



One Mistake
WITH THE
MECHANIC

ELLEN BROOKS

CURVY CHRISTMAS SERIES

One Mistake with the Mechanic

Ellen Brooks

Editor: Brynn Paulin

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One Mistake with the Mechanic

A hardworking mechanic she shot down before.

A generous diner owner sure he was asking for the wrong reasons.

Will the magic of Christmas—and a holiday blizzard—deliver a second chance at love?

SLOANE

When the irresistible mechanic I'd lusted over for years actually asked me out, it was out of pity. I knew better than to believe he'd actually go for a curvy girl like me.

Ever since I turned him down, I've steered clear of the long, lean hottie. Which is hard when you both run small businesses in a town as teeny tiny as

Ravish Ridge.

But it's worked out okay. Until now.

When, thanks to a charitable project and a holiday blizzard, we're snowed in together and he seems hell bent on discovering why I said no. Not that in a million years I can tell him the truth.

TREVOR

All I want for Christmas is a chance to convince the woman who turned me down years ago to say yes. Or at least give me the real reason she said no.

And thanks to a merry miracle, my only wish comes true when a blizzard blows in just as the curvy diner owner I've never stopped pining for swings by my shop to check on the non-profit project we're both helping with.

I've got one night to persuade this woman I'm the man for her, even though she's still way out of my league.

Read this steamy story today to see if Christmas really is the most wonderful time of the year...to reveal old mistakes and find true love.

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Sloane

“PLEASE TELL ME THAT’S not what you’re wearing to the party.”
Kate eyes the head-to-toe black work clothes and flour-dusted Ridgeview Diner apron she’s seen me in a thousand times before as if they’re soot-covered rags.

I glance up from the three sheet pans of scones spread across the stainless-steel workbench. “Cranberry pecan, chocolate orange, or maple walnut?”

I bake when I’m anxious. A fact my best friend has known for years. Thankfully, tonight, she’s distracted.

“Your hair’s not even done!” The saloon-style doors from the dining room swing back and forth behind her.

“It’s nice to see you, too.”

“I’m serious.”

I skirt the counter.

Her admonishment’s only halfhearted, especially when she adds, “It smells divine in here, but the party started ten minutes ago, and you’re not even closed up for the night.”

Kate, one of the few people whom I can tolerate a hug from, pulls me in tight, despite my appearance. The snowflakes on her shoulders melt against my cheek.

When I step back, I eye her closely. “Is that a new dress?”

A change of subject rarely flies with Kate, but tonight, luck is on my side.

“It is.”

She unbuttons her calf-length wool coat to reveal a long, hunter-green dress peeking out over furry winter boots. The shimmery fabric crisscrosses her slim waist and cinches together at the hip where a gold clasp shines. Matching gold hoop earrings complete the ensemble.

It’s a far cry from the athletic gear she usually sports, but fits her classic understated style, nonetheless. In a million years, I couldn’t pull off a dress cut like that. I’d look more like a wide Christmas tree in that color, but on her, it looks amazing.

“I had to get a few new dressy things for some holiday team gatherings,” she adds, almost as an afterthought. It’s her first holiday dating a pro-quarterback, but she’s still the same Kate I’ve known for years as she snags a scone from the closest tray. “Testing out a new menu item?”

I pull a side towel from my apron and avert my gaze, wiping down the already sparkling clean stand mixer. “Yes, for the coffee truck.”

“Oh,” she replies, drawing out the word in a tone she reserves for when she’s got *thoughts*. No shock there. “I heard the ribbon cutting’s scheduled for New Year’s Day at the 5k.”

My gut twists at the reminder of the ticking clock hanging over my normally merry holiday head. I have exactly nine days to finalize the menu and get everything set up. The looming deadline has haunted me for months now.

“Yes,” I confirm but don’t offer more. After all, even though Kate doesn’t live in Ravish Ridge full time anymore, she’s been part of the fabric of this small town for years. And she knows exactly why I haven’t tackled the non-profit project with my usual gusto.

The coffee truck was the brainchild of Sally, our town librarian. I was all in from the minute the fundraising committee approached and asked me to help bring the project to life. Even before I knew all the proceeds would benefit children’s literacy efforts in town.

“So, you’ve checked out the interior? The space where the staff will work to serve the coffee and pastries?”

I pull on the string to my apron, dropping it, along with the towel, in the overflowing laundry basket on my way to the back stairs. “Not exactly.”

Kate follows, hot on my heels, and in typical journalist fashion, doesn’t let up.

“But you’ve got a visit scheduled? After all, it’s almost Christmas.”

Three days, to be exact.

“I’ve got it under control.” I tug the ponytail holder from my hair and head upstairs to my loft, praying she drops the subject.

“When?”

I should know better.

