

Alexis smiled warmly at Sydney before continuing. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I just came by to give Jeff his Christmas bonus.”

Now Jeff’s family was really paying attention.

Alexis quickly took a red envelope out of her purse and held it up in front of him.

Jeff stared at the envelope like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Wait. What?”

Alexis smiled as she handed it to him. “And I’m here to tell you about your raise.”

Jeff’s eyes grew huge. Now he really looked confused. He turned to his family. “Just give me one second. I need to talk to Alexis.” He then hustled her into the kitchen.

Unfazed, Alexis took a second to admire Jeff’s kitchen. Even this room was decorated for Christmas with tiny gold twinkle lights and garland draped over all the gleaming white cabinets. She’d also missed that the night before.

“Are you feeling okay?” Jeff asked as soon as they were alone. He looked uneasy.

Alexis beamed back at him. “Never better.” She pointed at the red envelope she’d just given him. “Come on. Open your bonus.”

“I thought we weren’t doing this,” Jeff said with a mixture of skepticism and worry as he opened the envelope. When he took out the check, unfolded it, and read the number written on it, his jaw dropped to the floor. “Oh. Wow. Okay. This is obviously wrong.”

Alexis’s smile grew. “No, Jeff. I’m the one who’s been *wrong*.”

“I don’t understand,” Jeff said. He looked at the check again like he couldn’t believe it.

Alexis reached out and touched his arm as she looked into his eyes. “Jeff, you’ve been my right-hand guy from the very beginning. You keep my company running. You take care of my staff, and now it’s time for me to take care of you.”

“This is too much,” Jeff said, holding up the check.

Alexis shook her head. “No, I’d say it’s just right. It’s just enough to pay off your mortgage and continue to help your family any way you need to.”

Jeff, stunned, inhaled sharply. “Wait. What? How did you know?”

Alexis tried to think fast. “I... Uh...” She took a deep breath and smiled. “You know what? It doesn’t matter.”

Jeff shook his head, flabbergasted. “Alexis, this is a big number.”

“It’s only money,” Alexis responded.

Jeff’s eyes widened. “What?”

Alexis continued. “What good is money if you can’t share it with your family? And Jeff, after all these years, I consider you my family.”

This left Jeff speechless.

His reaction made Alexis realize even more how much work she had to do to make sure Jeff knew how much she valued, respected, and appreciated him.

“But we didn’t make our numbers,” Jeff finally said when he found his words again.

“No, we didn’t,” Alexis agreed. “But it’s my fault because I set the goals way too high. I think moving forward, we should set the goals *together*. Starting with this—you need a raise. It has been way too long,” Alexis said.

When she saw Jeff’s expression of wonder and gratitude, she wished she’d done this a long time ago. But she refused to dwell on the past. Today was a new day. She knew she was getting a rare do-over. She was going to do things differently this time around, much differently. She needed to keep her eyes on the future and not waste another precious second. She felt so grateful she could do this for Jeff.

She smiled brightly at him. “You deserve this raise, Jeff, and so much more.”

He looked touched.

“So what do you say?” Alexis asked. She gave him a hopeful look. She hoped she wasn’t too late.

Jeff hesitated.

Alexis held her breath.

Finally, he looked deep into her eyes. When he spoke, his voice was heavy with emotion. “I’d say, it sounds like you’re my Christmas miracle. Thank you, Alexis. Thank you so much.”

When Alexis saw grateful tears in Jeff’s eyes, she gave him a heartfelt hug. “No, Jeff, thank you. Thank you for never giving up on me.” Her voice trembled a little as she fought off her own tears. “Okay, now we need to get you back to your family. It’s Christmas.”

Jeff’s eyebrow arched. “You don’t need me to come to the office today?”

Alexis smiled as she shook her head. “No, you’re exactly where you need to be—home with the people you love most. Come on.” She led the way as they headed toward Jeff’s front door.

Everyone in the family room looked up as she passed them. She waved again. “Merry Christmas, everyone.”

This time, they all waved back to her and called out, “Merry Christmas!” Jeff’s granddaughter, Sydney, waved the most while she held on tight to an adorable white, fluffy teddy bear that she kissed on the top of its head.

Jeff was still smiling when they got to the door. “Alexis, I really can’t thank you enough.”

She smiled back at him. “And I can’t thank *you* enough for all you’ve done for me, Jeff. I’ve always been able to count on you. You’ve never let me down. That means everything to me. I’m very grateful.”

Jeff’s granddaughter, Sydney, exuberantly ran up to them. “Grandpa,” she called out with glee as she stretched out her arms.

Jeff effortlessly scooped her up into his arms and hugged her. “There’s my girl.”

This reminded Alexis of something her dad used to do. The memory made her smile.

“Alexis, this is my granddaughter, Sydney.”

Alexis smiled at the little girl. “Hi, Sydney.”

Sydney grinned back at her.

“You know what?” Jeff said. “Alexis, if you’d like to stay, we were just about to play some Christmas games.”

Sydney happily nodded her head in agreement.

“And you know what?” Jeff continued proudly, “Alexis can be on my team because I’m really good.”

Alexis laughed. “No, you’re not.”

When Jeff gave her a strange look, she quickly backtracked, realizing her mistake. “I mean, I’m not. I’m terrible. I’m no good at games.”

Confused, Sydney tilted her head as she stared back at Alexis. “Yes, you are. You guessed Santa.”

Alexis’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What?” Jeff asked.

“Last night,” Sydney said. “She guessed Santa.”

Alexis couldn’t believe it. Sydney had seen her. No one else had seen or heard her. The only explanation she could think of was that Sydney was a child. Maybe a child’s heart was still innocent and pure enough to believe in the magic and miracles of Christmas.

Jeff, perplexed, put Sydney down. “What do you mean, honey, when you say that Alexis guessed Santa?”

Alexis quickly smiled at Sydney and jumped in before the little girl could answer. “Jeff, you know how kids are—such vivid imaginations.”

Sydney smiled and stared up at Alexis with her big, beautiful eyes. “Where’s your mommy?”

Alexis froze. She hadn’t realized the child had also seen her mom. She knelt down so she could be eye to eye with Sydney.

“Where’s my mommy?” Alexis repeated the question to Sydney.

Sydney nodded.

Alexis touched her heart. “My mommy is right here.” As she said the words, she didn’t feel sad. Her sadness from the past had been replaced with so many beautiful Christmas memories with her parents that now brought her comfort and joy.

Sydney smiled back at her.

Alexis stood up. “Your granddaughter’s lovely. She’s really beautiful.”

Jeff looked down lovingly at Sydney. “We are very blessed.”

At that moment, Alexis felt very blessed, too. She was grateful that she could help Jeff and his family, and that Sydney was going to be okay. It was the best Christmas gift she could have asked for.

“Well, I should go so you two can get back to celebrating Christmas,” Alexis said. “Enjoy your family, Jeff. I’ll see you in January. Make a list of all the changes you’d like to make, and we’ll talk about them—start the new year off right. I want to hear all your ideas.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Jeff said. “And thank you again, Alexis, for taking the time to come by this morning, for the Christmas bonus, the raise, for everything. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Alexis called back to him cheerfully as she walked out the door. Before he shut it, she saw all of Jeff’s family run up and hug him, celebrating.

Alexis was still smiling as she walked up to Justin’s SUV.

As soon as he saw her, he jumped out and held the back door open for her.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Getting better by the second,” Alexis said merrily as she slid into the back seat. “Now you can take me to work.”

“Absolutely,” Justin said as he shut her door.



Chapter 20



As Justin pulled up to her office building, Alexis saw her huge Taylor Investments sign. “There it is,” she said, breathing a huge sigh of relief.

Justin eyed her from his rearview mirror. “There *what* is?”

Alexis laughed. “Sorry. Nothing. I was just talking about my sign. I still remember the first day it went up.”

“I do, too,” Justin said. “It was a huge media event.”

Alexis smiled brilliantly. “Everyone loves a success story.”

“And you’ve certainly been one,” Justin said. “And an inspiration to so many people.”

Alexis was touched. “Thank you, Justin. That’s a very kind of you to say. That means a lot to me.”

“It’s true,” Justin continued. “I know you inspired me to go after my dreams. And just look at the example you’ve set for so many young women. You’ve shown them that they can succeed in whatever career path they choose, even if it has traditionally been an all-male dominated industry. Your story and all your hard work and dedication are a fantastic blueprint for anyone wanting to follow in your very successful footsteps.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want anyone following exactly what I’ve done,” Alexis said. She was thinking about all the lessons she’d learned in the last twenty-four hours.

“What do you mean?” Justin asked.

“When it comes to my work ethic, sure, that I’m very proud of. But I haven’t always been the best boss to work for,” Alexis said.

“How so?” Justin asked.

For a moment Alexis pondered the best way to explain it. “I guess I could never understand why everyone else wasn’t as driven as I was. If they didn’t want to work as hard as I did and complained about working overtime and weekends, I thought they were lazy. Looking back at it now, I was the problem. I didn’t have any work-life balance. Even though I didn’t have a life, it wasn’t fair of me to expect my staff not to have lives, either. I pushed my employees too hard. Thankfully, I had Jeff as my chief operating officer. He always found a way to balance things out. He’s the one who took care of my staff, not me.”

Justin looked surprised.

Alexis saw his expression in the mirror. “It’s true. But I’m determined to do better. I’m going to work with Jeff to make some changes at the office that will be good for my employees and for me. This will be good news for you, too, Justin. You won’t have to work so many late hours driving me around.”

She was surprised when Justin didn’t respond. Instead, he looked away.

“Is everything okay?” she asked him.

“Yes,” Justin said quickly. “I’m just trying to take this all in. First, you’re all chipper because it’s Christmas, a holiday you’ve never celebrated for as long as I’ve known you. Then you want me to play Christmas music, and you actually relax and enjoy it instead of working. And now you’re admitting that you’ve been rough on your employees, and you have no personal life. I’m just trying to figure out how all this happened.”

Alexis laughed. “Believe me, I get it.”

“Not that I’m complaining,” Justin quickly added as he got out of the SUV and came around to open her door. “That just must have been some Christmas Eve you had.”

She smiled as she took his hand and got out. “Justin, you have no idea.” She headed into the building happily humming “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.”

As soon as the elevator door opened to her office, she paused to listen. She half expected her employees to be playing Christmas music and hanging around the Christmas tree again. But this time, she didn't hear any party going on. When she entered the workspace, she saw her entire staff was working away diligently.

As she took it all in, she was proud of the staff she had put together. She had some of the best and brightest minds working for her, and she knew they were a big reason for her success.

When she'd first started her business, she had handpicked every single employee. She made it a point to know who they were, where they were from, and what their long-term goals were. That way, she made sure they were the best fit to work together. Over the years, as her company grew to be one of the top financial firms in the country, she had counted more on her human resources department and Jeff to do all the initial scouting and vetting.

Now, Jeff did all the first rounds of interviewing. She only talked to the people he recommended she hire. He knew her strict guidelines and what she needed and wanted. He hadn't disappointed her yet.

As she looked around the room, she realized she knew very little about the people working for her, beyond their professional credentials. She thought about what her dad, who had owned his own appraisal company, had always told her. He'd said it was critical that she treat her employees like family. He said if she took care of her staff, they'd take care of her.

Clearly, after seeing her future where she was sick and alone and no one came to visit her, her dad was right. She'd never taken any interest in her staff's personal life, so why should they have cared what happened to her?

