



a
forbidden
Romance

His Christmas

MIRACLE

usa today bestselling author
frankie love

HIS CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

FRANKIE LOVE



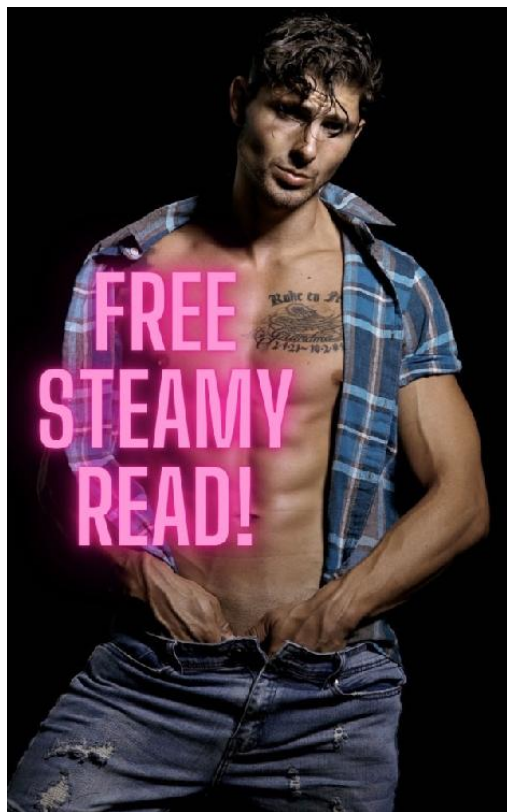
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ABOUT

HIS CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

A Forbidden Romance

By Frankie Love

Her name is Miracle, and growing up, she was the one I
wanted.

I heard she joined a convent. Me? I joined the Navy.

This year I've come back home for the holidays.

And Mom insists we go to Christmas Eve mass.

My Miracle is there, waiting for me.

One look and I know — it's sure as hell not gonna be a Silent
Night.

SILAS

It's a cold-ass winter, and it's Christmas Eve. And every song on the radio feels like the universe is playing a trick on me.

“Miracle” by Bon Jovi.

Next, “When You Believe” and “Miracles” by Mariah Carey.

I switch the stations. And suddenly, Kenny Chesney is crooning “No Small Miracle.”

I chuckle and look out the windshield of my truck. Speaking of miracles, the fact I got leave to come home for Christmas at all is a gift my mom won't see coming. I'm in the Navy. And most of the time, I'm out to sea. But somehow, the ship came into port just in time for Christmas.

I only have a few days to spend at home, so the moment I got off the boat, I jumped in my truck and started heading east, over the mountains in Washington State toward my parents' home in the small town of Briar Valley. It's a good enough place to grow up. There's a main street, a bakery, a café, and a church. A few churches, actually. But only one that matters to my mom.

Tonight, we will be going to midnight mass at Saint John's Church, though we only go to service there a few times a year. Still, tradition is tradition, and growing up going to mass always meant seeing her—Miracle Lane.

I change the station. This time, Kelly Clarkson is belting out “Some Kind of Miracle.”

I run a hand over my clean-shaven jaw, thinking about the *real* miracle. And sure, in my mom’s eyes, it will be me coming home for Christmas. But the only miracle I’ve ever dreamt of is Miracle Lane, the most beautiful girl in the world.

I went to school with her, and kindergarten until graduation, we were in the same buildings. She and I were opposites, though, from the get-go. When Miracle was a little girl, she was already bowing her head and saying prayers.

And as soon as I could, I was running rowdy at recess, hollering in the lunchroom. As we got older, she always volunteered the food bank in town. I’d pass her on my way to my pop’s auto shop, where I worked after school, learning the tricks of the trade. I’d smoke cigarettes as I walked to work, and if I caught her eye through the window of the food bank, she’d smile warmly, but I was all bad boy vibes, and she was angelic through and through.

Still, that’s how Miracle was. She’d smile at everyone. It wasn’t her being nice to me in particular. Of course, it made me want her. Badly.

She was beautiful, curvy in all the right ways. She’d wear these pleated skirts and knee-high socks, knit sweaters snug across her chest. God, she looked like a Catholic schoolgirl, even though we went to public school. Somehow, she still played the part, having no idea just how damn sexy she looked with that skirt skimming her ass. The sweater pulled tight. And if she put her hair in two braids, I would need to skip class, go home, and rub one out.

Crass, maybe. But every time I saw her, I felt something, wanted something, hell, I started praying for something. And I wasn’t exactly the praying type, never have been. But God, I’d convert if it meant having Miracle.

It was never gonna happen. By graduation day, though, I’d signed up for the Navy. Which wasn’t the real roadblock. The dead end was Miracle’s choice.

She signed up to head back east to become a nun. A real-life forgive me, Father, Hail Mary nun.

Apparently, there was some convent in Maine. She was headed there to learn what it meant to be a nun. I googled it, not really knowing much about nunneries.

Turns out she was going to marry Jesus and like never have sex.

Which, if that's the case, and Miracle's still a virgin...

I shake my head. I've been gone from home for four years, but I ask Mom about Miracle sometimes. Mom just smiles and rattles off everything she knows about anyone we went to school with. Like I said, it's a small town and a small school. She would tell me things like Miracle had been assigned a nunnery in North Seattle, that she had done whatever you do to pass the test to become a nun, probably about the same time I left bootcamp. Haven't seen her since.

But hell, these songs are making me think of her.

I take the exit off the freeway as Chris Tomlin's song "Miracle of Love" comes on.

At this point, I got to laugh. "Is the universe playing tricks on me?" I wonder aloud as I pull into town, turning my blinker on left to head to Mom and Pop's house.

Before I get there, I pass the Catholic Church, stained glass windows all lit up. For some reason, there's a tightness in my chest as I pass, wishing for a miracle tonight.

There has only been one miracle I have ever wanted, though. And it is crazy. But when I show up for midnight mass with my mom and pop, my wish is for Miracle to be there.

And instead of wearing her habit, or whatever it is nuns wear, in my fantasy, she'd be wearing nothing at all. I grin as I pull into my parents' driveway. I'm here to surprise them. But hell, I am a grown-ass man back from sea. I can't help it if I'm feeling a little swept away.

MIRACLE

Being the oldest of four sisters meant I grew up taking care of people. It's in my bones, in my blood. It's what I do probably better than anything else, especially with my mom gone. She died when I was little, which meant four girls under one roof with one dad who was doing his best to keep it together.

He has always done so amazingly well with us.

Over the years, he's bought more tampons and ice cream than most men, always making sure we were taken care of. I guess it just goes to show that if a man wanted to, he would. And my dad has always wanted to be a wonderful dad to his girls. Almost more so now that we are all grown up. It is as if he became even more protective. I'm the oldest at twenty-two, and it seems like just yesterday I left home.

Now I'm back.

I bite my bottom lip, tears stinging my eyes, wishing it had all gone differently.

My sister Sparkle comes up behind me. "Miracle, what's wrong? You crying?"

"I'm fine," I say as I wipe away the tears. "It's just, I don't know. The holidays always make me miss Mom." I was 10 when she passed, and I still have this vision of her twirling around the living room, laughing and singing with my dad because they were deciding where the ornaments should go on the tree we'd chopped down earlier in the woods. We always

did that even after Mom passed. But it's always different without her. She created the Christmas magic.

I look at Sparkle. She's 20 and all bright-eyed and hopeful. Her brown hair is in curls past her shoulders, and her chocolate brown eyes look like hot cocoa.

"What?" she asks. "You're looking at me all funny."

I shrug, knowing we're mirror images of one another. I'm just maybe an inch taller than her, but we can share all the same clothes and shoes. In fact, all four of us girls can. We were built the same. Same as our mom, all of us. Five foot four, a little curvy, dimples in our cheeks, dark brown hair, and eyes that our daddy says sparkle.

"I'm glad to be back," I tell Sparkle. She gives me a hug.

"I'm glad you're back too. I missed you."

I add some butter to the mashed potatoes that I'm making on top of the stove.

"Can you scooch over just a little bit? I want to pull out the ham."

"Oh, sorry," I say. I step aside as Sparkle pulls out the honey-glazed ham for our Christmas Eve feast. We're going to have a good dinner together before we head over to church tonight. Christmas Eve mass. I swallow.

"What is it?" Sparkle says, her eye catching mine.

"It's just tonight," I tell her. "It's so strange to go to church after everything."

Sparkle sets the ham on the counter, closes the oven, and then gives me a hug with her potholdered hands. "You're brave," she says. "And you're beautiful. And maybe your Christmas wish will come true this year."

I laugh. "A Christmas wish, huh?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. Now that you're not a nun anymore, who knows? Maybe you'll meet somebody."

I twist my lips. "It seems too soon," I tell her. I just made the decision two weeks ago to leave what I thought was my

true calling. But I realized that while I love to serve people, I have another longing in my heart.

It felt foolish, and I was terrified to say anything. But my mentor, Mother Grace, encouraged me to follow my heart, even if it was scary, and to be brave, even if it meant not knowing what would come next.