“Kate,” I sigh, my voice betraying my frustration. “I’m going to go...soon.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Maybe.” I slip inside my one-bedroom loft, and she follows, bending to pet Pancake, the stray calico who appeared in the back alley early one morning two years ago and never left.

Pancake sidles up and brushes Kate’s leg with a soft purr, all the while ignoring me.

“You know the longer you wait, the harder it’s going to be. You should have bit the bullet and headed over the first chance you had, then you wouldn’t be building it up in your head and baking three batches of scones on a Saturday night instead of getting ready for a—”

“I’m not *building it up in my head*. In fact, I’ve barely given it a thought.”

“Liar.”

I head into my bedroom and yank my shirt off over my head. Kate doesn’t follow, instead calling from the family room, “The minute you heard Trevor was helping and the coffee truck was being retrofitted in a spare bay at his garage, you’ve been... How do I say it...?”

“Busy?” I suggest, eyeing the outfit I picked out for tonight after trying on five different ones this morning to see what fit best this week. I kick off my shoes and curse my bad fortune. I mean, why couldn’t the committee have found another location to keep the coffee truck until it was ready to roll?

“Sloane,” Kate implores from the family room, her tone softer. “I know it’s Trevor, and you supposedly have your reasons for pretending he doesn’t exist, but don’t you think it’s time you put the past behind you?”

Easy for her to say. She’s never been embarrassed by one of the nicest—and hottest—men in town. I mean, sure, Kate’s always been one of the guys and she didn’t date throughout high school either, but at least, she didn’t get asked out out of pity.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I insist in as casual a voice as I can muster as I yank on my shapeless black dress a little more forcefully than necessary. I smooth the forgiving knit over my hips and glance over my shoulder to see how it looks from the back. As bad as I suspected. The holiday season hasn’t been kind this year. And the thought of having to

interact with the man I've avoided like the plague for two years certainly hasn't helped. "I barely even remember why we don't speak."

"We both know that's not true."

Man, called out again. How was I blessed with a best friend who insists on pointing out the harsh truth all the time? Why can't she be one of those friends who lets you believe the lies you tell yourself and even supports you by confirming your false beliefs?

"Think of this joint philanthropic effort as a way to reconnect," she calls as I flip on the bathroom light.

"Reconnect?" I scoff, swiping on a coat of mascara and running a brush through the tangles in my long, dark hair. "In order to reconnect, you actually have to connect first," I mutter, certain she's out of earshot.

I emerge from the bathroom, carrying the black flats I'll slip on once we get to the Christmas party at Reid and Avery's house.

"You've never told me exactly why you turned him down, but I hope he's at the party tonight because," Kate says with a mischievous smile, "You. Look. Beautiful."

I dismiss the compliment with a wave of my hand. I'm too busy swallowing the dread that's taken shape as a thick lump in my throat at the suggestion Trevor might be there tonight. As my mind whirls, debating whether it's too late to back out of going, Kate grabs my hand.

"Don't even think about backing out now. Even though the hot mechanic you haven't spoken to in two years might be there, you're still going. You can just pretend he doesn't exist, like you always do."

Just because I steer clear of Trevor Pierce almost as much as I avoid wearing a bathing suit doesn't mean I haven't had a super-secret crush on him for years. Not that anything will ever come of it.

"I wasn't thinking about it, "I bristle. "In fact, I'm ready to go."

Trevor

S LOANE WAINWRIGHT WILL BE the death of me. I've been waiting for the gorgeous diner owner to stop by my shop for weeks, but nothing. No sign of her long, dark hair. Not one glimpse of her irresistible curves. Not even a whisper of that beautiful smile that lights up a room as bright as the Christmas tree sparkling in the corner of the living room here at Reid and Avery's party.

Sloane's smile still shines bright enough to guide Santa's sleigh, even though she hasn't flashed it in my direction in over two years. Not since Robbie's birthday party when I tried to pick her up and got turned down flat.

She laughed harder than if I were a stand up comedian, which alone was out of character, but then she brushed off my question as if it was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. But something didn't sit right in my gut when she rebuffed me then and still doesn't, even now. Especially because she spun toward the door faster than a ballerina in the Nutcracker to hide the panic flashing in her beautiful eyes.

But Sloane will be here tonight. She wouldn't miss a holiday party for the

world. And if it takes another hour of making small talk in order to glimpse her gorgeous smile or her tempting curves, it'll be worth it. Even if she tries to pretend I don't exist.

The minute I heard Sloane was helping with the library coffee truck, I figured it was a sign. A chance to try again because no matter that we haven't spoken since that birthday party, my feelings haven't changed. If anything, the way she's transformed the diner and helped revitalize downtown Ravish Ridge has only cemented my attraction. That woman is the entire package, and damn, if I don't want a chance to prove we're a perfect match.