She was the one who had put up the wall between them. Now she was counting on Jeff to help her take that wall down one brick at a time. She thought about the popular phrase, "treat people the way you'd want to be treated," and realized it really was that simple. She also realized she had a lot of mending fences to do—and that started right now.

As she walked down the hallway, she heard one of her employees, Lorianne, talking. Her eyes widened as she listened to what Lorianne was saying.

“Where’s the Scrooge?” Lorianne asked. “I thought she’d be here first thing this morning to make sure none of us were late.”

“I’m right here,” Alexis said as she appeared around the corner.

All the color drained out of Lorianne’s face. “Oh my God... I’m sorry. I didn’t...”

Alexis laughed as she raised her hand to stop her. “It’s okay.” Alexis continued to smile as she looked around at all her staff. “Good morning, everyone. Merry Christmas!”

Lorianne and the rest of the staff looked shocked. Everyone was staring back at her like they were waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“How are you all? Sorry I’m late,” Alexis continued in her cheerful tone. With a flourish, she opened her bag and took out a stack of red envelopes. They looked just like the one she had given Jeff. “But I have something for you.” She stood up on a chair so she was tall enough to see everyone. “Your Christmas bonuses!”

Her employee Dave, confused, stepped forward. “What? I thought we weren’t getting our Christmas bonuses.”

“We didn’t make our numbers,” Lorianne added with a sigh.

Alexis nodded. “But we still had a very good year, and that’s because of all of you.” Alexis smiled, but no one smiled back. As she looked around, no one would make eye contact with her, either. Her entire staff looked apprehensive, nervous, and even scared. That was when she realized her plan of mending fences was going to be harder than she’d thought. But she wasn’t giving up. She took a deep breath and continued.

“I want you all to know how much I appreciate you and all that you’ve done for my company,” Alexis said.

Her words were met with silence.

She continued and corrected herself. “*Our* company—because this is *our* company. I couldn’t have done any of this without your magnificent minds and all your hard work and dedication.”

Lorianne and Dave exchanged surprised looks.

Alexis handed a red envelope to each of them. “There are going to be some big changes, starting right now.”

Everyone looked worried.

Alexis started handing out more red envelopes to her confused employees.

David gulped as he stared at his envelope.

Alexis caught his look and realized everyone thought she was firing them, just like Jeff had. “It’s okay,” she said to Dave. “I’m not firing you. I’m not firing anyone. This is your Christmas bonus, and everyone gets one. When I said we were making changes, I meant it—and we’re starting right now. You can all leave. Go home.”

“What?” Lorianne asked, confused. “I thought you needed us to work.”

“What I *need* is for you to go enjoy Christmas,” Alexis said with a bright smile. “Be with your family and friends. Take your vacations. Do whatever you want. But I don’t want to see anyone back here in the office until January second.”

No one moved.

Alexis laughed. “No, seriously. I really mean it. Go. The office is officially closed.”

“Is this for real?” Dave asked. His amazement grew when he opened his red envelope and saw the check. “Whoa! This is more than we’ve ever gotten.”

“Because you all deserve it,” Alexis said. “Now, seriously, everyone. Get out of here. Go home. What are you waiting for? It’s Christmas.”

After seeing their checks, everyone started celebrating and hugging each other as they did what Alexis said and quickly left the office.

As Alexis watched them go, she breathed a sigh of relief. It looked like it wasn’t too late to start over with her employees. Her staff hadn’t given up on her. She made a silent promise to herself, then and there, that she’d work with Jeff to find more ways to compensate her team, not just with money but with more time off and other benefits to help improve their quality of life.

She wasn’t sure how she was going to make all these new changes happen, but she knew she was a smart woman. If she could run a multi-million dollar financial company, she could figure out how to hire the right people to help restructure her company and her own personal life, so she actually had a life beyond her office.

If she was going to be a role model, like Justin had talked about, she needed to make sure she was a good one.

Her mind was already whirling with ideas when her assistant, Elise, tentatively walked up to her. Still looking nervous, Elise held out a red envelope to Alexis.

“Here,” Elise said. “You gave me this by accident. I know I just started here, so I don’t get a Christmas bonus yet.”

Alexis took the envelope and locked eyes with Elise.

“You’re right. You are *new* here,” Alexis said. “And I have a lot to teach you. Starting with ‘when someone offers to give you money, you take it.’”

Elise’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Really,” Alexis said, smiling, as she gave the envelope back to Elise.

“Okay,” Elise said gratefully. She looked like she couldn’t believe it.

“Now go home,” Alexis said. “Go enjoy yourself. Merry Christmas.”

Elise was overjoyed. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” Alexis said.

As Elise hurried off, Alexis called out to her. “Elise.”

She stopped and turned around. “Yes? Do you need something Ms. Taylor?”

“Where did you graduate from?” Alexis asked. Her plan to get to know her employees better was going to start right now.

Elise looked surprised by the question. “Harvard. Harvard University.”

Alexis nodded and smiled. “Excellent school. Your family, are they back in Massachusetts?”

Elise, relaxing, smiled back at her. “No, I actually grew up here, in Atlanta. This is where my parents and my sister are. I always planned to come back here to work and working for you at your company has always been my goal.”

Alexis nodded. “You graduated Harvard with a degree in...”

“Finance,” Elise said proudly.

“And you’re working as my assistant?” Alexis asked, surprised.

“You didn’t have any other openings,” Elise explained. “I told Jeff I wanted to work for the best of the best to learn. I thought if I started working for you,

I could learn as much as I could about your company. And then when a position opened up, I'd be the first to hear about it and apply. Jeff said that was okay..." Elise's voice trailed off. She was looking anxious again.

"Yes," Alexis answered quickly to put her at ease. "That's more than okay. Actually, I'm very impressed. I think what you're doing is pretty brilliant. You're ambitious, and not afraid to work hard. It reminds me of something I would do."

Elise looked relieved.

"In January, let's talk," Alexis said. "There's always room for someone like you in this company. Since you do the scheduling for me, put yourself at the top of my list. If there isn't a position for you, I'll make one. How does that sound?"

Elise's eyes were filled with grateful tears. "That sounds amazing. Thank you so much, Ms. Taylor. This is the best Christmas present ever. You have no idea what this means to me. Thank you."

Alexis smiled back at her. "You're welcome. Now go celebrate Christmas. Your family is waiting."

"What about you?" Elise asked. "Are you staying at work?"

Alexis shook her head. "Only for a minute. I just have something I need to get from my office, and then I'll be leaving, too."

"Okay," Elise said, grinning ear to ear. "Thank you again."

Alexis smiled as Elise walked away.

"Merry Christmas," Elise said over her shoulder.

"Merry Christmas," Alexis answered.

As soon as Elise was gone, Alexis headed for her office. When she got there, she stopped before going inside. She stared at the giant Christmas wreath on her office door.

The wreath was spectacular. It looked like it cost a fortune because it did. It was made up of gold-dipped everything. There were gold-dipped evergreens. Gold-dipped sprigs of holly and holly berries. There were gold-dipped pine cones, glittering gold glass ball ornaments, and gold, sparkling Christmas lights.

It was a true work of art, created exclusively for her, by her interior designer who knew she loved all things gold and who did all her Christmas decorations at the office. Alexis knew it was meant to be a symbol of wealth and success. But when she looked at the wreath, it didn't mean anything to her. If she was going to start celebrating Christmas again, she wanted to do it right—and this didn't feel right. If she was going to keep her parents' Christmas memories alive she wanted to decorate with the old-school, traditional decorations that they had all loved together as a family.

She walked down the hallway until she got to Jeff's office. The wreath on his office door was different from all the other gold wreaths in her office. His wreath was traditional. The deep emerald evergreen branches were as full and luminous as they were fragrant. Beyond the pine cones and natural elements, there were a few pretty, hand-carved wooden angels peeking out of the branches along with a big red-and-green plaid bow. That was it. Its beauty was in its simplicity.

She remembered when Jeff had picked the wreath out, she'd given him a hard time, telling him it was too basic, that it wasn't grand enough. She had planned to have it replaced, but then she had gotten too busy and had forgotten. Now she was glad she had forgotten.

She carefully reached up and took Jeff's wreath off the door. She decided there was no reason to let it go to waste on Christmas Day. It was a feast for the eyes and the senses. It was meant to be appreciated and to bring joy.

Satisfied, she carried the giant wreath toward the elevator. When she got to the lobby and the elevator door opened, she saw Justin patiently waiting inside for her. He was admiring her famous Christmas tree that everyone always stood in front of to take pictures.

As soon as he saw her, he hurried over. "Wow, that's some wreath. Here, let me help you with that." He carefully took the wreath from her. "This really is nice."

Alexis smiled brightly. "Thank you. Isn't it amazing? And can you smell it?" Alexis inhaled deeply. "It just smells like Christmas."

Justin laughed. "It sure does."

“I thought you might like to have it for Christmas with your family,” Alexis said.

Justin looked surprised. “Really?”

“I know how you love Christmas decorations,” Alexis answered.

He grinned back at her. “I sure do. Thank you. Everyone will really love this.” He started heading for the door when Alexis playfully grabbed his hand.

“Wait,” she said. Excited, she pulled him over to stand in front of the Christmas tree. “We need to get a picture.”

“What? Seriously?” Justin asked, sounding as shocked as he looked.

Alexis laughed and nodded. “Yes. Apparently, everyone comes from all over to take a picture in front of my tree, except me. I’ve never taken a picture here before.”

“Ever?” Justin asked, surprised.

“Ever,” Alexis answered him and handed him her phone. “Can you take it?”

Justin laughed. “Sure.” He backed up to get a good shot of her.

“No, of both of us,” Alexis said, laughing. “A selfie. You have longer arms, so you should take it.” She looked around for the perfect spot in front of the tree. She frowned, realizing all the best shots would have her Taylor Investments signage in the background. Her perfect marketing plan was now being a perfect pain. She moved around to the side of the tree. “I think I found a spot right here,” she said triumphantly.

Justin put the wreath down and joined Alexis.

She smiled up at him as he held out her phone for a picture and leaned down so they could both be in the shot. “Come on, get closer, so you’re not cut off,” she said. She put her cheek next to his, grinning. “Okay, this is good.”

“Say Christmas,” he said with a sexy smile.

“Christmas!” they both called out.

Justin took the photo and showed Alexis. It was perfect.

Impressed, she looked up at him. “You’ve got skills. This is great.”

Justin nodded. “I *am* good.”

They both laughed.

“You need to text me a copy,” Justin said.

“Absolutely,” Alexis said. When she looked at their picture, the first thing she noticed was how happy they looked. Their eyes were twinkling, and their matching smiles were filled with joy. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so happy and carefree.

Justin walked over and picked up the wreath. “Are you ready to go?”

Alexis nodded as she joined him.

“You know—” Justin started, then stopped.

“What?” Alexis asked.

Justin shook his head. “It’s okay. Forget it.”

“Justin, what is it?”

Justin turned around and pointed at her Taylor Investments sign. “Your sign. I get why you have it there, for advertising and all that, but…”

“I should really move it,” Alexis finished for him.

Justin nodded as their eyes met. “You really should. It’s so annoying.”

Alexis burst out laughing. “I can always count on you to tell me the truth.”

Justin chuckled. “And that’s why you pay me the big bucks. Oh wait, no, you don’t.”