“The potatoes and ham are done, which means dinner’s ready,” I tell Sparkle, not wanting to get lost in memories of Mother Grace and the convent.

She smiles. “All right. I’ll go get Lovey and Clover.”

Just then, Dad comes in through the back door.

“Hey, Dad,” I say, “just in time for supper.”

He stomps off his boots covered in snow and pulls off his thick flannel coat, hanging it on a hook by the back door. His knit hat is covered in snow too, and he takes it off, revealing his thick wavy gray hair. He has never dated since my mom died, but it’s been a dozen years, and he is a catch. I wonder if he is lonely like I am.

“It’s pretty windy out there,” he tells me.

I smile. “Maybe we’ll have to drive to mass tonight.”

“Maybe,” he says. “But I think the wind will die down and we can still walk over. It’s just a few blocks. And it’s tradition to walk there, all bundled up.”

I nod. “That’s true.”

My sisters tumble into the kitchen, all looking beautiful, dressed up in their Christmas Eve finest: velvet dresses, hair all curled, their makeup done perfectly.

“Well, I missed the memo on putting on a pretty dress for dinner,” I say, looking down at myself. I’m in a corduroy jumper and a white turtleneck. I suppose I still look like I’m a nun in some ways. Sparkle, though, is going to school to be a beauty esthetician, and she always looks glamorous with her lash extensions and acrylic nails.

Sparkle must notice what I'm wearing. "Okay, can someone make the salad? I'll be back in a second with Miracle. She needs..."

Lovey and Clover laugh.

"A makeover?" I roll my eyes.

"Be nice to yourself. You just always put yourself last," Lovey says gently. The youngest of the four, she managed to avoid the stereotypical selfish stereotype. Instead, she is nothing but generous.

I laugh. "I just never think of putting on cute clothes like you girls."

Dad chuckles. "Well, I think you're beautiful no matter what you're wearing, Miracle."

Clover grins. "Yeah, but she's looking for a man. She's not going to find one like that."

"That's not true," Dad says as I walk out of the kitchen with Sparkle. "It's what's inside that counts. And thankfully, Miracle has a heart of gold. Any man that ends up with her is one lucky bastard."

SILAS

When I push open the front door, I am flooded with the familiar scents of Christmas at home. Mom's apple cinnamon candle is burning on the entryway table, and the freshly cut pine tree is in the living room a few feet away, all lit up and decorated with the ornaments I made when I was a little kid.

Mom walks out of the kitchen in an apron and a look of surprise on her face. "Silas, what on earth are you doing here?" She walks toward me as I set my duffle bag on the floor, her arms wrapping me in a warm hug.

"I got leave and wanted to surprise you and Pops."

"Henry, come in here. Silas is home!" Mom calls to my dad.

He walks in from the garage a minute later, grinning and reaching out to give me a big hug. "Son, you sure know how to make your parents happy."

I am an only child, and I know that having me here means a lot. I also know that in about ten minutes, my mom will already be asking if I have met anyone special.

"We were just about to eat before midnight mass. Are you hungry?" Mom asks.

I follow her and Pops into the kitchen. "When am I not hungry?"

"Fair enough," Pops says as he helps by carrying a platter of roast ham to the table. I grab the basket of rolls, and Mom

pours us all sparkling wine.

“It’s a celebration, after all,” she says with a twinkle in her eyes.

As we sit to eat, Mom pipes in with the question I was expecting. “So have you met a special someone?”

“Darla, the boy hasn’t even taken a bite of food yet,” Pops says with a heart laugh, then adds, “But have you?”

I play along good-naturedly. “You know I have never dated anyone. If there was someone, you’d be the first to know.”

“But you are twenty-two, Silas ... It seems like the time to go out there and find a girlfriend.”

“Mom, I was out to sea for the last four months. And that isn’t changing any time soon. Who would want to be in a long-distance relationship like that?”

“The right lady would be willing to wait for you,” she says.

“Well, if I meet her, I will be sure to let you know.”

“You know who I always thought you would make a good couple with?” Pops says.

“Who is that?” I ask with a smirk, taking a bite of mashed potatoes.

“Miracle Lane,” he says.

I nearly choke. Can this man read my mind? “Miracle Lane? Don’t we seem like opposites?”

Mom laughs. “Complete opposites. Not to mention she is off being a nun, last I heard.”

Pops, though, shakes his head. “No. I saw her dad, Hank, at the diner the other morning. She moved back home a few weeks ago. I guess living in a convent didn’t suit her.”

The idea of Miracle being back in town and no longer being a nun is a shock. Wasn’t I just dreaming about that on my way to my parents’ house? Is it possible to have my Christmas miracle happen that fast?

I smile, my parents watching me. “What?” I say, knowing my grin is obvious.

“So maybe you like the news that Miracle’s back in town,” Mom says, taking a sip of her champagne.

“Honey, don’t start in on that. It’s just going to push him away,” Pops says.

I shrug. “Not true, Dad. Yeah, I’ve always had my sights set on Miracle. Surely you both know that.”

“No, we didn’t,” Mom says. “You always keep that sort of thing to yourself. You really had a crush on her?”

“Yeah, but I always figured what’s the point of even considering her and me? You remember what I was like in high school and what she’s always been like.” I shake my head, remembering how sweet Miracle always was. She was even an angel in the school lunchroom, saying grace before she opened her paper lunch bag and pulled out a pb and j. Even as a fifth grader, she would open her purse and hand someone a \$5 bill if they forgot lunch money, and she always seemed to save a seat for someone who was looking for a place to eat lunch. She’s just that kind of person.

Mom speaks up. “What, you mean like she’s pretty religious, and you only go to church three times a year?”

“Three times?” Pops laughs. “I think it’s two.”

“Regardless,” Mom says, “I do think you’re opposites in that. I never considered you much of a religious person, Silas. You know I’ve accepted you just as you are, but I’m not so sure a girl like Miracle would be interested in a man who wasn’t...” She bites her bottom lip as if thinking of the word.

“Look, I say my prayers every night before I go to sleep,” I tell my mom.

“Really?” she asks, leaning in. “What do you pray for?”

“For you and Pops to be happy. For me to find the girl of my dreams and settle down, have a family, get you some grandkids that you’re always talking about.”

“You don’t need to rush those things,” Pops says. “You’re only 22.”

“I know, but you were married to Mom already at that age.”

That doesn’t mean you have to follow in our footsteps. We were young and in love and...”

I pipe up. “That’s what I want too, is all, so that’s what I pray for before I go to sleep. I’m praying to God or whoever the universe may be. All I know is I’m not so opposed to a higher power. But what I really believe in is love.”

Mom’s eyes widen. “Going out to sea made you quite the romantic, huh? Maybe all that time on the boat has you thinking.”

“And what are you thinking about?” Pops asks.

“I’m thinking about the meaning of it all. What’s the point? It seems like I could keep on messing around like I did when I was young, getting into trouble, barely graduating high school, or I could clear all that bullshit away right now, focus on finding the one, on being happy, on making a life—a real life for myself.”

Mom and Pops look at one another across the table. “You know I always wanted more kids,” Mom says. She reaches out and takes my hand. “I always thought I would have a big old family, but I was gifted with you after so long of waiting. It took a decade of trying before I had my Christmas miracle, and that was you, Silas. And I guess now it’s Christmas Eve, twenty-two years later, and I’m just sitting here in awe, looking at my son all grown up, wondering when did you become so wise? You figure it all out on your own.”

“Well, I kind of had pretty good examples,” I say, looking at both my parents. Pop then looks all misty-eyed, and for a mechanic who has callused hands and doesn’t talk about his emotions all that much, I’m surprised to see him so emotional.

“Sorry to choke you all up,” I say, looking at him, but Pops just shakes his head.

“No, don’t say that, son. It’s good. The last few years with you being gone in the Navy has had me thinking too, about the point. And you’re right: It is about love, family.”

Mom watches as Pops stands up and walks over to the Christmas tree. He bends down and picks up a box and carries it back to Mom.

“What’s this?” she asks as he sits back down at the dining room table.

“It’s a Christmas gift,” he tells her.

“For me?”

He grins. “Yeah. Of course, I didn’t know Silas was coming, so now you might not like the gift at all. I thought it was going to be a quiet Christmas here, just your Mom and me,” he says to me.

I shake my head. “I’m not trying to ruin your plans.”

“Oh, you’re not, sweetheart,” Mom says, clasping my hand. She unties the bow of the box and unwraps the paper that is bright red. It’s a small, slim box, the size of a bracelet box or something like that. But when she opens the lid, there’s no jewelry. Instead, there’s a piece of paper folded in thirds. “What’s this?” she asks, looking at my pops.

He can’t help but grin. “I got us tickets. That honeymoon we never had. We fly out in the morning, 6:00 a.m., which means I was planning on us leaving right after midnight mass so we can make it over the mountains and to the airport in time.”

Mom presses a hand to her heart. “Oh my goodness, really?”

My eyes are wide as I take in the scene. It’s awfully romantic. My parents have never had a real vacation, and I know Mom over the years has always talked about wanting to go to the big island. She loves her coffee and wants to tour all those coffee roasters, go to the black sand beach, and walk across a volcano. I know she’s thinking all of this, taking it all in as she reads the paper out loud. “Ten nights on Kona,” she

says, looking at my pops. “Hank, how can we afford this? How?”