Alexis playfully swatted him. “Hey, it’s Christmas. Be nice.”

Justin raised his eyebrows. “Oh, is that the new holiday rule?”

“Yes,” Alexis said. She linked arms with him as they headed for the door.

“And about that sign. I one hundred percent agree. Consider it done.”

They were both smiling as they headed for the SUV.

“So you’re ready to go home?” Justin asked.

Alexis smiled and shook her head. “No, I have another stop to make.”



Chapter 21



*T*his is it, she thought, as Justin exited the freeway fifteen minutes later. They were almost there.

She'd only given him an address to drive to and told him she needed to see someone she hadn't seen in a very long time.

He glanced at her now in his rearview mirror. "When was the last time you saw this guy?"

Alexis took a deep breath. "Christmas Eve, twenty years ago."

Justin looked surprised. "The same night that your parents..."

"Yes," Alexis said before he could finish. "The same night."

They drove in silence for a few seconds.

"We were engaged," Alexis finally said.

In the rearview mirror, she saw that Justin's eyebrows had shot up. "Really? You never told me that before."

Alexis stared out the window. "I've never told anyone before."



Alexis didn't realize how nervous she was until Justin pulled up in front of a pretty white church.

The church was beautifully decorated for Christmas with holly wreaths on all the doors and windows. The wreaths were decorated with alternating red and green velvet bows. There were also two giant Christmas trees on each side of the front door that were lit up with Christmas lights. The trees were

decorated with charming homemade ornaments that looked like they were made by children. There were strings of cranberries and popcorn and cutout snowflakes covered with glitter. A sign at the front of the church advertised a Christmas concert at 7 P.M.

Anxious, Alexis fidgeted in her seat as Justin stopped the SUV and walked around to open the door for her. Her heart was racing. She told herself to stay calm, but it was easier said than done.

She didn't move.

Justin leaned in to check on her. "Alexis, are you okay?"

When she looked into Justin's eyes, the last thing she felt was *okay*. "It's just... I haven't been to a church in a while."

Justin held out his hand to her. "It'll be okay."

Her hand shook as she took his hand and got out of the SUV. She inhaled sharply as she looked at the church.

Justin's eyebrows knit together. "Alexis, if you don't want to do this, we can turn around and go right now."

Alexis mentally shook herself. She stood up straighter to give herself confidence. She lifted her chin high. "No, I need to do this," she said. "I won't be long." She slowly started walking toward the church.

"I'll be right here if you need me," Justin called out after her.

She smiled a little hearing Justin's voice. It gave her reassurance and made her feel better. When she got to the front door of the church, she stopped for a moment. She inhaled deeply and shut her eyes.

"I can do this," she whispered softly to herself. She opened her eyes, forced a smile, and slowly started to open the church door.

As soon as the door opened, a flash of white light blinded her.

"Oh no, not again," she said, shielding herself from the light, thinking she was about to be transported to another *Christmas Carol* lesson.

She jumped back when someone touched her arm.

"Alexis?" a man's voice asked, sounding as stunned as she felt.

Even before Alexis opened her eyes, she recognized the voice. It was her former fiancé, Steve. She'd always loved the richness of his buttery-smooth

voice. She opened her eyes and smiled back at the first love of her life and the only man she had ever truly loved.

“It is you...” Steve said as he shook his head in wonder. “I’m sorry about the spotlight. We’re doing a run-through with all our lighting before our Christmas concert tonight.”

Alexis breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness that’s all it was.”

Steve gave her a confused look. “What?”

She rushed on, realizing she was making no sense. “Oh, nothing. Sorry.” Her smile grew as she stood back and took a good look at him.

It had been twenty years since they’d last seen each other. But beyond a few gray hairs around his temples, Steve looked almost exactly the same as when they had lived together in college. He was wearing a casual but stylish white button-down shirt over a khaki T-shirt paired with black jeans. His smile held the same warmth she had loved so much.

“How are you, Steve?” she asked with a nervous smile.

“I’m great,” he said as he gave her a heartfelt hug. “I can’t believe you’re really here.”

When Steve pulled back, his smile grew. “You look amazing, Alexis. You’re just as beautiful as ever. You’ve hardly aged in twenty years.”

Alexis felt herself blush like a schoolgirl. “Ah, thank you. You should see my mom.”

When Steve looked confused, Alexis realized her mistake and quickly continued. “You’ve hardly changed, either.”

Steve laughed. “Thanks, but a wife, three kids, a dog, and a guinea pig would say differently.”

Alexis’s eyes widened. She also laughed. “Okay, so you’ve changed a little.”

They shared a smile.

“Come on in,” Steve said. “I want to show you my church. I’m the pastor here.”

“Wow, this is amazing,” Alexis said as she took it all in.

It was a small but charming church. You could tell it was beloved by all the beautiful Christmas decorations and how well it was taken care of. The

wooden pews were polished and gleaming. At the end of each pew was a pretty Christmas wreath.

At the front of the church there was a wonderful nativity scene made up of a humble stable with rustic wooden walls and a thatched roof. Inside the stable were several life-size statues of wise men that were dressed all in white. They were holding precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh as they gathered around a porcelain baby Jesus that was nestled in the manger. There was also a gorgeous group of angels hovering over the stable. They were wearing flowing white garments with shimmering, translucent wings. Their faces were beaming with joy. The backdrop was painted like the night sky with glittering silver stars that caught the light. In front of the nativity scene, there was a row of several dozen, bright red poinsettias that added to the festive feel.

Alexis turned back to Steve. “You said you’re the pastor here. When did this happen?”

“Right after our last Christmas together,” Steve answered. “That Christmas Eve when you ran away from your faith, I ran toward it. The church has brought me comfort.”

Alexis nodded. She hadn’t planned out what to say. But now that she was here with Steve, there were so many things she wanted to tell him. She took a deep breath, looked into his eyes, and trusted that her heart would find the right words.

“I wanted to come see you today to tell you that I am really, truly sorry for everything that happened with us,” Alexis said. She looked over at the altar. She chose her words carefully. “It’s just that... when my parents died, it was like everything inside me shut down. The thought of loving someone and losing them like I lost them... I knew I couldn’t go through that again.”

Alexis was relieved that when she looked back at Steve, his expression only held kindness. There was no judgment.

“Steve, I know this is, like, twenty years too late, but I want you to know I’m really sorry.” Her voice shook with emotion.

Steve took her hand to comfort her. For a moment, they just stared into each other’s eyes. “It’s never too late to say you’re sorry,” he said earnestly.

“Thank you for coming here today.”

Alexis nodded slowly. “Thank you.”

In that moment, she felt like all the guilt she had felt about how she’d treated Steve, that had been weighing her down all these years, was finally lifted off her shoulders. Having Steve’s forgiveness was something she hadn’t known was important to her, until now.

She smiled back at him. “You know, I really did love you. So much. I was so fortunate that you were my first love. You always made me feel so seen and appreciated. You taught me how to love and be loved, and I am so grateful for that.”

“You were very easy to love,” Steve said.

The words brought tears to her eyes. She was so touched. “I think that’s one of the nicest things anyone’s ever said to me.”

Steve smiled. “It’s true.”

“And it’s also true that you’ll always be someone very special to me,” Alexis said. “What we had in the past is something I’ll always cherish and never forget. I’m sorry it has taken me so long to say that.”

“I’m just glad you’re here now. That’s what matters,” Steve said. “You’ve certainly made my Christmas special this year. You’ve always been in my heart and prayers.”

“Thank you, Steve, for just... being you,” Alexis said. “I know you’re busy getting ready for the concert. I should go and let you get back to work.”

Steve held up his hand to stop her. “Oh, wait. Before you go, I have something for you.”

Alexis’s eyes widened with surprise. “Really?” she asked as she watched Steve walk over to a box of Christmas decorations.

He pulled out a small red velvet box and handed it to her. “Here you go.”

Her breath caught. She was stunned. She knew exactly what was in the box.

“Go ahead, open it,” Steve said with a kind smile.

“It’s the angel,” she said with delight as she opened the box and held up the beautiful crystal angel ornament. “You gave this to me on our last Christmas together.”

The angel caught the light and sparkled.

“I did,” Steve said. “It was given to you with love, but for twenty years, it has been packed away. But I think it’s time to celebrate love again, don’t you?”

Alexis smiled back at him and then at the angel. “I do,” she said, meaning every word. This was the first time she was able to remember the genuine love she had shared with Steve without it causing her pain and regret. For years, she had tried to forget that love. Now she knew she didn’t want to forget it. She wanted to celebrate it for what it was—a very special time in her life that she would always be grateful for.

She knew some people went their whole lives never experiencing the kind of love she’d shared with Steve. She hadn’t been ready to receive that love back then, but now she promised herself that if she ever had a chance at true love again, she wasn’t going to run away. She wasn’t going to give up on love again. It was too precious and too important not to fight for.

As she looked around the church, she realized that going to church was something else she had avoided ever since that night she’d been told what had happened to her parents in the hospital chapel. Now, standing inside Steve’s church on Christmas Day, she didn’t want to run from her faith anymore—or from her memories.

For the first time in twenty years, instead of being weighed down by all the sad memories of losing her parents and Steve, she was able to start remembering some of the good memories that had brought her so much happiness and joy.

That night she’d lost her parents, her heart had shattered into a million pieces. As the weeks, months, and years had gone by, love hadn’t been something she thought she needed. Now, as she looked at Steve, she realized she’d been wrong. She wanted more from her life than just her career. She wanted what she’d had with Steve all those years ago. She wanted the kind of love where the person you loved was your best friend and partner. Someone kind and caring. She wanted someone who could be her best friend and make her laugh and help her not take herself too seriously. Steve had always been that person for her.

She gave him a heartfelt hug. “Thank you for forgiving me and for loving me.”

“I forgave you a long time ago,” Steve said. “I’ve always prayed for your happiness and that you would find love and your faith again.”

Alexis stood back and shook her head, smiling.

“What?” Steve asked. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“I was just thinking what a great guy you are,” Alexis said. “Your wife is very lucky.”

Steve laughed. “Wait, will you call her and tell her that? I lost one of the guinea pigs yesterday. I need to get out of the doghouse.”

They both laughed.

“But seriously. I’m the one who’s lucky,” Steve said. “I have a wonderful family. I got a second chance at love, and I never took that for granted.”

“I’m truly happy for you, Steve,” Alexis said. “You deserve all the love in the world.”

Steve smiled back at her. “And so do you, Alexis. So do you.”

Alexis gave him a grateful look. “Okay, now I really need to let you get back to work.”

“You’re welcome to come tonight,” Steve said. “I know my wife, Sandra, and the kids would love to meet you.”

“That’s so kind. Thank you,” Alexis said as she headed for the door. “But I have somewhere I need to be. Merry Christmas, Steve.”

“Merry Christmas, Alexis,” Steve called out.

She was still smiling and admiring her angel as she walked outside the church and headed toward Justin. He was waiting for her, leaning against his SUV.

“I see you got yourself a new friend there,” Justin said as he motioned toward the angel.

“I do,” Alexis said, smiling.

“Nice. But I’m confused. I thought you don’t do Christmas decorations,” Justin said.

“I’m reconsidering a lot of things,” Alexis answered. She tapped Justin’s shoulder as she passed him. “I’ve got the door.”

Justin, surprised, laughed. "Okay."