“I’ve been saving,” he tells her. “I wanted to surprise you. And...” He looks over at me. “Sorry, Son. I really didn’t think you were going to be here, but...”

“No,” I say, “this is literally Mom’s dream come true.” Pops’ cheeks are red as if he’s embarrassed to be bringing the girl he loves so much joy. Mom stands up from the table and walks over to her husband, wrapping her arms around him and giving him a gentle kiss. I watch in awe, knowing one day I want that kind of love. Love that lasts forever.

And sure, I may be some hard-knock kid in the Navy, but when I see them right now, I know what they have is something special.

“The honeymoon we never had,” she says.

“I hope it’s not too late,” Pops says back.

She shakes her head. “There’s no such thing as too late, not when we have right now.”

I think maybe my mom’s on to something. I also have right now.

I have tonight, and I have a feeling I’m going to find my miracle, too.

MIRACLE

Getting out of the house is nearly impossible. Four girls, all wanting to look their best, and a dad who's standing at the door saying, "We're going to be late." Everyone's in a tizzy. And I'm focused on getting the food from dinner into the refrigerator before we leave for church.

"Seriously, Miracle," Sparkle says, "the food could get put away in an hour. We don't want to be late. Come on."

"Okay," I say, knowing she's right, and setting down the Tupperware on the counter. She has my red wool coat in her hands and offers it to me. "Thanks, sis," I say.

I slide it on and reach for the gloves in my pockets. And then just like that, the four Lane girls are walking out the door with our dad. It's a small town, which means the light pollution is low, and there are stars twinkling in the sky. The houses all along the street are lit up with Christmas lights, and there's a feeling of hope in the air. I look over at Dad as I walk.

He asks me to stay back, and he links his arm through mine. "I know you've had a big month," he tells me, "making the big choices you did."

"You swear you're not disappointed in me?" I ask. "I've been talking about being a nun since I was a little girl, and then I only lasted a few years."

"Disappointed?" He pats my hand. "That's not even remotely possible. How could I be disappointed in my

daughter following her heart? I think that's the one thing every dad wants for their kid."

As we cross the street, my boots sink into the snow with each step we take, even though these sidewalks have been cleared over and over again. The church is at the end of the street all lit up, and there are other families walking toward the building.

"I have a confession," Dad says.

I smile. "Maybe you should leave that for the priest."

Dad laughs. "No, no. I have something I've been wishing for."

"Wishing?" I say. "Not praying for?"

"All right. Maybe I've been praying. I don't know."

"Well, what is it, Dad?"

"Call me crazy. I just want you to be happy. I've always thought... Well, I know it's silly, but you know my buddy Henry?"

"Henry Ritter?" I ask, knowing just who that is. He owns the auto shop downtown, and Dad's known him forever. And I've known their son forever. "You mean Silas's dad?"

"Yeah." Dad gives me a low chuckle. "Silas's dad. Well, I saw him the other morning at breakfast."

"Okay, and what exactly are you confessing?"

"I told him you were back in town."

"Why does Henry care if I'm in town?" I ask.

"Well, I thought maybe.... I don't know. Their son, Silas, he was always a good kid. I thought maybe you and him might..."

"Dad." I cut him off and stop on the sidewalk, turning to face him. "Me and Silas Ritter? No way."

"Why not?" Dad says.

"That's your confession, or your wish, or your prayer? That Silas and me would be... What? Like be together?" I

can't help but laugh out loud. I cover my mouth as my sisters turn to look at us.

“What’s going on?” Sparkle asks.

“Nothing” I say. “Except Dad thinks Silas Ritter and I would be a good couple.”

Lovey’s eyes shoot up. “He joined the Navy, didn’t he?”

“How do you keep tabs on the guys I went to high school with?” I ask my younger sister.

She shrugs. Clover, though, laughs. “She stalks him on Instagram.”

“Who does?” I can’t help but smile at my sisters creeping on Silas’s social media.

“Lovey.”

“How come?” I ask.

“Because he’s always going to cool places,” Lovey says. “Like Japan and San Diego. It just seems really cool, life at sea.”

“You want to join the Navy now?” I ask my younger sister.

“No, I want to travel. I want to see the world. I want to get outside of Briar Valley.”

I smile at my sister. “You will one day,” I tell her, and I know it’s true. Ever since she was a little girl, she would look at maps, check out books from the library about exotic locations. She’s always had a bit of wanderlust.

It’s not something I’ve had myself, not because I’m simple or boring, but I’ve always been content with the idea of living in a convent, of serving other people, of my life’s purpose being about a life of service.

But then, of course, those feelings changed, and last year I realized what else I wanted in life. And it wasn’t to travel the world. It was to fall in love, be someone’s partner, have a family, a life that was simple but ours.

That dream, though pure in spirit, is not aligned with life as a nun. I had to make a choice. I swallow back the emotions, remembering how hard it was to finally declare my truth, that being a nun wasn't the life for me. I lick my lips. "Well, regardless, I don't think Silas would be interested in someone like me."

"Why?" Lovey asks. "I don't think he has a girlfriend. Or if he does, he never posts about her, which is a bad sign."

I shrug. "I don't have social media, so I wouldn't know, but I'm sure he dated girls in high school. Maybe he's married by now."

"He's not," Dad says.

I look at him. "And how do you know that?"

"Because I was talking to his dad, Hank. He's actually never had a girlfriend. He's been single forever. His dad was wondering, well..."

"What?" I say.

"His dad thought you guys would be a cute couple."

I frown. "I think Silas is a little wild for me."

"Why?" Dad asks.

"I don't know. In high school, I think he was always skipping class and drinking and going to parties. It's just, that was never my thing. It still isn't. I just don't think we would, you know, mesh."

Sparkle slows her pace, walking beside me and Dad. "You want a guy who's more religious?"

I shrug. "No, not that exactly. Someone who has a gentle spirit, a good heart, who wants to have a family. I'm looking for someone who, maybe will say a prayer at supper, but I don't know. Saying a prayer out of love, not out of obligation." I shrug. "I don't know if that makes any sense."

My dad just smiles. "It makes sense. You're figuring it out. And hell, maybe you'll run into Silas while you're home."

“I think he’s out to sea,” my sister says. “I mean, he hasn’t posted anything in a while, at least. So sorry, sis, but I don’t think you’re going to meet him tonight.”

Dad, though, grins. “That’s the thing about Christmas. Sometimes there’s miracles where you don’t expect them.”

When we get to the church, my heart feels lighter. Just talking with my family, and laughing about ridiculous things like me and Silas has somehow lightened my spirits. And as I enter the church I grew up in, I feel a peace I wasn’t expecting.

I can’t imagine Silas Ritter would be interested in me, but I am reminded of why I chose to change my life’s path so dramatically. Because I do want to fall in love. I do want a partner. I want someone to look at me and think, *My word. That girl right there is my miracle.*

SILAS

Mom and Dad spend the half an hour before we leave for church packing for their vacation. I love Mom's energy. Instead of getting stressed that she doesn't have time to prepare for her vacation, she just happily begins throwing sundresses, flip-flops, and her swimming suit into the suitcase. Dad pulls things out from the closet for her.

"I already packed," he announces, and Mom and I both laugh. I can imagine him, this burly mechanic, packing for a beach vacation without my mom knowing. It's romantic in a way I genuinely didn't expect. It's not that they haven't been lovey-dovey all my life, but this is next level.

"I feel bad, though," she says. "I'm leaving you here on Christmas, Silas. You came here to surprise us, and now Dad surprised me, and it means you're going to be all by yourself Christmas morning."

"Seriously, it's going to be great," I tell her, meaning it. "Usually I'm on a boat with a whole bunch of dudes. It'll be nice for some peace and quiet in my own bedroom, honestly." Dad claps me on the back.

"Besides he's a grown man. He'll be fine. How long are you home before you go back to sea?" he asks me.

"Five days," I tell him. "So five days to enjoy Briar Valley."

"Hey, Mom and I got a hot tub earlier this fall. You can enjoy that."

My eyes widen. “You never told me.”

He shrugs. “We didn’t want to brag.”

“Pops, I guess you really have been saving.”

“The shop’s been doing well,” he tells me. “If you weren’t planning on re-enlisting, I would try and convince you to become my partner. It’s a lot of work running that place on my own.”

I smirk. “You want me moving back here to Briar Valley and living with you and Mom?”

He shakes his head. “Hell no. I don’t want you moving in here. Your mom and I are going on our honeymoon. We’re going to come back like newlyweds. We don’t need a kid around.”

Mom laughs. “Stop it, Hank.”

I grin. “Well, I’ll let you guys have at it. I’m going to go change before we head to church.”

Mom smiles. “All right, sweetheart. We’re going to leave in just about five minutes.”

In my bedroom, I unzip my duffle bag and look for a collared shirt. I pull it on, hoping it’s not wrinkled, and in the bathroom I comb back my hair, thinking about what Pops was saying at dinner, that Miracle moved back home, that she’s no longer a nun.