"And you can take me home now," Alexis said. "But I won't be staying long. I just need to grab a few things, and then I have another stop we need to make."

"Really?" Justin asked.

Alexis nodded. "Really."

* * *

As Justin drove down the highway, Alexis used her favorite small, gold compact to touch up her makeup. She wanted to look her best. She caught Justin's expression in the rearview mirror.

He didn't look happy.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"When you said you were 'reconsidering' things, I didn't think you were talking about Marc and your Bali trip."

Alexis's eyebrows arched. Justin had been acting odd ever since she'd gone home, packed up a suitcase, and told him to take her to Marc's place. When she gave him a questioning look, he quickly changed his tone.

"But I heard Bali's beautiful this time of year," he added.

Alexis could see Justin was forcing a smile, but right now, she didn't have time to worry about what was up with him because they were almost to Marc's condo.

"The last time I checked, Bali was eight-five degrees and sunny," Alexis said merrily. She finished putting on her red lipstick and pursed her lips together. "How do I look?" She flashed Justin a brilliant smile.

Their eyes met in the rearview mirror.

"Beautiful. Like always," Justin said sounding sincere as he pulled up to Marc's sleek, modern condo. "Okay, we're here. Hold on a second, and I'll get your luggage."

"Thank you," Alexis said.

As Justin got out of the SUV, Alexis caught his brooding look as he passed her. He returned a few seconds later with her luggage and opened her door. Then, he held out his hand to help her out of the SUV.

“Thanks, Justin,” she said as she took his hand. When she went to grab her suitcase, his hand landed on top of hers.

Their eyes locked.

Alexis was surprised when she saw that Justin seemed reluctant to give up her luggage.

“I’ve got it, Justin. Thank you,” Alexis said.

Justin slowly pulled his hand away. “You’re sure?”

The way he was staring at her made Alexis wonder if he was talking about her luggage or something else.

“Yes, I’m good. Thanks,” Alexis said. “Wish me luck.”

Justin shook his head. “You don’t need luck.”

Alexis smiled at him and hoped he was right as she headed into Marc’s building.



Chapter 22



As soon as Alexis was inside Marc's building, Justin's forced smile faded.

"Bali," he muttered under his breath as he rolled his eyes. The more he imagined Alexis and Marc together on vacation in Bali, the more his frown grew into a full-blown scowl.

He couldn't believe Alexis was really doing this.

His mood didn't improve any when he thought about how excited Alexis had been when she'd come out of the church and had told him all about seeing her old fiancé, Steve. She had gone on and on about how he was her one true love and that she wanted to find that kind of love again in her life. Now she wanted more than just work. She wanted a partner to celebrate her successes and share her life with.

At first, after he had gotten over his initial shock of her sudden transformation, he had loved hearing this. It had brought him hope that the timing was finally right for him to tell her how he felt about her.

But before he could say anything, she'd asked him to take her back to her condo so she could pack up and head to Marc's place. That was all she'd said—and while he'd been dying to ask her more questions, he knew it wasn't his place. He didn't know what shocked him more, that Alexis was apparently getting back together with Marc or that she was actually going to go to Bali.

In all the years he'd known her, she'd never taken a vacation. She'd never even gone away for a short weekend or a staycation. As far as he knew, every

time she tried planning some time off—always at the request of whoever she was dating—she always ended up canceling the trip, using work as her excuse. And he knew it was a legit excuse because even with as much as Alexis worked, he saw firsthand how she was always in demand. There was always something or someone who needed her at the office, giving her the perfect excuse to back out of any trip at the last minute.

Over the years, he actually started feeling sorry for most of the guys Alexis canceled on. She always told him the guys never understood why she couldn't go on vacation. She said if these guys didn't understand that her work would always come first, then they'd never understand her. After that, Justin witnessed the pattern of her canceling vacations and then canceling the boyfriend, dumping him shortly after.

While he knew Alexis was usually very careful about anyone she dated, he was happy when she kicked a few of her so-called boyfriends to the curb. He called those guys “the users.” They were the guys—it was clear to him from the start—that didn't really care about Alexis at all. They only cared about what she could do for them.

When he expressed his concerns to her once—after he overheard one of the guys she was dating talking to the press, setting up a way for photographers to get pictures of them together at dinner—she told him not to worry.

He was surprised to learn that she was completely aware of what the guy was doing. It had turned out she was using him, too. She only agreed to go out with him because she was trying to get information from him about a deal she was working on. She knew just how to play every game, with every guy, so she could make sure to get all that she really wanted and needed. That was her way to win at this game, and she was phenomenal at it.

That was when he realized Alexis always knew exactly what she was doing and didn't need anyone to protect her.

Still, that didn't stop him from being her self-appointed gladiator. No one was going to hurt Alexis on his watch.

Over the years and all the time they'd spent together driving, he felt like he'd seen and learned enough to have a pretty good idea about who exactly

Alexis Taylor was. While everyone always saw the tough-as-nails, cutthroat side, he knew another side of her.

He knew the side of her that was caring and generous, who always gave to multiple charities. It was a side that she hid well from everyone, making her donations anonymous. But he had seen firsthand how she was especially passionate about charities that helped women. From funding homeless shelters and helping women trying to transition out of challenging situations to creating college scholarship programs and assisting students in need, he knew Alexis had a heart, even if she did an excellent job at hiding that fact from everyone else.

When he asked her once why she always donated anonymously, he was surprised when she gave him a very personal answer. She told him that there was a time in her life when she suddenly lost everything—her parents, her home, all her money. She shared that if it wasn't for the help of charities like the ones she was supporting, she didn't know what would have happened to her. She said that she gave anonymously because she didn't share this part of her past with anyone. She was afraid that if the press found out and her donations were publicized that she'd be bombarded by dozens of charities asking for donations. She didn't want the distraction of having to explain to anyone why she chose the causes that she supported.

Her answer had made perfect sense to him. He liked knowing that she wasn't just driven by greed and that somewhere deep down inside her, she had a need to give back and try and help those who were unable to help themselves. That was why whenever his sister tried to throw shade at Alexis, he always stood up for her, without giving away her secrets or compromising her privacy.

He laughed when his phone rang and he saw it was his sister, Shauna. He chuckled as he answered it. "Speak of the devil."

"Oh, no. You did *not* just call me a devil," Shauna snapped back at him.

Justin laughed louder. "Me? Never. What's up?" He leaned against the SUV and made himself comfortable. His sister's calls were never short. Even though Shauna always promised to tell him "the short version," he'd learned

with his sister there was no such thing. It was an ongoing joke in his family. Everyone laughed or groaned whenever Shauna said, “the short version is...”

“I’m checking to see when you’ll be home so we can plan the Christmas dinner,” Shauna said.

Justin took a deep breath. “Honestly, I’m not sure.”

Silence.

“Shauna? Are you still there?” Justin asked as he checked his phone to make sure he hadn’t dropped the call.

Shauna sighed. “I’m here. Let me guess. You’re still with Alexis.”

“Yup,” Justin said. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“Really?” Shauna asked, sounding intrigued. “About Alexis?”

“Yeah,” Justin said as he looked up at Marc’s condo building. “Are you busy right now? I need your help...”



Chapter 23



When Alexis got to Marc's door, she took a long, deep, cleansing breath. She smoothed back her hair and ran her hands down her dress. *I'm ready*, she thought. This was it.

She knocked two times.

When Marc opened the door, he had a radiant smile. "Alexis."

All her nerves evaporated when she saw how happy he looked. She smiled back at him. "Merry Christmas."

His eyes widened. "Wow, you look great. Love the dress. Please, come in." He held the door open for her.

"Thank you," Alexis said as she entered his condo.

"I have a bottle of your favorite wine chilling. A white Bordeaux," Marc said. "Can I get you a glass?"

"That sounds perfect," she said. It was yet another reminder to her about how thoughtful Marc was.

"I also have a fire going. So make yourself comfortable, and I'll be right back," Marc said as he shut the door behind her and then walked into his kitchen.

"Okay, thanks," Alexis replied. She left her luggage by the door, and then she sat down by the fire. When she glanced around the living room, it looked just like it had the night before when she'd visited with her mom to see Marc and her jeweler looking at engagement rings.

She held out her hand and looked at her wedding ring finger. She tried to imagine what a huge, sparkling diamond, like the ones Marc had been looking at, would look like on her.

She'd never thought about what kind of wedding ring she'd like before. When Steve had proposed to her, they had been in college, and he hadn't had much money. He'd surprised her with a ring that had been his grandmother's. It had been a simple ring. The diamond was so tiny you had to squint to see it, but she had loved it with all her heart. She had never cared about material things back then.

When she caught Marc giving her a strange look, she quickly dropped her hand back into her lap and clasped both hands together quickly.

He smiled as he walked toward her, carrying two glasses of wine.

"Here you go," he said as he handed her a glass.

"Thank you. I can't believe you remember one of my favorite wines," Alexis said.

Marc laughed. "How could I forget? Remember, I planned the other trip we were supposed to take—the one where we never got on the plane..."

"Our trip to Bordeaux, France," Alexis finished for him. "You had a whole itinerary mapped out for us to visit some of the finest vineyards in the region."

"In the world," Marc quickly corrected her. "And then you couldn't go at the last minute."

"Because of work," Alexis said. "So you brought the wineries to me." She smiled, remembering. "You ordered some of the best wines from the Saint Émilion and Médoc regions, and you brought in an award-winning sommelier from France. We did our own private wine tasting at my office. That was definitely a first."

"But it doesn't have to be," Marc said as he sat down next to her. "There could be a lot more wine tastings in our future. Only this time, we could actually make it to the wineries. Try the wine and see what you think."

She took a sip and shut her eyes in bliss as she savored the taste. It was crisp and dry with a rich, citrus taste. When she opened her eyes, she saw Marc watching her. "I taste grapefruit and lemon."

“That’s right,” Marc said, impressed. “That sommelier has nothing on you.”

Alexis laughed. “I’m a quick study when it’s something I like.” She held her glass up to the light. “It’s one of the few white wines I like because it’s not too sweet.”

“Because you hate sweet wine,” Marc said. “What is it that you always say?”

“I like to eat my sweets, not drink them,” Alexis answered quickly.

Marc chuckled. “That’s it. That’s just one of the many things I’ve always admired about you, Alexis. You always know what you want and don’t want. Just like you didn’t want our Bali trip.”

Alexis gave him an apologetic look. “I know it’s not always easy being with me.”

Marc put his wine down on the coffee table. He took her hand in his and looked into her eyes. “No, Alexis, it’s not always easy. But you’re one of the most exciting, smart, beautiful women I’ve ever met.” Excited, he got up. “And that’s why I have something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

Oh no, Alexis thought. Her heart raced. He’s going to ask me to marry him...

Marc smiled down at her. “I was going to wait until we got to Bali. I had this whole perfect night planned out. Wait. Don’t move. I just have to run and get something first.”

When Marc started to walk away, Alexis wouldn’t let go of his hand. “Marc, wait. Please, sit back down.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked as he sat down next to her.

She scrambled to find the right words to say. Nervous, she held up her wineglass. “We haven’t even had a toast yet.”

Marc laughed as he picked up his wineglass. “Sure. Okay. I’ll make the toast. To us.”

She clinked her glass to his. “Merry Christmas.”