Is it possible? Truth is, just the thought of it gets me hard. I have to grip the edge of the counter to get ahold of myself. I keep imagining her saying her prayers, her head bowed, her lips parted, her pink tongue...

Okay, I’ve got to stop. I shake my head, telling myself to get a grip. *You’re going to church not to bed with this woman.*

I meet my parents at the front door, and the three of us head out to the church. We walk like we always do, and I know when we pass Miracle’s house a few blocks down, because I always notice it, but the lights are off though the Christmas lights are on.

I'm sure they're already at church. They're a much more religious family than we are. I wonder if that would bother Miracle. I shake my head, not that it matters. Miracle and I aren't a thing, so it doesn't matter what she's looking for or not.

We walk into the church. Mom and Pops are holding hands. I take a program from the usher as we look for a pew. Mom finds one in the middle of the church, and we scoot in. I'm on the end of the aisle.

As I take my seat, I look over. On the other side of the aisle are four young women and their dad. The Lanes. Miracle is sitting opposite me. I look at her, and our eyes lock.

Damn it. I shake my head, and she shakes hers, a smile cresting her face, her eyes twinkling brightly. Her sister seems to be watching the silent exchange, but before I can say anything to her like, "Hello, by the way, I've been dreaming about you for years," the music from the organ begins to play, and we all stand ready to sing the Christmas hymn "Silent Night," but I swear I hear the pounding of my heart beating like Little Drummer Boy.

I look over at her, unable to keep my eyes away. She is in a red wool coat with black boots to her knees, and her hair is long and loose around her shoulders. Her profile is beautiful. Her nose is upturned, her lips pink and pouty. Her cheeks are flushed from the winter cold outside. Candles surround us, everything lit up like magic. The stained glass windows are hauntingly beautiful, the church music echoing around us.

What follows for the next hour is singing, and prayers, and kneeling, and then candles are passed to everyone in the sanctuary, and we light them one by one.

I look over at Miracle. Her eyes are closed, her head bowed, just like I imagined. She's holding that candle flickering in front of her. The whole church is illuminated. I feel something, and no, not my hardening cock. This time it's something else, and it's more than a beating heart.

I look at her and feel a surge of longing. Not lust. It feels like love, and I know that's crazy. This girl and I, hell, we

haven't talked in four years, and before that, we hardly ever spoke, but maybe words aren't necessary.

I know what I've been praying for every night when I go to sleep, and sure, I'm not the religious sort, but maybe that doesn't matter.

If Miracle left the church and is no longer a nun, maybe her religion changed too. Maybe both of us simply believe in love.

MIRACLE

It is impossible to concentrate. For the entire service, my mind is on him.

Silas.

I keep stealing a look, and every time I do, I'm reminded just how handsome Silas Ritter is. He's even more handsome now. He must have gotten stronger in bootcamp. His shoulders are broad. I swear there are muscles in his neck and his jaw. His hair is cropped, and I want to run my fingers through it ... and now I'm thinking things I shouldn't, things that started me on the path of leaving the church.

I swallow, focusing on the words of Silent Night, looking for some sort of amazing grace. I close my eyes, willing myself to follow along as we kneel and bow our heads, praying to the heavens, looking for all the gratitude in our hearts, feeling a surge of love flow throughout the church, grateful that I'm here with my sisters and my dad, that even though I changed my life path, I haven't been turned away from the place I call home—at least my second home, the church.

It's excruciating, though, standing across the aisle from Silas, wondering what he's thinking. I saw the look in his eyes though when he looked at me. It was reflective of my own heart pounding with anticipation and questions and wonderment, amazement that he is here.

Dad was just talking about him. What are the odds that I am back home and so is he? And isn't he in the Navy? Lovey

said he never posts a girlfriend on Instagram. My mind is swirling with thoughts that are ridiculous because I don't even know Silas, and he doesn't even know me, but he's looking at me like he does, like he knows something, like he knows everything.

And in that split second, as my eyes are closed and my head is bowed, I pray. I pray for my own sort of Christmas miracle. I've always been the sort to believe in them.

I was my mom's miracle, after all. All she wanted in the whole world was to be a mom, and I made her one. That's why she named me this. And it's a ridiculous name, sort of silly, but it's also so full of beauty. And right now, I'm reminded of everything I want in life.

Not the fancy vacations and not the big old house. I just want a place to call mine, a home to create with a husband, a family to grow of my own. I understand why my mom wanted to be a mom so badly, because I suddenly have that feeling too, a desire to create a life with someone else.

I look over at Silas, and once again, his eyes are catching mine. The service is ended, and everyone is putting on their coats or buttoning their jackets, and he's stepping out toward me, then he is next to me.

I look up at him, a smile spreading across my face.

"Miracle Lane," he says. "Merry Christmas."

I press my lips together, looking for the word, searching for something to say that's both clever and cute and real.

"You're so much more handsome than I remember," I blurt out, instantly realizing what I've just said, and my cheeks turn crimson red. He breaks out into a grin.

"Well, I wasn't expecting you to say that. You always seemed like the shy and quiet type."

I shrug. "I think I'm a lot different than you remember."

He nods. "I understand. I think I'm a lot different than you remember."

I lick my lips, looking up at him. “Do you have plans for Christmas?” I ask, instantly realizing how dumb that sounds. His parents are a few feet behind him talking to some other people, and he’s here to see his parents. It’s Christmas.

“Actually, I don’t,” he says.

I frown. “Really? You’re not doing Christmas with your parents?”

“No. They’re actually leaving town right after the service. I’m going to be alone on Christmas.”

My eyes widen, and I look back at my family. They’re scattered around the church talking to friends, and I’m alone with Silas. I’m grateful that my sisters read the room and gave me a moment of peace. “Well, if you’re not doing anything for Christmas, maybe we could...get together?”

He smiles. “Are you asking me out?”

I cringe. “Oh my God. Is that embarrassing?”

“No. It’s sweet. You want to spend Christmas together?”

“Is that weird? I mean, I haven’t talked to you in four years. We just went to high school together. We were never even really friends. I don’t know what I’m thinking.” I shake my head, pressing my fingertips to my cheeks, telling myself to calm down, but I just feel so much all at once for him.

“I’d love to spend Christmas with you,” he answers. “You tell me what you want. I can come to your place and do Christmas with your family or you can come to mine and we can do Christmas just you and me.”

“Your house will be empty?” I ask tentatively.

He nods. “Yep. I’ll be all alone.”

I know what it could mean going to his place, his *empty place* on Christmas, and I know what Christmas would look like at my house with him coming to me and my sisters and my dad. The whole day would be loud and chaotic and silly and ridiculous.

But this whole year has been about giving in to what I truly desire, even if it's scary and unknown and uncertain. It's been a whole year of saying yes to what I want instead of to what I should do or who I should be. And when I look at Silas, I know exactly what I would do if there was no guilt involved, no expectations that other people had on me.

"Look, I don't mean to put you on the spot," he says. "We could also hang out on New Year's—shoot, except I'm going to be gone." He shrugs. "Any time, honestly. I'm home for five days, and I'd love to see you."

"I want to come to your house tomorrow," I tell him quickly, my voice fast and real and honest.

He smiles at me and nods slowly. "All right. Do you want to have Christmas breakfast together, Christmas lunch, or Christmas dinner?" His words are soft, and he leans in so only I can hear them. I feel the warmth of his breath on my ear.

"Can I say yes to all three?" My body is lit up, on fire in a way it's been before, but not like this. This is different. This is real. This is so close. It's happening. I swallow.

"You can say yes all day long," he whispers.

I smile. "All right. I will come over for breakfast."

"Perfect," he says. "I'll make a fire, and we can have hot cocoa. I'm sure my mom has food in the house. Don't worry about that."

"You can cook?"

Silas smiles. "Yeah, I actually can. I was my mom's only child, and she was really insistent that I learned how to do things on my own. Cook and clean and all that stuff."

"That's sweet," I say. "You have a good mom."

Instantly he cringes. "Sorry. Is that disrespectful? I know you..."

"It's all right. I had a good mom too. She just left this earth way too soon. But I love that you are close with your parents, with your mom especially."

“Yeah, she’s pretty much the best.”

My heart warms and softens and gets all ooey-gooney at the same time. “So Christmas breakfast at your place...”

He nods. “Eight o’clock?”

I smile. “An early bird, huh?”

He laughs. “I actually get up way earlier than that. My internal clock has got all weird since I joined the Navy. I’m up at 5:30 most days.”

“That’s funny,” I tell him. “That’s how mine is too. I’ve been at the convent and...” I swallow. “Well, that’s a whole other story. But there, I’d have to wake up at the crack of dawn. Six a.m. was breakfast, and you could not miss.”

“Well, you can come over at 6:00 if you like.”

I bite at my bottom lip. “You want to wake up on Christmas morning with me?”

“Yeah,” he says. “We can have coffee together before the hot cocoa. Oh, wear your pajamas.”

I laugh. “You want me to wear my pajamas to your house?”

He smiles. “I absolutely do. Do you have Christmas pajamas? Please wear them.”

“Do *you* have Christmas pajamas?” I toss back.

“I think so,” he says. “I’m sure my mom has kept a pair of flannel pants in one of my drawers.”

“Okay,” I say with a giggle. “I’ll wear my Christmas pajamas to your house at 6:00 in the morning.”

“Perfect,” he says. “I’ll see you then.”

I nod as he turns back toward his parents. He turns around and gives me one last look, a smile, and a wink. And my heart, it pounds, and I wonder, did this all just really happen?

But just then Sparkle is up behind me slipping her hand in mine, whispering in my ear, “Oh my God. I just heard all of that. I pretended I wasn’t listening, but I was basically

listening the entire time. Miracle, are you going to hang out with Silas Ritter for Christmas?”

I turn to my sister, my eyes misty in a way they’ve never been before. “Yeah,” I say. “I think my miracle just happened.”

She laughs. “I think your real miracle might happen tomorrow.”

I squeeze her hand. “Don’t get crazy.”

She laughs. “I know you’re a virgin, but that doesn’t mean you might not get another gift tomorrow.”

“What kind of gift?” I say.

“The Big O,” she says with a whisper, laughing all the way home.

SILAS

When we leave the church, my parents ask me what I was talking to Miracle about. I'm honest and tell them the truth. My pops chuckles as we walk back to his house. "Well, you sure got right to it, didn't you?"

My mom smiles through a yawn. "I guess your prayers are paying off, son."

Inside the house, I head to the kitchen and make a pot of coffee for my parents so they can take travel mugs with them for the road. It's going to be a long drive in the middle of the night. Still, I can tell my dad was preparing for this. He told me he took a long nap this afternoon.

I can tell my parents are talking about something animatedly in the bedroom, but when they come out to pour their coffee, they suddenly seem quiet.

"What's going on?" I ask. "I feel like there's some second conversation going on."

"Well, son"—Pop looks at Mom—"it's none of our business, and it may be out of the question. However, if something comes up with you and Miracle, I mean, and you feel inclined—" He pauses, looking at my mom again.

"Go on, Hank, just say it."

"The thing is, in case of an emergency, there's a box in my top dresser drawer."

"A box?" I repeat. "Of what?"

My mom smiles. “Oh, you’ll just have to look yourself. All right?”

“Okay,” Pops says, walking to the closet in the hall and grabbing both his and my mom’s coat. “Well, we are going to head out because I have a honeymoon to go on.”

Soon my parents are in the car and driving away. I stand in the doorway waving goodbye. The snow has begun to fall again, and I think about the morning ahead. I look at my clock, and it’s already 2:00 AM. Miracle is going to be here in four hours. I yawn, exhausted all of a sudden. Before I head to my bed, I look in the kitchen to make sure there’s stuff for breakfast. There’s plenty of coffee and milk. There’s eggs, sausage, and a box of pastries on the counter. Perfect.

And then, once in my bedroom, I look in my drawers, wondering if there’s any pajamas left from ages ago. I smile when I see a pair of green and red checked flannel pants. Tugging off my khakis, I trade them for the Christmas attire. I put on a fresh white T-shirt and set my alarm for 5:45, enough time to brush my teeth and wash my face before Miracle knocks on the door.

I wake with a jolt when the alarm clock buzzes, ringing me awake. I hardly got any sleep, but somehow I feel like I am lit up with plenty of caffeine. The idea of seeing Miracle here has me excited in ways I may never have been before. I brush my teeth quickly and wash my face. In the living room, I put on a pot of coffee and check to see that the lights are lit on the Christmas tree. That’s when I realize I don’t have a present for the girl coming to visit me on Christmas morning.

I groan, wondering what I can do with such short notice. Sure, my mom has pots of poinsettias around, and I could always do something like write her a quick letter. But what would I even say?

Instead, I walk into my parents’ bedroom, remembering the in-case-of-emergency gift my pops mentioned. I open his drawer and see only one box amid the pairs of folded white socks.

A ring box.

I open the box and see a ring I remember. It was my Grandmother Holly's ring. It's a beautiful emerald-cut diamond glittering in the dark morning light.

My doorbell jingles. I'm so nervous, I jump out of the bedroom and to the front door before I realize the ring box is still in my hand. When I open the door, Miracle is a smiling, bright-faced beauty.

"Get in here," I say. "It's freezing." I shake my head. "I should have come and got you."

"No," she says, "it was beautiful actually. It was like this early morning twilight walk and ..." She smiles. "Gosh, I'm really happy to be here."

I look at her wondering how in the hell this woman is at my house on Christmas morning. She has a pale blue knit cap on her head and that red wool coat and big black boots on.

I step inside and shut the door. And she looks down, seeing the box in my hand. "Oh," she says. She bites her bottom lip. "What's that?"

I laugh nervously, realizing it's more awkward if I don't show her. I hand it over. "It was my Grandma Holly's wedding ring."

"It's so pretty," she says, lifting it out of the box.

"Yeah, my parents gave it to me, and ..."

"That's sweet," she says.

"I wonder how it would look on your finger," I say before thinking.

Her eyes widen. "I don't know. It might be weird to put on your grandma's wedding ring, Silas. I mean ..." She looks around the living room. It's so quiet and empty. The lights on the Christmas tree are the only lights on in the house. There's a hush, like we're on the precipice of some sort of magic moment.

"I want to see it on you," I urge. "I don't know. Just indulge me. It's Christmas."

She laughs. “Okay. I’m sure it looks just like it did on your grandma.”

“Well, my grandma was a really wonderful woman. Very special.”

“Yeah?” Miracle says. “Tell me about her.”

I take the ring from the box and reach for her left hand. “She was the kind of grandma everyone would want. Funny but sweet. She’d always make cookies. She actually made all those stockings hanging on the fireplace,” I say, pointing to the stockings on the mantle. “She loved crafts, like embroidering things and made everything by hand.”

I slip the diamond on her ring finger.

Her eyes widen.

Mine do too, because it fits perfectly. *It looks perfect.*

“Wow,” she says breathless, “it’s even more beautiful than I imagined.”

I smile. “Have you ever had a ring on your ring finger before?”

She laughs. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. You were in a convent, right? Maybe you literally get married to Jesus.”

“It’s not that literal, but I get the sentiment.” She moves to pull the ring off her finger, but her brows furrow. “Oh no,” she says.

“What?” I ask.

“It’s stuck. I can’t ...”

I grin. “It’s okay. It can stay right where it is.”

She laughs playfully. “Stop it, Silas. You’ve got to get this ring off of my finger.”

“Why? You don’t like the look of it?” I ask. I am close to her now, and I lean in, cupping her cheek with my hand. Her eyes close as if swept away by the touch. I want to do so much more than that.

She whispers, surprisingly, “I like the way that feels, your hand on my cheek.” Her sincerity is startling, the way she speaks telling me exactly how this moment makes her feel.

“I’m glad you like it,” I tell her. “And I really like the way that ring looks on your finger.” I take her hand in mine and squeeze it. “I lost my Grandma Holly about five years ago. She died from cancer. It was a horrible loss, obviously, but the memories I have of her will always stay. I don’t know. I think she’d like this ring on your finger.”

“Stop it, Silas,” Miracle says, her eyes opening now. She presses her hands to my chest, both of them. I know I’m strong. I work out way too much to pass the time, and I know she feels my muscles as her hands run over my T-shirt. “So,” she says, “it’s early on Christmas morning, and you’ve already put a ring on my finger. I’m guessing this day is just going to get more and more...unexpected.”

I smile. “Well, you should take off your boots and coat first, and I can pour us some coffee. Or we can crawl back in bed and wake up in a few hours pretending it’s Christmas morning like we’re little kids.”

“But I don’t even have a present for you to open.”

I laugh. “And I just gave you my gift.”

She looks at the engagement ring. “Oh, shush, Silas. This was not my Christmas present.”

I shrug. “It should be, though. Why not?”

“You want me to marry you?” Miracle says with a gleam in her eyes.

“Maybe,” I say. “That will be a good story to tell our kids.”

“Our kids?” Miracle says. “Oh my goodness, this day really is getting insane.”

“I know you like the sound of it.”

She pauses, surprising me. “Actually, I do.” She steps out of her boots and pulls off her coat. I take them from her and put them in the hall closet.

When I turn back to her, I see her in this adorable pair of Christmas pajamas. The bottoms are long johns covered in gingerbread men and a tight pink top dotted with cups of hot cocoa. There's a plunging V in the front. She's not wearing a bra. I can tell; her nipples are hard from the cold.

She looks down. "What?" she asks. "You told me to put on pajamas."

"I was just thinking how incredible you look in those."

"You think?" she says. "It's just PJs."

"I don't think there's anything *just* when it comes to you, Miracle. So tell me, are we going to make coffee and sit by the fire, or are we going to go back to bed for a little bit?"

She looks down at the ring in her finger. "I mean, if we're already engaged, I don't think there's anything wrong with us sleeping together. Do you?" Her eyebrows lift and there's a smile on her face that is so teasing, so delightful, I feel like the luckiest man in the world. As my cock grows hard, I take her hand in mine, dragging her to my bedroom.