Marc’s eyes widened with surprise. “That’s twice you’ve said ‘Merry Christmas.’ I’ve never heard you say that before. I thought you didn’t celebrate Christmas.”

When she didn't answer right away Marc took a drink of his wine and continued "Hey, don't worry. I'm not judging you. I don't do Christmas, either."

Alexis drank more wine.

"It's unbelievable to me how much time and money people spend on Christmas," Marc continued, rolling his eyes. "Advertisers are always trying to make everyone feel all nostalgic and sentimental so they can squeeze every dollar out of you. You're never going to see me buying into any of that holiday hype. I'd be happy if we could just skip the holidays altogether. That's why I always get out of town and go someplace like Bali where you can escape all the Christmas chaos if you want. Oh, and do you know what I really hate? I hate how all the charities are constantly hitting you up at Christmas, claiming they desperately need donations. Well, maybe if they just managed their money better, they wouldn't have to beg for our help. Am I right?"

It took everything she had not to cringe at what Marc was saying. Her stomach was twisted into a knot. Yesterday, she would have agreed with what Marc was saying. She couldn't deny that it was one of the first things she had liked about Marc, that he was on the same page as she was when it came to not celebrating Christmas. Over the years, it had surprised her how hard it was to find someone who didn't love the holidays.

Whenever she'd met someone and told them she didn't celebrate Christmas—and that it was nonnegotiable—they'd quickly tell her that was fine because Christmas was no big deal to them, either. But once December rolled around, they would always try to convince her to give the holidays a shot and force Christmas on her.

But Marc had never done that. He'd instantly been onboard with her about boycotting Christmas. That was why they'd planned their Bali trip.

But now things were different.

She was different.

After seeing her parents again and all the lessons she'd learned in the last twenty-four hours, she had changed for the better. As she started letting Christmas back into her heart, she felt an overwhelming sense of joy and

hope. She was ready to embrace true love again and create a future filled with happiness.

She would never forget the words her mom had said, “Anything is possible at Christmas...”

Going forward, instead of focusing on all she had lost that devastating Christmas twenty years ago, she was now going to concentrate on being grateful for all that she still had. She was determined and excited to find new ways to keep the memory of her parents with her always, including all the special times they had spent together as a family at Christmas.

When Alexis heard Marc bash Christmas, instead of agreeing with him, she just felt sorry for him. She couldn’t help but think that he needed his own *Christmas Carol* intervention.

When she looked over at Marc, she found him staring back at her. He looked worried.

“Alexis, is everything okay?” Marc asked.

She slowly put her wine glass down on the coffee table and took a deep breath. “Marc, we need to talk.”

* * *

A half hour and a heartfelt talk later, Alexis stood up from Marc’s couch.

She felt terrible breaking his heart all over again, but she had been honest with him. While she didn’t share with him the last twenty-four hours with her parents, she did try to explain as best she could that on Christmas Eve she had done a lot of soul searching. She wanted to make some big changes in her life. In her professional life as well as her personal life.

After Marc had listened patiently, he was ultimately the one who said, “And this new future you’re planning doesn’t have me in it, does it? I’m not the one.”

That was when she’d told him what she knew in her heart. He was correct. He wasn’t the right one for her, but she also wasn’t the right one for him. She didn’t want either of them to settle. She believed they both deserved to be with the right person, not just the person who was good for right now.

She was thankful he'd taken the news graciously. On the drive over, she'd been worried about how he'd react. She feared he would ask her a lot of questions she wasn't prepared to answer. She knew she couldn't explain to him the last twenty-four hours, but she wanted to be honest with him about how she was letting Christmas back into her heart because she wanted the same thing for him. She wanted him to be happy. That was why she'd come over. She hadn't wanted to just apologize for the way she'd suddenly canceled their trip and broken up with him. She wanted to see if there was any way she could help him see the real meaning and magic of Christmas. Her mom and dad had helped her, and now she wanted to try and help Marc.

While he had been surprised at her sudden change of heart about Christmas, he had opened up and talked for the first time about his past and why Christmas was so hard on him. His father had left him and his mom at Christmas, and he'd never seen his father again. His mother had never recovered. So now, Christmas only reminded him of his broken family and heartbreak.

By the time they were done talking, Alexis had shared her story about losing her parents on Christmas Eve, and they had bonded over their mutual loss. She was only sorry it had taken them this long to share something that was so important to both of them.

In the end, Marc had promised that he, too, would try and give Christmas another shot. He said he respected Alexis more than anyone else, and that if she could do it—and if it truly had transformed her like she had shared—he would try it also.

When it came to their breakup, he had respected her decision and hadn't tried to change her mind.

She was grateful for that.

Marc stood up and faced her. "I'll walk you out."

"Thank you," she said, and then gave him a quick hug. "And thank you for understanding."

Marc's expression was a mixture of sadness and respect. "You have always been one smart lady. Even though I know you're right about all of this, I'm really going to miss you."

Alexis looked into his eyes. “I’m going to miss you, too, Marc.”

She was truly grateful for all the time she had spent with Marc. They had built a solid friendship. Like all the men she dated after Steve, their relationship hadn’t been based on romance. She’d never felt any butterflies or fireworks. Since most of their dates were centered around work projects, what they’d had was solid, not sexy.

When she thought about how she always felt safe with Marc, she realized that now she knew why. She’d never fallen in love with him, so she didn’t have a crushing fear of losing him.

When her mom had brought her to see Marc on Christmas Eve and she had seen him picking out an engagement ring for her, it had completely caught her off guard. She’d never meant to give him the wrong idea. She’d hoped the topic of marriage was buried forever, but Marc had brought it up during their talk.

When he’d insisted on getting the engagement ring to show her, she’d feared it was going to be an awkward moment, but it hadn’t turned out that way. They’d actually ended up laughing at the fact that he’d planned out this whole romantic proposal without ever talking to her about marriage, what kind of ring she’d want, or if she even wanted to get married at all.

When she asked him why he’d done it, his answer had surprised her. He said that he’d known from the start that their relationship wasn’t the stuff that rom-com movies and romance novels were made of. But he valued what they did have—a thriving business partnership and mutual respect. He thought maybe with time they could find the spark that they both knew was missing. He said if he had to marry someone, he wanted to marry his best friend—and that’s how he thought of her.

In the end, their talk had turned out better than she could have hoped. They promised to stay friends and to continue working together, and for that, she was thankful.

When she looked at Marc now... if anything, she felt even more respect for him.

He smiled back at her. “Thank you again for coming over and bringing my stuff back.”

“Of course,” Alexis said. “You know... that cocktail waitress last night was right. You’re going to make some girl very happy someday.”

Marc gave her a baffled look. “Waitress?”

Alexis’s eyes widened. She realized her mistake immediately. Of course Marc hadn’t seen her at the bar when he was drowning his sorrows and the cocktail waitress had been flirting with him. She quickly headed for the door. “I gotta go. Justin’s waiting for me...”

Marc’s eyebrows arched. “Justin? He’s driving you around on Christmas? Doesn’t he have family to be with?”

“He does, but he said he’s fine. He’ll see them later,” Alexis answered.

“Wow, that’s pretty nice,” Marc said, impressed. “He’s giving up a lot of his Christmas for you.”

Alexis smiled and nodded. “He does it every Christmas, ever since he first started working for me. Justin’s always been the one person I can count on. Whenever I need him, he’s always there...” Her voice trailed off as Marc gave her a knowing look.

Her heart started racing as it hit her.

Justin.

A flash of special Justin memories filled her mind so fast that it made her dizzy. The first memory was when she ran into him at the hospital twenty years ago and had spilled the contents of her purse all over the floor. Justin had rushed to help her. She inhaled sharply when she suddenly saw it so clearly now. At the moment when she was losing her parents, Justin had come into her life.

“Justin,” she whispered.

Marc studied her carefully. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Alexis smiled, incredulous. “I am,” she exclaimed, excited. “For the first time in a long time, I really am. I don’t want to run. I’m not scared.”

Marc looked even more confused.

She laughed. “I gotta go!” She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and was out the door in the blink of an eye.

As soon as she stepped outside, she saw Justin next to his SUV, talking on the phone.

Her heart beat faster. She couldn't stop smiling.

When Justin looked up and saw her, he smiled back at her with his sexy smile.

For Alexis, time stopped—and then everything started to move in slow motion. She never took her eyes off Justin's handsome face as she walked toward him.

He wrapped up his call quickly. "I gotta go, Sis. See you soon," he said into the phone and then hung up.

When Alexis locked eyes with him, that was when she felt it.

Butterflies...

Justin gave her a questioning look and looked behind her. "Where's Marc?"

Alexis shrugged. "I think he's on his way to Bali, but I'm not going."

"Really?" Justin asked, surprised. "Are you okay?"

Alexis smiled widely. "Actually, I'm great. Never been better."

Justin opened the back door of the SUV for her.

Only this time, Alexis didn't get in the back. Instead, she opened the front passenger door.

"What are you doing?" Justin asked, confused.

Alexis grinned back at him. "Come on. Let's go. Get in." She laughed when she saw how perplexed he looked. She then watched him walk around to the driver's side while texting someone on his phone. Still texting, he paused a moment before opening his door.

Justin got into the SUV and started the engine. He turned to face her.

They stared at each other in silence as she sat next to him in the passenger seat.

Alexis smiled brightly.

He looked at her like he was trying to figure her out.

Good luck with that, she thought with a small laugh.

He finally blinked first.

"You can drive, Justin," Alexis said merrily.

Justin laughed a little. By the look on his face, he clearly didn't know what was going on as he started driving away. "Where to this time?" he asked.

Alexis sat back and relaxed. “I guess, home,” she answered. Because at the moment, she couldn’t think of anywhere else she needed to be.

When she saw Justin nod, she could have sworn she saw a twinkle in his eyes.



Chapter 24



As soon as Justin started driving, he turned on some Christmas music. Alexis smiled when she heard the song “O Christmas Tree.” At first, she tried to sing along until she realized the lyrics were different from the ones she knew. So she just listened instead...

“O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
You set my heart a-singing
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
You set my heart a-singing
Like little stars, your candles bright,
Send to the world a wondrous light,
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
You set my heart a-singing...”

“That’s different,” she said.

Justin turned down the song. “What’s different?”

“I’ve never heard this version of ‘O Christmas Tree,’” Alexis explained. “When I was little, my mom and dad would take me to get a tree, and we’d always sing ‘O Christmas Tree’ together.”

Justin smiled back at her. “Really? Same with my family. I loved picking out our Christmas tree.”

“Me too,” Alexis said. “What version of the song did you guys sing?”

Justin laughed. “Oh no, you’re not getting me to sing.”

“Come on,” Alexis urged. “It’s Christmas. You have to sing.”

Justin gave her a look. “You go first.”

“Fine,” Alexis said proudly. “I will.”

Justin waited.

Silence.

“Well?” he asked.

“Hold on. I’m trying to remember the lyrics. I haven’t listened to Christmas music or had a Christmas tree in a very long time. I know—let me look up the lyrics on my phone,” Alexis said.

“Oh no. The phone,” Justin teased. “And just when I thought we had a Christmas miracle on our hands because you weren’t glued to your phone this Christmas.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny,” Alexis said. “Wait. Here. I found something.”

“What does it say?”

“Wow, it turns out there are tons of different versions of this song. I have no idea which one we used to sing when I was a kid,” Alexis said.

“Didn’t the song originally come from Germany?” Justin asked.

“Yes. It says ‘O Christmas Tree’ started as an old German Christmas carol that was originally called ‘O Tannenbaum.’ But after that, everything I’m finding has a different story of when the song was originally written. But check this out. Did you know we had our first Christmas tree in the early 1500s?”

“That’s cool,” Justin said.

Alexis nodded. “Right?” She kept scrolling through stories about the song on her phone. “It looks like there have been a lot of different versions of the lyrics written over the years for different countries all over the world.”

“I knew I liked this song,” Justin said as he turned the volume up.

“‘O Christmas Tree...’” They both sang along with the song until it came to the new lyrics they didn’t know.

They both abruptly stopped singing and laughed.

“Maybe we should pick something easier, like ‘Jingle Bells,’” Justin suggested.

“Oh, I bet that has different versions, too,” Alexis said. “Who knew these Christmas songs could get so complicated?”

Justin switched what he was playing over to a beautiful instrumental version of the song “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.”

Alexis met his smile. “Perfect. No lyrics. That solves that problem.”

They shared a laugh.

“So what was it like when you were little and went and chopped down a Christmas tree?” Alexis asked.

Justin chuckled. “Are you kidding? We never chopped down anything. My sister, Shauna, would never let us do that. She was all about protecting the forest and taking care of nature and all that stuff.”

Alexis laughed. “Even when she was little?”

“Oh yeah,” Justin said. “When she was six, she wanted a Forest Service hat so she could be a forest ranger. Then in high school, she interned for the Forest Service, and now she runs an environmental company where half the things she does, I don’t even understand. I just know we’re all really proud of her. She definitely found her calling.”

“So no Christmas trees?” Alexis asked.

“Oh no, we always got a Christmas tree,” Justin said. “We just had to get live trees that came in pots. That way, after we were done with them at Christmas we could replant our Christmas trees, and they could keep growing.”

“I love that,” Alexis said. “What a great idea.”

“Right,” Justin agreed. “My sister says we ‘borrow’ a Christmas tree every year. One year, I think we even dug up the same tree we’d had the year before. How is that for recycling?”

Alexis laughed.

“And that’s just one of my family’s crazy Christmas traditions,” Justin said.

“I think it’s such a smart idea,” Alexis said. “I like that after Christmas you can go back and visit all the Christmas trees that are still growing and relive those memories.”

“You sound just like my sister,” Justin laughed.

“I think I’d like this sister of yours,” Alexis said.

“And I think she’d like you, too,” Justin said.

“Of course she would,” Alexis laughed. “Because I haven’t cut down a tree in twenty years.”

“But you used to,” Justin said. “What was your family tradition?”

Alexis smiled, remembering. “There was a Christmas tree farm about an hour outside of Atlanta that my dad loved going to because there was also this little bakery called Sweet Thing that made his favorite dessert...”

“Sweet Potato Pie,” Justin finished for her.

Alexis laughed. “Yes, how did you know?”

“Because it’s my favorite, too.”

“Wow, all these years, I never knew that,” Alexis said.

“That’s because this is the first time we’ve ever talked about Christmas and Christmas traditions,” Justin added.

“You’re right,” Alexis said. She realized she hadn’t stopped smiling since they’d started sharing stories. It made her heart happy to enjoy Christmas songs again with Justin and talk about their Christmas traditions. She sat back and studied him.

“What?” he asked, laughing a little. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“You kind of remind me of my dad,” she said.

“Really?” Justin grinned back at her. “I’ll take that as a huge compliment.”

Alexis nodded and smiled. “You should. He was the best dad. My mom was great, too. She was the one who was picky about the tree. It couldn’t be too tall or too small. It couldn’t be too skinny or too fat. It had to be just right. Some years, we would spend hours looking for her perfect tree. She’d always say she’d know the tree when she saw it because it would be the one that jumped out and grabbed her heart.”

“So it picked her,” Justin said.

“Exactly,” Alexis said, knowing how much her mom would have loved that analogy.

“What kind of tree do you like best?” Justin asked.

She had to stop a moment to think about it. “I guess the one I grew up with. We always picked out Douglas fir trees. My mom liked them because they were big and bushy. She didn’t like those skinny trees that only have a few

branches. She wanted as many branches as possible so she could load up the tree with all the ornaments we had.”

“And you had a lot of decorations, right?” Justin asked.

Alexis nodded. “Of course. You too?”

“Absolutely,” Justin said with a grin.

“But while my mom always had the final say on the tree we picked out, I had the most important job,” Alexis boasted.

“Really?”

She nodded vigorously. “I had to water the tree and keep it alive.”

Justin laughed.

“What? I’m serious,” Alexis shot back. “It was a big deal.”

Justin was still laughing. “I’m sure it was. I bet you took that job very seriously.”

Alexis gave him a look. “Of course. I was also great at decorating the tree.”

“Let me guess—with all gold ornaments,” Justin said.

“No. As a matter of fact, I don’t think anything we had was gold. We did all the traditional colors of red and green and there was some silver, too. Our trees were never designer trees with any themes or things like that. One of my mom’s favorite things to buy was Christmas decorations. She’d wait until the day after Christmas and get everything at half price. So every year, our collection grew. My dad used to say we had enough to decorate ten trees.”

Justin laughed. “It sounds like you had some pretty amazing Christmases.”

Alexis smiled, remembering. “We really did. We weren’t a rich family. We didn’t have a lot, but we always had love, lots of love.”

“And that’s what matters most,” Justin said.

Alexis nodded. “Exactly.” She had been enjoying their conversation so much, she hadn’t been paying attention to where Justin was driving to. When she looked out the window, she couldn’t believe what she saw.

They were driving into Holly Point.

“Justin, seriously?” she asked, flabbergasted. “You brought me to Holly Point again?” This time, she was more amused than angry. The sun was just setting and as the day turned into night, all the homes on the street had their

dazzling Christmas lights on. As she looked out her window, it was the first time she really saw and appreciated how beautiful it was.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Justin asked as he slowly drove into the neighborhood.

“Yes, it is,” Alexis said. “But you’re supposed to be taking me home. I know your family’s waiting to celebrate Christmas with you. I don’t want to keep you away from them any longer than I have to.”

“This will only take a minute,” Justin said cheerfully.

Alexis laughed. “When have I heard *that* before?”

Justin slowed down and stopped the car in front of the same house they’d stopped at before that had glowing, gold, life-size LED angels out front.

Alexis did a double take. “Is this the same...”

“Angel House?” Justin finished for her. “Yes.”

Alexis gave him a look. “You already showed me this house. Why are we here again?”

“You’ll see,” he said mysteriously.

Before she could respond, he stopped the SUV, jumped out, and opened her door.

Their eyes locked as he held out his hand. His smile was irresistible. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Alexis stubbornly stayed put. “But we’ve seen the Angel House before.”

“But you never got out of the SUV before. You didn’t really see it,” Justin said with an encouraging smile. “And to do that, you need to get out. Come on. Please.”

As she reluctantly stepped out of the SUV, Justin put his hand on the small of her back and started guiding her toward the house. “I wonder who lives in here?” he asked as he walked up the path to the front door of the Angel House. “I’ve always loved this neighborhood.”

Alexis’s steps faltered. “It’s none of our business who lives here. Let’s go.”

But instead of turning back, Justin took her hand and kept walking toward the door. “Let’s find out,” Justin said, excited.

Alexis looked at him like he was nuts. “No. Stop. We can’t...”

Justin laughed. “We can. It’s Christmas.” He happily knocked on the door.

“Stop it. What are you doing? We’re going to get arrested,” Alexis said as she looked around for security cameras. With everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, the last thing she wanted to do was wind up spending Christmas in jail.

“It’s okay,” Justin said as he reached for the doorknob. When he turned it, the door opened. He smiled brightly. “Look, this neighborhood is so nice they don’t even lock their doors.”

Shocked, Alexis gasped. She wanted to run back to the SUV, but Justin wouldn’t let go of her hand. She gave him an incredulous look as she tugged on his hand and tried to pull him away from the door. “Justin, no. What are you doing? You can’t just go in. The owners...”

“The owner won’t mind,” Justin said confidently.

Reeling, Alexis stared back at him. “How do you know?!”

Justin smiled slowly. “Because I’m the owner.”



Chapter 25



Speechless, Alexis stared at Justin as he opened the door wide, and they stepped inside.

“Are you serious?” she asked as she looked around in awe at Justin’s impressive living room. Every inch was beautifully decorated for Christmas. There were hundreds of sparkling white twinkle lights and lush evergreen garlands that outlined every window. There was also fragrant garland with little red velvet ribbons draped across the fireplace mantel. Hanging from the mantel were white velvet Christmas stockings that were illuminated by the glow of the crackling fire. Adding to the romantic ambiance, there were several dozen white, vanilla-scented candles flickering in crystal candleholders positioned around the room. One group of candles surrounded a gorgeous Christmas centerpiece made up of tall, white lilies and deep red, long-stemmed roses.

As Alexis took it all in, she smiled when she saw Justin’s magnificent Christmas tree and noticed a red velvet blanket carefully draped around the emerald-green ceramic pot that the tree was planted in. The tree looked magnificent with all its white twinkle lights and whimsical ornaments. Artfully weaved around the Christmas tree branches were glittering red ribbons and an exquisite garland made up of tiny silver and gold sparkling beads.

“This is incredible,” Alexis said. She felt like she was in a Christmas fairy tale.

Justin smiled at her reaction. "I'm glad you like it."

"This is really your house? The Angel House?" she asked, still trying to process it all.

Justin laughed. "Yes. I've been trying to tell you. But I've just moved in, so pretend you don't see all the boxes over there in the corner."

Alexis smiled as all the pieces started to fall into place. "You've always loved this neighborhood, Holly Point. You bring me here every Christmas Eve."

Justin nodded. "That's right—because this neighborhood has the best Christmas decorations. I've always hoped that someday, you'd see all these beautiful homes and would find your Christmas spirit again—that I could help bring Christmas back into your life. But every year, you refused to get out of the car... except this year."

Their eyes met.

"And this is where I saw my mom, in your front yard," Alexis said softly. She looked over at the beautiful angel that was at the top of Justin's Christmas tree. The angel glowed softly, illuminated by all the Christmas lights. Alexis looked around the living room again. She gave Justin a curious look. "But how did you do all this? How did you have the fire going and all the candles lit when we got here? How did you know I'd even come?"

Justin looked deeply into her eyes. "I had faith. It's Christmas. Anything's possible."

Alexis felt a spark between them that was undeniable. She felt excited and nervous all at the same time.

"And I had my sister help me," Justin continued. "And I think I just saw her run by the window."

They shared a laugh.

Alexis couldn't believe Justin had gone to all this trouble just for her. She picked up a framed picture that was on his coffee table and smiled. "Is this your family?"

Justin nodded as he looked at the picture. It was of him with his parents and sister and her husband and kids. "That was taken back when we still had my dad with us."

“What a wonderful memory,” Alexis said. Then she looked closer at the picture. “Wait. Is that my tree behind you? My office tree?”

“It sure is,” Justin said with pride. “That’s one of my family’s Christmas traditions, taking a picture in front of your tree, along with the rest of Atlanta.”

Alexis looked confused. “But I don’t see my Taylor Investments sign.”

“We photoshopped it out,” Justin said, looking a little guilty. “You can blame my sister, Shauna. It was her idea.”