MIRACLE

When I told my sisters and Dad that I was going to be gone on Christmas, they were surprised but also excited for me. They laughed, incredulous that I was actually going to go over to Silas' house. I didn't tell them that Silas was going to be alone at his parents' house on Christmas.

I figure I'm an adult, and some things are okay to keep to myself. That's why when I woke up extra early, putting on my cutest Christmas pajamas and walking down the quiet street toward his parents' home, I had a buoyancy I haven't had in ages. My heart was full in a way I have rarely experienced. I felt free. I felt alive. I felt like I was walking toward the direction of my future, and I know that's crazy... or at least it was crazy... but now I'm standing here in Silas' house with his grandmother Holly's engagement ring on my finger and a look in his eyes that says he's hungry. Like he is as starved as I am.

My whole body lights up as he takes my hand and leads me to his bedroom for our Christmas morning nap. It's not even dawn, yet he's pulling back the covers of his large bed in a bedroom that is filled with trinkets from his childhood. I smile as I look over the corkboard above his old desk. There's pictures of him playing baseball and soccer, a ribbon from a race he'd won. The rest of his room is pretty bare, which makes sense considering he left home right after he graduated, same as me.

"Your bedroom's so neat and tidy," I say.

He shrugs. “My mom made sure of that. I think she misses having me here a lot actually.”

“Do you miss being here?” I ask him. He takes my hand and leads me to his bed. We both slide in under the flannel covers. It’s warm and cozy and smells like laundry detergent in the best possible way.

“I miss the comforts of home sometimes, but I have liked being out at sea. I read a lot of books. I exercised a lot. I have seen places I would’ve never seen otherwise.”

“Do you think you’ll make a whole life of being a sailor?” I ask him.

“I don’t know. It depends.”

“On what?” I ask. We turn toward each other in his bed, as if we’ve done it hundreds of times even though this is the only time in my entire life I’ve been in bed with a man. I swallow. “What does it depend on, Silas?”

“On what comes next. I don’t want to be a sailor at the cost of having a family.”

I smile. “You mean our kids?”

He laughs and reaches for my hand, playing with the diamond that’s wrapped around my finger.

“I can’t believe I can’t get this off,” I say. “I’m sure if I use some butter or warm water or something...”

“I don’t want it to come off,” he says. “Look how cute it looks on you. It looks like a Christmas ornament. You’re all decked out for the holiday.”

I close my eyes. “Silas, I don’t know if my heart can handle this level of make-believe.”

“Then don’t make it make-believe. Just act as if...”

“As if what?” I ask.

“As if this is what we’re doing. We’re together. We’re going to get married. On Christmas morning, we’re in *our* bed.” He smiles. “And we’re planning *our* life together, *our* future.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” I ask. “All that talk of a fairytale life?”

“What if it’s simply our happily ever after?”

“You hardly even know me.”

“You’re right,” he says. He runs his hand over my hair, and a shiver runs through my body at his gentle touch. I want him to stroke me other places too. Everywhere. “I want to know everything about you, Miracle. I always thought you were going to be in a convent for life. When my dad told me last night that you were back in town”—he shakes his head—“I was shocked, but also not.”

“What do you mean not?”

“You want the truth?” he asks.

“Of course, I want the truth,” I tell him, my voice a whisper, the room dark and quiet. The house is so empty, just the two of us. Like we’re in a cocoon, a bubble of our own making. “I only ever want the truth from you.”

He smiles and cups my cheek again, and my heart flutters. “I’ve been thinking about you forever, for years when we were growing up. Every time I passed you, I’d think, *That girl’s an angel. Way too good for me.* I wasn’t the best kid growing up. You know that, I’m sure. And then you left to be a nun. It’s like you’re heaven on earth. Which leaves me wondering, why’d you come home? Did something happen for you to change your dream?”

I nod. “Yeah. Something did happen.”

His brows furrow. “What happened? Please tell me no one hurt you.”

“No, not like that. I had an...” I lick my lips. “An awakening, I guess you’d say.”

“What sort of awakening?” he asks.

“I had desires, urges I’d never felt before. I guess you can say I was a late bloomer ...or repressed.”

“What do you mean exactly?” he asks, running a hand over my shoulder down my arm. We’re inches apart. I scooch my body even closer, wanting my knees to brush his knees, my nose to brush his nose. He laces his fingers with mine, and it feels as natural as anything I’ve ever felt.

“I suddenly started having ideas, ones I’d never had before. My body felt alive, alert.” I close my eyes. “What I’m trying to say is I got really horny, and being a nun isn’t exactly conducive to getting off every time I was alone.”

“Are you really being serious?” he asks.

I nod, opening my eyes. “I can’t believe I just admitted that to you. When I told my family I was leaving, I didn’t say something so explicit. I just told them I’d changed my mind. I told them I wanted a family, to be a wife and a mother, but also, I was horny. Wildly so. My body was desperate to be touched, and yes, I can take care of myself pretty well,” I say with a smile, “but I had a longing, and it wasn’t sinful. It was pure, but it was forbidden. A forbidden want ... to be with a man.”

I close my eyes again, imagining what I imagined so many times alone in my bed, in the convent. I’d run my fingers between my legs, touching myself as I grew wet, imagining a man above me, inside of me, with me, holding me and touching me, adoring me. It’s all I desired. It’s all I want right now.

“You wanted to be taken, is that what you mean?” Silas asks.

I nod. “I wanted to be had mind, body, and soul,” I confess.

“Was there someone in particular you were imagining when you were all alone touching yourself?”

“I was imagining a man from home.” My eyes narrow. “I was imagining you, Silas. When my dad mentioned your name tonight, I felt like it was some ridiculous joke or an answer to prayer. I don’t know. I felt like someone had read my mind...”

like you had read my mind ...and you showed up here to give me exactly what I wanted for Christmas.”

“And what’s that?” he asks, running his hand over my breasts, my nipples hard between his fingers as he touches me, runs his hands all over me.

“I want...” I exhale. “This and more, but my faith means I’m not going to have sex with someone who isn’t going to be my partner.”

Silas takes my hand in his. “I’m not the religious sort, but I have saved myself for my one true love.”

My eyes widen. “You’re a virgin?”

He nods. “Yeah. Crazy, right? Most people wouldn’t believe it, and I wouldn’t really admit it, but I always just thought there would be someone, the right one who I would give that to. And now you’re wearing my grandmother Holly’s wedding ring. And we both showed back up here in Briar Valley at Christmas, and you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known with a heart so pure it makes me want to be a better man. And we’re in my bed, and no one else is here, and it’s Christmas.”

I run my hand through Silas’s hair, wanting his lips to meet mine. “So what you’re saying, Silas, is that maybe we’re both one another’s Christmas dreams come true?”

He nods. “Oh, Miracle. I know you’re mine, and I’m sure as hell not going to let you go.”

SILAS

I run my hands over Miracle. Her honesty is beyond beautiful. She told me what she wanted, what she craves and desires, and all I want in the world is to give her exactly that.

“Are we really going to do this?” she asks, a smile playing on her lips. “Because, Silas, I’ve been dreaming about it for a very long time.”

“What are you dreaming about exactly?” I ask her, loving her vulnerability. It makes me want to be honest and real with her too, to tell her all about my deepest fantasies.

I just imagine being kissed until I can’t breathe, about my clothes being peeled off me piece by piece. Dreams about running my hands over her. She closes her eyes. “Running my hands over your length and kissing you, every inch of you. Can we do that?”

“Oh baby,” I say, “of course we can. We can do all of that and more, and we can learn every inch of each other together.”

“It’ll be our first time,” she whispers. “Doesn’t that feel romantic?”

“Insanely romantic,” I say, then I press my lips to hers, cupping her cheek the way I know she likes. Her lips are soft like pillows, and our mouths melt.

“Oh, Silas,” she whispers between kisses. I move against her harder, my mouth pressing against hers, and her lips parting and mine parting too. And we kiss and kiss. We kiss

for what feels like hours. And maybe it is because her lips are something else. My whole body stirs as our kiss intensifies, her tongue twirling against mine, soft and supple but needy too, a want in her mouth that I understand.

I run my hands over her body. Her leg latches against mine, and she smiles as she kisses me, her long brown hair spooling over her body. I feel hot and needy, and she must too because she leans up, pulling her shirt up over her head.

“Oh my God,” I groan. “And I’m sorry for saying his name in vain, but Jesus Christ, Miracle, your tits.”

She laughs openly, without shame or embarrassment as I take both her breasts in my hands and run my fingers over her soft skin. I hold them in my hand, and they’re beautiful, so creamy and milky.

I lower my mouth to one of her nipples, and I suck until she’s moaning against me, running her hands through her hair. I pull back. “Is that okay?”

“It feels so nice,” she says breathlessly. “I mean, it makes my whole body light up.” She takes my hand, running it between her thighs. “Right there, you feel how wet I am? That’s what happened when you kissed me like that. That’s what...” She rolls back, laughing. “Oh my gosh. I want you so bad.”

She begins tugging at my T-shirt, running her fingers over my ladder of abs. “You’re so handsome, Silas.”