Alexis laughed. “Good for her.”

Justin looked relieved and laughed with her.

“This is your mom, right?” Alexis asked as she pointed at Justin’s mom in the picture.

Justin nodded and smiled. “It sure is, and she’s a big fan of yours. She knows you’re the one who encouraged me to start my own business.”

Alexis smiled back at him. “It sounds like all the women in your family are pretty smart.”

“They sure are,” Justin said proudly. “And they definitely keep me in line.”

“You’re lucky you have a family you can celebrate Christmas with,” Alexis said wistfully.

As she said the words, she didn’t feel sorry for herself anymore. Going forward, she was going to work really hard to focus on feeling grateful for the time she had with her parents and all the love they’d shared. She would always miss them, but she was done trying to block out all her memories. When she did that, she not only blocked out the painful memories but also the good times. She realized now all her memories were a gift, just like the visit from her parents had been, and she wanted to cherish those gifts always.

She put Justin’s family picture back down on the table.

“I’m very grateful for my family,” Justin said. “My mom and dad are the reason I worked so hard to make something of myself. They both sacrificed so much for me and my sister. After my dad passed away, I wanted to be able to take care of my mom financially, so she’d never have to worry about money again. It hasn’t been easy. But now I’m at a place with my company where I can do that, and it means everything to me.”

“And they’re lucky to have you,” Alexis said. “What do your mom and sister think of your new house?”

Justin chuckled. “They love it. When we were kids, every Christmas, my parents brought us here to Holly Point to see all the decorations. We’d drive through the neighborhood several times to see all the Christmas lights. I’d always say that someday, I was going to own a house here—and that I would have the best Christmas lights in the whole neighborhood.”

“And now you do,” Alexis said as she sat back on the couch. “That’s pretty amazing. You made your dream come true. You set a goal, and you conquered it. I’m really happy you’re doing so well, Justin. You deserve this and a lot more. How is your company doing? What do you have now, eight or ten cars?”

Justin joined her on the couch. “Actually, more like a hundred.”

Alexis’s eyes grew huge. “Wait. What?” she asked, incredulous. “You have *a hundred* cars?” She couldn’t believe it.

Justin nodded. “Yeah, I bought out my competitor. You always say, ‘go big or go home.’ I went big...” Justin looked around his living room. “...and I bought the home.”

Alexis was stunned and impressed. “Okay, when did all this happen?”

“Well, a couple months ago. I decided to take all the money I’d been saving to do what you always told me to do, to invest in myself. So far, it’s paying off. I’m doing a big company relaunch in January.”

Alexis leaned forward and gave him a look. “Okay, I have to ask you. If you’re doing so well, and you’re so busy, why are you still driving me around? Not that I don’t enjoy it.”

Justin took a moment before answering and then looked into her eyes. “You make time for the things that matter most.”

Alexis’s heart skipped a beat. She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap and then back up at him. “So are you saying I’m one of those things?” she asked softly.

Justin nodded. “I am.” His husky voice was thick with emotion.

When their eyes met, he leaned in.

She knew he was going to kiss her. Her heart raced with anticipation. She shut her eyes. But when a moment passed and there was no kiss, she opened her eyes, disappointed, and saw Justin standing up. She blinked several times, trying to figure out what happened. She watched him walk over to his Christmas tree. “I got something for you.”

“Okay,” she said, still confused.

Justin picked up a small, pretty Christmas present from underneath the tree. It was wrapped in shiny gold paper and had a sparkling, matching bow. He handed her the present as he sat back down next to her. “Here you go.”

With no idea of what it could be, she opened the box carefully and found a black velvet pouch. She caught her breath when inside, she found a dazzling crystal heart ornament that was hanging from a red satin ribbon. She held it up.

“It’s an ornament,” Justin said proudly.

Alexis laughed. “I can see that. It’s stunning.” She gave him a knowing look. “And you get me a different ornament every Christmas, even though you know I never have a Christmas tree and I don’t decorate.”

Justin nodded. “Yes, that’s because it’s our Christmas tradition.” He stood up, took her hand, and led her over to the Christmas tree. “But this year, I’d like to start a *new* tradition where we actually hang it on a tree. Together.”

Alexis’s heart skipped a beat. “I would like that, too,” she said as they faced each other and looked into each other’s eyes. In that moment, Alexis didn’t feel nervous or scared. She felt a sense of calm, because she knew she was exactly where she needed to be.

Justin had always been there for her. He was the one and only person who had never left her side, no matter what. With Justin, there was no judgment. She could always be herself. He’d always accepted her, the good and the bad, and he’d never given up on her. Beyond Justin’s undeniable support and work ethic, she’d always admired him for the way he talked about and cared for his family. She smiled, remembering how when she’d first encouraged him to start his own business, he’d been hesitant about asking her questions and for her advice. But once she made it clear she wanted to help him, his questions hadn’t stopped. She’d quickly seen how smart and ambitious he

was. As she looked at Justin now, it was with admiration, respect, and love. She knew he was already an invaluable part of her life, and she couldn't imagine a future without him.

She held up her beautiful new crystal heart ornament. "Where should we put this?"

Justin looked into her eyes and smiled. "How about right—"

"—there," Alexis finished for him as she pointed at the perfect spot in the center of the Christmas tree.

"Good choice," he said as they put the crystal heart ornament on the tree together.

"Perfect," she said happily. When their eyes met again, she felt a flutter in her stomach. Butterflies.

She couldn't stop smiling as Justin adjusted the tree branch the crystal heart ornament was hanging from.

"This is going to work great," Justin said as he moved some lights around, so they illuminated the heart.

When Alexis looked over Justin's shoulder, she caught her breath when she saw her mom and dad standing there, watching. A golden glow surrounded them. When her parents both silently nodded and smiled at her, Alexis felt more love and gratitude than she'd ever thought possible.

Alexis's mom motioned toward Justin. "I like this one," she said softly.

Her dad nodded in agreement.

As Alexis smiled back at her parents, there was a flash of white light. Like a string of movie clips, Alexis saw highlights of the last twenty-four hours with Justin.

The flashback started with the pivotal moment she'd first run into him at the hospital twenty years ago and was quickly followed by Christmas Eve morning this year, when he'd picked her up for work. As the flashbacks continued, Alexis saw what she had missed before—how Justin always looked at her with love and treated her like she was someone special.

As fast as the memories came, they were gone, and Alexis could see her parents again.

When her mom and dad both smiled at her, she touched her heart.

“We’ll always be with you,” her mom whispered. “We love you.”

And in a flash of white light... her parents were gone.

And in that same instant, the crystal heart ornament on the tree lit up with light.

Justin, amazed, pointed at the heart. “Did you just see that? The heart. It just lit up!” Justin said, incredulous. He looked around. “Maybe it just caught the light or something?”

Alexis stopped his question with a kiss. It was a kiss that brought all the fireworks and was filled with the promise of love and a future of Christmases together.

After the kiss, Alexis whispered back to him. “Or something.”

When Justin gazed into her eyes, his smile grew. “Now that was worth the wait.”

Alexis gave him a dazzling smile. Her heart was ready to love again, and she couldn’t wait to start a new chapter of her life with Justin.

When they kissed again, the heart ornament on the tree lit up and sparkled brilliantly...

Thank You For Reading
Every Day Is Christmas

If you enjoyed this story it would mean so much if you could take a moment to post a review and share the Christmas spirit by telling your Christmas loving friends about this story.

Karen's Behind-The-Scenes Movie Photos



Karen brings mom, Lao, to movie set



*Karen in "Video Village"
setting up next shot*



Jeff's living room "Game Night"

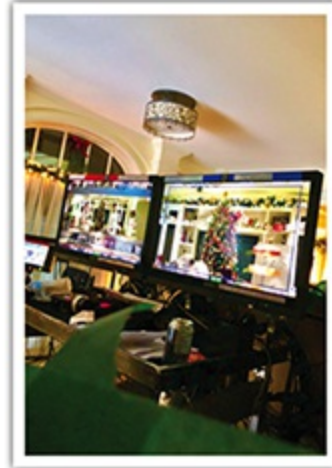


Lights, camera, action!

Karen's Behind-The-Scenes Movie Photos



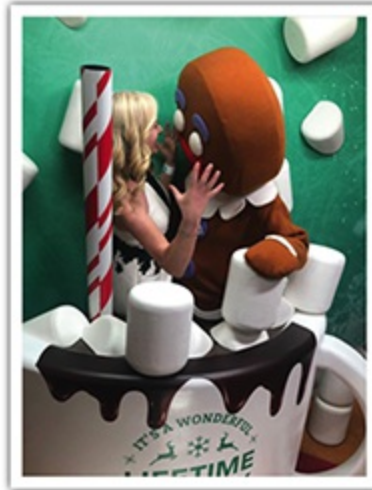
Steve & Alexis's college apartment



Getting ready to shoot at Jeff's place



Karen at Lifetime's Christmas party



Karen making friends at Lifetime's party

Karen Schaler's Free Gift For You!

Get Karen Schaler's DIY Christmas Camp Guide for FREE. This special holiday guide includes exclusive recipes, activities, and more from all Karen's Christmas movies and novels. The guide is updated each year with new content.

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INSTAGRAM: [@TravelTherapy](#)

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Acknowledgments



T rue story. Most days, when my phone rings, I let it go to voicemail. This gives me time to figure out what hat I need to wear. As a multi-hyphenate author, publisher, screenwriter, producer, journalist, national TV host, and entrepreneur, I'm constantly juggling different careers. Don't get me wrong, I love it. Telling uplifting, inspiring, and empowering feel-good stories is my passion. So whenever I get to take one of my passion projects and play in several different sandboxes it's exhilarating.

That's exactly what I've done this year to bring you my latest Christmas novel, *Every Day Is Christmas*, which began as an original Christmas movie I wrote for Lifetime television. The holiday headliner premiered in 2018 with an all-star cast that included multi-Grammy-winner Toni Braxton, Gloria Reuben, and Michael Jai White.

It takes a village to turn my imagination and storytelling into a product you can read, listen to, and watch. This time, my village began with a talented team of visionary filmmakers that included executives at Lifetime like Chris Wade and Yolanda Brown, executive producers Craig Baumgarten and Toni Braxton, and the entire Lighthouse Pictures producing team and crew, as well as all the outstanding actors who worked with the masterful director David Weaver to bring my words to life.

The fact that our *Every Day Is Christmas* movie has gone on to become a beloved favorite is why I decided to also write the novel and give you more details about these very special characters that have touched so many hearts.

Helping me create the best product possible I have my amazing publishing team to thank, which includes my brilliant editors Elizabeth Mazer and Mira S. Park, interior designer extraordinaire Ramesh Kumar Pitchai, and my gifted cover designer, Kristen Ingebretson. As a visual person, I always have a clear idea for my book covers before I even start writing the story. I'm always grateful to have Kristen's brilliance and patience to bring our combined vision to life. I hope you enjoy this year's unique cover that celebrates a very special Christmas tree ornament that's also showcased in the movie.

But even before my publishing team gets this novel, I have another team of invaluable editing elves. My cherished family—my mom Lao Schaler, Kathy Bezold, and Margaret Schaler—are the first to give feedback on all my stories. My dad, Harry Schaler, loves the movie version of *Every Day Is Christmas* so much that he inspired me to write this novel for you.