“Quiet,” I tell her. “Look at you, so damn beautiful, so damn pure.”

“And so are you,” she says. “I honestly cannot believe you’re a virgin.”

“It’s gonna be good,” I say.

“Both of us learning this together, it’s like my literal dream come true,” she says. She looks down at her hand. There’s a ring on it, as if she just remembers. “What if we were really engaged?” she asks. “What if we were really having sex for the first time while planning to be married?”

I take her hand in mine. “Let’s do that,” I say. “Let’s do all of it.”

“Silas.” She smiles. “I don’t even have a job. I live in my dad’s house.”

“That’s okay. I have a job. Or I can get another one. I can do anything I want. We both can. We’re free, and we’re young. And we’re happy and in love.”

“Love?” She laughs. “You love me?”

“Yes, I think I do. I know I do. I love you, Miracle. Why not? Why not give in to the one thing I want, which is you?”

“I’m really sheltered,” she says. “I mean, I’ve seen some hard things working at the convent, helping people who were in a lot of need, but not a lot of life experience...”

“Hey, just because you haven’t lived through years of hard times doesn’t mean you’re not capable of loving someone fully. Love is a choice, right? I choose you.”

“Silas...” she says.

“I’m not saying that just because I want to have sex with you. We don’t have to do this at all. I swear,” I say, getting out of the bed. I look at her. We both look down at my cock, which is so damn hard. It looks ridiculous in these pajama bottoms.

“Oh no. I want to have sex with you. There’s no pressure, but it’s what I want.” She gets out of bed and runs her hands over the waistband of my pants, pushing them down, looking at me completely naked. I tease her backward onto the bed, and she falls back with her hair sprawling around her, her breasts bouncing as she does.

I run my hands over her breasts and her bare belly, and I tug off her pants. She’s not wearing any panties. “My God, woman,” I say. “You’re gorgeous. Look at your cunt. It’s so ripe, so beautiful.”

“Is it?” she asks. “Is it how you like it?” Her hair is shaved, her pussy practically bare, and I spread her knees.

“I’ve got to lick you up and down, tease you the way you’ve teased yourself.”

“Oh Silas,” she says as I kneel before her. She’s lying on the bed perfectly positioned, and I spread her knees apart, looking at her creamy cunt. I dip my mouth to her pussy, running my tongue up and down the length of it.

She tastes like a cloud, like a marshmallow, like a puff of perfection. I breathe her in, the scent of her intoxicating, and I kiss her, spreading her folds, wanting to memorize every centimeter of her body, of her skin, of her scent, of her wetness.

“God, you’re wet.” I massage her thighs, easing her open, knowing her pussy is tight, untouched. “Mine, all mine.” There’s a hunger in me then, my cock throbbing with desire, and she’s squirming above me, her back arching as I suck and I lick and I taste all of her, wanting more, wanting everything. She wants it too.

“Oh, Silas,” she moans, “don’t stop. Please don’t. Oh God, yes. Right there,” she whimpers. And I kiss her harder, sucking at her perfect little clit, teasing it with my tongue until she’s groaning, moaning, gripping the bedsheets as her knees buckle, as she explodes against me, her wet, juicy cunt pouring, knowing exactly what it means to let go.

The orgasm is beautiful, and I see it written on her face as I lean up over her on the bed. Her eyes are glittering like gold, shimmering as if... Well, as if this is the first time a man has ever kissed her down there.

“I’ve never even done that,” I honestly tell her. “I’ve never... You’re my first everything, Miracle,” I say, my voice choking. “I don’t know if that makes me less of a man.”

“No,” she says, wrapping her arms around my neck. “That makes you *my man*.” She draws me to her, and I know she can taste her sweet juices on my lips. And she rolls me over on my back, straddling me.

I look up at her, and she is so beautiful, hair falling over her skin, her breasts bare and perky, her pussy wet against my hard cock. “I cannot wait to do everything in the whole world with you, fiancé.”

“So we’re doing this?” I ask her. “You’re going to be my wife?”

“Yes, I’m going to be your bride. But first you’re going to take my virginity.”

MIRACLE

He wraps his arms around my waist, and it feels so sexy sitting like that on top of him. And I look at this cock, marveling at how big and thick it is, not really knowing what to do with it, and I tell him as much.

“I know how to touch myself,” I tell him, “how to get myself off, but I don’t know how to do it for you. I’ve actually never watched porn to get ideas.” I cringe. “I know maybe that makes me even extra naïve. It’s just it wasn’t something I was ever going to do as a nun, and it just felt forbidden, wrong somehow. Not because it’s not something I’m okay with. I wanted to save everything for you, for my future husband. I want you to teach me what you want, how you want me to take care of you the way you just took care of me.”

He looks at me in amazement. “How are you so gorgeous and perfect and precious all at the same time?”

“I’m not perfect,” I tell him. “I am just a girl who’s trying my best to grow up, to be real with who I want to be. I don’t want to be a nun, but my faith is a big part of my life.”

“I love that about you,” he says, “that you know who you are and that you’re trying your best. That’s how I am too, at least doing my best to do that. And I guess we’re going to do that together, Miracle. You and me.”

I close my eyes, his words like a balm to my heart I didn’t know I needed, but deep down I longed for. Tears seem to fill my eyes.

“Don’t cry,” he says. “I don’t want you to be sad.”

“It’s not crying out of sadness. It’s happy tears. It’s like my dream’s coming true when I didn’t even expect it, all of a sudden and so, so fast. It’s like you fell out of the sky. I don’t know, where do you come from?”

“We grew up together. I spent plenty of time in classrooms with you over the years, but I wasn’t the kind of guy for you. Not back then.”

“Well, I wasn’t the girl for you back then either. But now it’s like we fit.”

“We do,” he tells me.

“We fit perfectly and we haven’t even tried out *all* the ways we fit,” I say, knowing soon enough he’s going to fit right inside of me. My body is going to open for him, and he’s going to enter me. I close my eyes, breathless at the thought.

“Here,” he says, taking my hand. “You can move up and down it just like that. Nice, easy pressure.”

“And what about your...?”

“My balls?” He grins. “You can do what you want with them. I have a feeling you’re going to know how to satisfy me the same way you satisfy yourself. I’ve never licked anyone’s pussy before, but the moment I was kneeling in front of you, it’s like my body knew what to do. All I want is to take care of you, Miracle.”

“Silas, that’s all I want to do too. I want to take care of you.”

I crawl off of him and turn around, opening my mouth and taking him inside of it. I begin to run my tongue along the hard ridges of his cock, sucking his tip. There’s pre-cum releasing, and it makes me excited. My whole body thrills at the idea of more of his release in me.

With my booty in front of his face, he runs his hands over my cheeks, squeezing them and then slipping his hand between my legs, touching my wet pussy as I bob my head up and down more quickly. I hesitate, but then give in, running my fingers over his balls, loving the weight of them, dipping my mouth to them and sucking them too. My saliva runs out of

my mouth, dripping against his cock, and I pull my mouth away.

I run my tongue over my palm to make it nice and slick, and then I use my hand to pump him up and down as I suck him off.

“Oh, damn,” he groans. “That feels so good.”

“Come in my mouth,” I tell him. “Please, I want it.”

“God damn it,” he moans. “I’ve never done this. I’ve never, never...”

He begins to finger me. One finger enters me, and I whimper as it does. “Oh, my....” It feels so different than when I touch myself with my fingers, but I love it. I need it.

I feel my hips moving, dipping up and down as he fingers me, as I suck him off. I feel like I’m going to come. The walls of my pussy tighten, and I know an orgasm is about to crash through me all over again. I moan as I suck him, and I feel like his head is about to burst.

“I’m going to come, baby. I’m going to come. I’m going to...” And then he does. His ejaculation shoots into my mouth, and I swallow him quickly, loving the salty and delicious taste. It’s Silas. I moan as I suck him off. His hardness is relentless, and I move my hand up and down.

My pussy climaxes, and I pull my mouth away, rolling onto my back, and he gets up on his knees, a second finger entering me.

“There we go, girl. There we go. Just like that.” He begins to finger me harder. In and out, in and out. I’m so wet. I feel my juices just dripping onto his bed.

“Is this okay?” I ask.

He grins down at me. “Baby, baby, you’re perfect.” And then his words seem to roll over me just as the orgasm does. My back arches, and I moan, my knees hitting one another. His fingers squeeze deep inside my pussy, and I come against him, but it’s not enough. I need more, and so does he.

His cock is hard. He takes my hand and runs it over his shaft. “You feel that? I’m still hard for you. I need more.”

“I need more too,” I tell him breathlessly. I know he means it. On my back, he enters me slowly with a kiss on my lips, so tender and sweet. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he tells me.

“You won’t,” I say. “I promise.” Of course, I don’t know if he will hurt me, but I think he eased me open, and I’ve eased myself open plenty of times. It’s going to feel good. I *know* it will feel good.

“Baby,” he says, “I want to make you happy.”

“I’m already happy,” I tell him. “All of this makes me so happy.”

“You mean it?” he asks.

“I mean it,” I say. “This is everything I’ve ever wanted. You and me right now here like this.” He enters me then, so slowly I forget to breathe. “Oh, my,” I say. “Oh, yeah, please, please don’t stop.”