Always guiding me on my literary journey and helping me be the best hybrid national and international author I can be is the talented team at the Jane Rotrosen Agency, led by my fantastic agent Christina Hogrebe, and includes Maria Napolitano and Tori Clayton. Also, a special thank you to Deon McAdoo, Leigh Pierce, and the entire Ingram family for continuing to create and distribute quality books. You have been fantastic publishing partners.

Always cheering me on are powerhouse *USA TODAY*–bestselling authors Jenny Hale, Nancy Naigle, and Teri Wilson. Thank you for teaching me the tricks of the trade and always being there to offer advice, insight, and your infinite wisdom.

My ability to write novels, movies, and audio projects and share these stories with you also wouldn't be possible without my legal gladiators, Neville Johnson, Phillip L. Rosen, and Kim Swartz.

I also wouldn't be where I am today without the encouragement and support of my family—Debbie, Wynn, David, Margaret, Nathan, John, Maddy, Taylor, Marcus, and Sandra. I'm also grateful to my friends who are like my family—Arnel, Ray, Lani, Alicia, Teri, Maureen, Hope, Sue, Carol, Mark, Clint, Rob, Jeryl, Denise, Delia, Heather, Lorianne, Marybeth, Amy,

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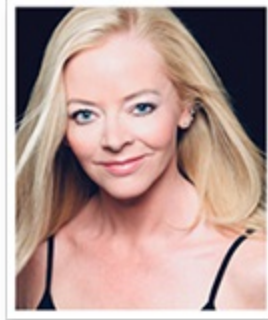
A hearty howl and heartfelt thank you to my Wolfpack family in Kai Alexander's incomparable Entertainment Business School. And to the EBS Sunrise Howl's phenomenal writers who are telling their own amazing stories, Ambra, Kawan, Vickie, Birgit, Kait, and A Noelle, this novel was written during our five A.M. morning howls, and I couldn't be more grateful for all your support, love, and friendship.

To my stars in the sky that I know are watching over me and give me strength—John, Tim, Heather, Lee, my grandparents, Pat and Walter Crane, and Irene and Harry Schaler, I miss you every day, but you are always with me in my heart.

And to you, my dear readers, while the last few years have been some of the most difficult of my life, losing family and friends way too soon, it's continuing to write these stories for you that has been my greatest honor. We are all in this together, and my goal is to continue to do all I can to write stories that bring joy and hope for all of us. Thank you for being on this journey with me.

Have a healthy and happy holiday season.

Meet Karen Schaler



KAREN SCHALER is a three-time Emmy Award-winning storyteller, screenwriter, bestselling author, journalist, and national TV host. Karen's brand is "Smart with Heart." She writes feel-good, uplifting, and empowering romantic comedies and dramas. In addition to writing seven beloved Christmas novels, she has written holiday movies for Netflix, Lifetime, and Hallmark, including the Netflix sensation *A Christmas Prince* and Hallmark's *Christmas Camp*. Karen was also tapped to write an original Christmas story for Audible, *Once Upon a Christmas Carol* that when released in 2022 became an instant Top 10 Audible Bestseller! This romantic comedy Audible Original featured a full cast of award-winning actors and musicians and also included an original song written by Karen. Bringing her *Christmas Camp* Hallmark movie and novel to life, Karen is the creator and host of ongoing, immersive, real-life Christmas Camp experiences for grown-ups that are held at resorts, hotels, and destinations around the world. Traveling to more than sixty-eight countries, Karen is also the creator and host of *Travel Therapy TV*, airing nationally on top TV and streaming outlets, and it's where she features the most inspiring and empowering trips to take based on what you're going through in life. All of Karen's stories are uplifting, filled with heart and hope. Be sure to visit www.karenschaler.com for your exclusive, free *Karen Schaler's Christmas Camp Guide*. It includes Christmas recipes and holiday activities from Karen's movies and books so you can have your own magical Christmas Camp experience with your friends and family.

Karen would love to connect with you!

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Wedding, 2019
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Top 10 Audible Bestseller

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Celebrate the magic and music of the season with this scripted holiday romance featuring award-winning actors and musicians by Emmy Award-winning writer Karen Schaler!

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RECIPES & FESTIVE ACTIVITIES!

When I wrote my debut novel *Christmas Camp*, inspired by my original *Christmas Camp* Hallmark movie, I decided to start a new holiday tradition as an author and always include exclusive Christmas recipes and activities from the story. I thought this would be a fun and festive way for us all to connect. I love seeing when you all make my recipes and try out the activities, especially when you share your pictures on social media—so be sure to tag me so I can share them as well.

I can't wait to hear what you think of this year's recipes for *Every Day Is Christmas*. Just writing this, I get thirsty for the Merry Berry Christmas Punch that is wonderful with the delicious and easy-to-make Peppermint Shortbread Christmas Magic Bars.

If you're like me and love holiday treats and festive fun, I have a free gift for you on my website www.karenschaler.com where you can download my Christmas Camp Guide that has delicious exclusive recipes and activities from all my novels and movies that I update each year.

Enjoy!

***Every Day Is Christmas* - Peppermint Shortbread Christmas Magic Bars**

This easy recipe, inspired by one of Alexis's favorite treats in *Every Day Is Christmas*, is a festive twist on a classic shortbread favorite that is sure to be an instant holiday hit with your peppermint-loving family and friends.

Ingredients:

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon peppermint extract (optional)
- Pinch of sea salt
- Fresh crushed candy canes (for topping) 1/4 cup

Instructions:

1. Preheat your oven to 325°F (165°C) and line a 9x12-inch baking pan with parchment paper, leaving some overhang for easy removal later.
2. Mix together the softened butter, granulated sugar, vanilla extract, peppermint extract, cinnamon, and sea salt until light and fluffy.
3. Gradually add the flour to the butter mixture, mixing until well combined and a dough forms.
4. Press the dough evenly into the prepared baking pan, smoothing the surface with the back of a spoon or spatula.
5. Poke the surface in at least a dozen places with a fork.
6. Sprinkle ½ to 1 cup of fresh crushed candy canes over the top of the dough, gently pressing them into the top of the dough.
7. Bake for 25-30 minutes, or until the edges are lightly golden.
8. Remove from the oven and let cool completely in the pan.

9. Once cooled, use the parchment paper overhang to lift the shortbread out of the pan. Place it on a cutting board and cut into bars of your desired size.
10. Serve and enjoy!

Christmas Tip: Crush your own candy canes for the most fun and the best taste.

Gluten-Free Peppermint Shortbread Christmas Magic Bars

Sharing another fabulous way to make one of Alexis's favorite Christmas treats. This time we're keeping it gluten-free. This is the recipe I've developed for my family and friends, and I hope you love it as much as they do.

Ingredients:

- 2 cups almond flour
- 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon peppermint extract (optional)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Pinch of sea salt
- Fresh crushed candy canes (for topping) 1/2 cup

Instructions:

1. Preheat your oven to 350°F (165°C) and line a 9x12-inch baking pan with parchment paper, leaving some overhang for easy removal later.
2. In a mixing bowl, combine the almond flour, cinnamon, and sea salt.
3. In a separate bowl, mix together the softened butter, sugar, vanilla extract, and peppermint extract until well combined.
4. Gradually add the wet mixture to the dry mixture, stirring until a dough forms. The dough should hold together when pressed. It will be crumbly in texture. If it's a little too dry you can slowly add a few teaspoons of water to it.
5. Press the dough evenly into the prepared baking pan, smoothing the surface with the back of a spoon.
6. Poke the surface in at least a dozen places with a fork.

7. Sprinkle ½ to 1 cup of fresh crushed candy canes over the top of the dough, pressing them gently to adhere.
8. Bake for 12-15 minutes, or until the edges are lightly golden.
9. Remove from the oven and let it cool completely in the pan on a wire rack.
10. Once cooled, use the parchment paper overhang to lift the shortbread out of the pan. Place it on a cutting board and cut into bars of your desired size.
11. Serve and enjoy!

Christmas Tip: Crush your own candy canes for the most fun and the best taste.

Every Day is Christmas - **Merry Berry Christmas Punch**

Why should Jeff's family in *Every Day Is Christmas* be the only one to enjoy this refreshing, festive, holiday crowd pleaser? Now you, too, can enjoy my Merry Berry Christmas Punch with this exclusive recipe.

Ingredients:

- 2 cups unsweetened cranberry juice
- 1 cup unsweetened pomegranate juice
- 2 cups sparkling water
- ½ cup unsweetened coconut water
- 1/4 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 12 fresh slices of lemon & 12 fresh slices of lime
- 3/4 cup cranberries
- 24 mint leaves for punch and garnish
- Ice cubes (optional)

Instructions:

1. In a large pitcher or punch bowl, combine the unsweetened cranberry juice, pomegranate juice, coconut water, and sparkling water, and freshly squeezed lemon juice.
2. Stir well to mix the ingredients.
3. Add lemon and lime slices, fresh cranberries, and mint leaves to the punch for added flavor and garnish.
4. If desired, add ice cubes to chill the punch.
5. Serve the sugar-free sparkling punch in glasses with your garnish of choice.
6. Enjoy the refreshing and festive flavor of this Christmas punch!

Garnish Ideas:

- **Mint-Cranberry Skewer:** Skewer a few cranberries and fresh mint leaves onto a cocktail pick, for a fantastic combination of tartness and freshness.
- **Cranberry-Studded Mint Leaf:** Float a single mint leaf on top of your drink and stud it with a few cranberries, adding a visually striking element and a burst of fruity flavor.
- **Mint-Cranberry Ice Cubes:** Freeze whole cranberries and fresh mint leaves into ice cubes, creating a stunning garnish that not only chills your drink but also adds a pop of color and flavor as it melts.

Feel free to adjust the proportions of cranberry juice, white grape juice or pomegranate juice, and sparkling water according to your taste preferences.

Christmas Tip: If you're looking to spike the punch, just add 2 cups of your favorite vodka for even more festive fun.

Every Day Is Christmas - Draw the Christmas Song

It was so wonderful having the opportunity to be on the movie set for *Every Day Is Christmas* when we were filming one of my favorite scenes—when Jeff’s family is playing this game. Like Jeff, I can barely draw a stick figure, so this always brings a lot of laughs and joy.

Equipment:

- Easel: A sturdy, adjustable stand that holds the drawing pad or paper
- Drawing pad or paper
- Markers or pens—use different colors for extra creativity
- Slips of paper to write your Christmas song clues on
- Christmas stocking to put the clues in
- Timer (optional) if you want to set a time limit
- Christmas music (optional) if you want some background inspiration!

Instructions:

- Have the game host write 12+ Christmas carol songs on the slips of paper and put the clues into a Christmas stocking to draw from.
- Split your group into two teams. One team is the “Jingle Bells” the other team is the “Deck the Halls”
- Flip a coin to see who goes first.
- The first team member gets a clue from the stocking and starts to draw that clue in front of everyone on the easel without saying anything or pointing to anything.
- Team members from both teams can guess and whoever guesses correctly first that team gets a point.
- Then the next team is up, and this process is completed until you’ve done all 12 songs and tally up the score.

Christmas Tip: I always like to put some Christmas treats together for the winning team.

Merry Christmas!

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EVERY DAY IS CHRISTMAS

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The recipes in this book are meant to be followed exactly as written. The publisher and author are not responsible for any of your adverse reactions to the recipes found in this book, or for your individual allergies or health issues that may require medical assistance