He looks down at me. “Baby, I would never. I want to satisfy you every day for the rest of our life.”

“You promise?” I say.

“Of course.”

“How will you satisfy me if you leave for sea again? You’re in the Navy, you...”

“Shh,” he says, pressing a finger to my lips. “I won’t reenlist. I don’t have to. You and me will be happy wherever you want to go, wherever you want to live. I’ll take care of you, baby. I promise.”

“You promise?” I gasp as he enters me fully. The sensation is so deep, so overwhelming, I can hardly breathe. “Oh my goodness, Silas.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, loving the way he feels inside of me. “Oh my. Oh my, oh my.” I’m coming then, I feel it, the orgasm rolling over me in a way I have never felt

before. Every inch of me is alive and on fire, and I wrap my legs around his body as he moves inside me.

He's big, and he fills me up, and he knows it. "God, you're so tight," he says.

"Is that good?" I ask.

"Oh baby, it's perfect. You're perfect." Then he pauses before adding, "We didn't use protection." His eyes meet mine as he enters me fully. "I'll pull out."

"No," I say. "I don't use protection either. I'm Catholic."

He looks at me with a knowing expression. "That means you want a big family?"

"Yes," I say. "I want to be pregnant with your babies over and over again. I want..." I shake my head, closing my eyes. "Does that sound weird?"

"No," he says, "it feels so fucking hot. I'm going to fill you up with my seed. I'm going to get you pregnant right now, and then I'm going to do the same thing in nine months over and over as long as you want."

"Don't tell me things you don't mean," I say. "My heart can't handle it."

"I already got a ring on your finger. I'm going to be your husband, and I'm going to be the father of your babies. You understand me?" He thrusts deeper and deeper. With each thrust, I want him more.

"Oh my gosh. I'm going to have all your babies. My belly's going to be full with your babies."

"Your tits are going to be so ripe with milk, and I'm going to suck them. I'm going to lick your tits, your nipples. You understand me? You're going to be my baby. You're going to be my bride and you're going to be filled with my seed over and over again."

"Take me," I say. "Take me anywhere you want."

"I'm going to take you to the edge and back again," he whispers.

“You promise?”

“I swear.” His mouth is on mine again. He kisses me deeply as his cum shoots from his cock, filling me up, and tears fill my eyes. I’m overwhelmed with pleasure as the father of my children makes me his.

I’m no longer a virgin, and neither is he.

It’s Christmas.

The house is ours, and we’re going to do this all day long.

SILAS

We manage to put our pajamas back on, and I bring my girl coffee and pastries to the Christmas tree. We're sitting there with a punch-drunk love look on our faces, laughing, sipping our coffee, and eating the croissants.

"This feels like too good to be true," Miracle says. "I mean, look at us. It's like make-believe."

"Don't say that," I tell her. "It could be our life. Why not? Everything anybody does is because they choose to. Why can't we just choose to be ridiculously happy?"

"I suppose we can," she says. "My sisters are going to be" Then her eyes widen. "And my father. Oh, my God, he's not going to have any idea what happened. In the blink of an eye, I'm getting married, and" Then her eyes fall. "I'm sorry. Maybe we were just talking in the moment, and you don't mean"

"Miracle, you can't back out now. You're my fiancée. I've already proposed. We're getting married."

"You mean it?" she says.

"Of course," I tell her. "I love you."

"I love you, too. We can't wait too long," she says. "I mean, what if I *did* just get pregnant?"

"Oh, I sure as hell hope you did," I tell her.

She laughs, taking another bite of the croissant. "This just may be the best Christmas ever."

“It sure is,” I tell her. “Like it all just worked out exactly as it was supposed to.”

“Can it be that easy?” she asks. “You and I both getting our dream-come-true just like that?”

“What? You want some drama? You want me to break up with you, run out of here? You want your dad to say no or my parents to refuse? It’s Christmas. Why can’t it just be perfect?”

“I don’t know. Can it?”

“Yes. You’ve had pain in your life, too, Miracle. You said earlier you haven’t been through hard things, but you lost your mom. You made the choice to leave the convent. You’ve been through enough hard things. Let this one be easy.”

Her eyes sparkle with the Christmas lights around her. “I guess you’re right. We don’t have to make this complicated. We can just do what we want: get married and be happy and have a family. And are you sure you don’t want to be in the Navy?”

“I want a family; that’s what I really want. And speaking of no problems, my dad wants me to take over his business. He’s been talking about it; he was saying it last night. I have a job here in town, and”

“Really?” she says. “You could stay in Briar Valley?”

“It seems like a nice place to raise a family. After all, it’s where we grew up, and we turned out all right.”

She laughs. “I feel like most love stories have some sort of conflict. Like every book I’ve read or movie I’ve watched, there’s some big horrible scene that happens that pushes everyone apart and”

“Stop it,” I repeat. “We don’t have to be like any other story. We’re ours: Silas and Miracle. That can be it. That can be everything.”

“I love you,” she says. Then she starts laughing. “I actually love you. I’ve been thinking about you forever, and then all of a sudden, here you are, and here I am. And here, it’s like our whole life just unfolded for us, just like that.”

“Let’s not say no,” I tell her. “Let’s say yes all the way to the altar.”

“Okay,” Miracle says. “I do.”

EPILOGUE

MIRACLE

One year later...

Silas and I got married in a wedding at the church. Our families were there, and so were our friends, and it was beautiful, and I wore a big white dress. It was quick, right after we were engaged, the fourth week of January. I was pregnant by the time we walked down the aisle.

We laughed, eating our wedding cake and toasting with glasses of sparkling apple cider to our future.

When we looked for a house, we found a perfect home in the heart of town. It had three bedrooms and a big kitchen. Enough space for me and Silas and ...our twins.

Because yes, we didn't just have one baby; we had two perfect baby girls.

And now it's our first Christmas together in the house. The babies are sleeping, and Silas and I are sitting underneath the Christmas tree, remembering last year. "I can't believe they're both sleeping at one time," he says.

I laugh. "I know, but you haven't even opened your Christmas present."

"You didn't have to get me a present. You literally gave me my dream come true this year. We got married. We had our babies. Amber and Rose are the most beautiful little girls in the whole wide world."

"I know, but still," I say, handing a box to him. "You gave me this ring last Christmas, and I gave you nothing."

"You gave me more than nothing last year," Silas laughs. "You gave me your virginity."

I giggle. "Oh my gosh. We were ridiculous. Weren't we?"

"We were happy, and we were young."

"We still are." I smile. "I love that we just went all in."

"Me too," he says, untying the red ribbon on the gold wrapping paper. He peels open the box. "What is it?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, knowing he's going to scream.

"Oh my word," he says, pulling the test stick out of the box. "We're pregnant?"

I laugh. "Yep, we did it. Another baby or two, who knows?"

"We're pretty lucky considering we got pregnant the first time we tried."

Silas runs his hands over me, pulling me to him. "The babies are still sleeping in their room," he says, "which means..."

I smile. "Which means you should ravish me under the Christmas tree before my belly's too big for it."

He smiles. "How did we get so lucky?"

"I think it's because we're doing what our hearts are saying for us to do. We're not scared of anyone or anything. We're just going all in with our deepest desires. I think that's what gives someone a happy life."

"That, and you pray every damn day," he says.

"Yeah, I guess maybe we have some angels on our side too, looking out for us."

"I love you Miracle," Silas says. He undresses me slowly, tugging my nightgown up over my shoulders and off my head. My breasts are full of milk, and he's gentle with me. Soft.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asks. "How long have you known?"

"Just a few days."

"A few days," he says, leaning me down on my back, placing a pillow behind my head. The floor is carpeted and soft, and we're alone in the living room. The blinds are drawn. He tugs off his pajama pants, and then his hard length is before me, and I run my hands over it. More comfortable now. Familiar. This man of mine is my husband, my lover, my best friend, the father of my children. I close my eyes, amazed at the miracle of our life.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“My mom is going to be over the moon,” he tells me.

“And my dad and my sisters, everybody is going to be so happy for us.”

That’s one thing about this year: Silas and I declaring our love and making a family has brought everyone so much joy. It’s made me so sure in my decision to follow my heart and leave the convent.

It’s like the moment I went toward the life I wanted and leaned into my wildest dreams, things began to work out for me.

I wonder what I would’ve lost out on if I had been too scared to follow my heart.

I run my fingers through my husband’s hair, knowing I would’ve missed out on him.

“I love you, Silas,” I say. “Thank you for being my dream come true in every way imaginable.”

“Oh baby,” he says. He runs his fingers over me, leaning down to kiss me. I’m tender, and he knows it, and he’s gentle with me in the way I need. “I love you,” he says as he begins to fill me up.

“I can’t believe we’re having another baby,” I say. “I’m the happiest girl in the world.”

He kisses me again and again and again. “Let me make you come before the babies wake up.”

I laugh. “All right, baby,” I say, wrapping my legs around his waist. “Fill me up and make me yours, the way only you and only you can ever do.”

“I will, again and again. After all, you are my Christmas Miracle.”

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