My heart beat double time when Sally, from the library committee, told me to expect Sloane to swing by to check out the interior of the truck. But that was over a month ago and still crickets. I've been pulling double shifts just in case she tries to slip in when I might not be there and yet nothing.

My guys at the shop have noticed, but I've blown off their questions with some bullshit excuse about wanting to book some extra revenue before year-end. I'm sure they see right through me. After all, I've been so distracted during those extra hours it's not as if I've so much as changed a flat tire. Plus, Pierce Automotive has grown right along with our small town. And thanks to the reputation for honesty and integrity the guys and I have built from the beginning, we've been profitable every month since opening.

Which is another reason I was happy to fix up the engine on the old food truck and lend a hand refurbishing it, along with the other committee volunteers.

“Hey, man, I haven't seen you lately. Place looks different, eh?”

I drag my gaze from front door where it's been laser focused for the past hour like a sniper lining up a target, to Thad, a guy I've known since high school, when my grandparents still owned this house. “Sure does.”

Thad takes a swig from his long neck bottle. “How’s your grandma, by the way?”

“Hanging in there.” In truth, my grandmother hasn’t been the same since my grandfather passed away in the spring, but I do what I can to keep up her spirits. Especially now that this is her first holiday at the nursing home.

“How’s Callie?” I ask, looking around for Thad’s girlfriend, who he lives with now, right next door to Reid and Avery.

He lights up at the question and leans in, lowering his voice. “About to become my fiancée.”

A shot of envy, as strong as the whisky in my glass, turns my stomach. All the guys I know are settling down. Everyone except for me. Because the only woman I want won’t give me the time of day.

I swallow and nod. “Congrats, man.”

“Thanks,” he replies. “Figured it was about time. How’s business for you?”

“Can’t complain. You?”

“Great. Busier than ever. Say,” he says, launching into a question about his old Chevy truck. I only half listen because the door swings open and Kate, Sloane’s best friend, rushes in out of the snow.

Sure enough, Sloane, dressed head-to-toe in black, follows. Thanks to the freezing temperature outside, her cheeks are flushed the same shade of pink as the bakery box tied with string in her glove-covered hands.

The dusting of fluffy white snowflakes on her long, dark hair melts away as she stomps her boots on the mat and shrugs off her coat.

The breath catches in my throat. It’s not as if I never see her. Ravish Ridge is only so big after all, but this is different. Tonight, if Sloane Wainwright turns me down again, I’m determined to uncover why. The real reason. Even if I have to pry the truth out of her.

Ten minutes later, it's clear she's avoiding me—as usual. She saw me, averted her gaze the second she spotted me in the corner, then busied herself in the kitchen, helping Avery arrange the pastries on a Christmas-tree shaped platter longer than it would take to bake them. And now, she's fiddling with the garnishes at the bar while gushing over Savannah's baby bump.

Time to seize the moment. I step up behind Sloane and meet Savannah's eyes. The gracious newlywed politely interrupts their conversation to bring me into the fold.

“Sloane, do you know Trevor? Trevor Pierce from Pierce Automotive?” Savannah says, pausing as she refills her sparkling water.

“I do.”

Sloane forces out the words quickly, and when, thanks to good manners, she's forced to turn to acknowledge my presence, I'm close enough—by design—for her to bump into. She tenses and jerks back, her rich brown eyes flicking to mine for barely a second before they scan the room as if seeking an escape.

“It's been a while,” I point out, holding her gaze when it snaps back to mine and narrows. “Too long.”

“Did you two go to school together, or...?” Savannah asks, glancing between us. She's still fairly new to our small town and learning everyone's connections.

“I've been meaning to stop by.” Sloane tries for casual, although the fierce grip on the stem of her wineglass tells another story.

“The coffee truck is ready to roll,” I say.

“Ooh, yes, the coffee truck,” Savannah interjects with a smile. “I heard about it just the other day, and can I just say how brilliant the idea is? I mean Ravish Ridge needs something like that. And for such a good cause.”

“They’re lucky to have landed the beautiful Sloane, here, to design the menu,” I offer, taking a sip of my drink, all the while holding Sloane’s gaze. Her lovely brown eyes flash, and it seems like steam might blow out of both ears any second. But I’ll take it. Anything is better than a cold shoulder.

“Lucky indeed and with the two of you helping, I’m sure it will be a smashing success,” Savannah says, dropping a wedge of lime into her glass.

Sloane’s glossy pink lips curve up in a weak smile as she turns toward our mutual friend. “I hope so.”

“I’ll be at the shop all day tomorrow and would be happy to show you around the interior,” I suggest, determined to pin Sloane down with a verbal commitment before she cuts short the conversation and tries to escape.

“Tomorrow?” she murmurs, her eyes boring into her red wine. “I...I could make that work.”

“Perfect. See you then.”

Sloane

I'M SHIVERING THROUGH THREE thick layers as I make the left onto Main Street and head west toward Pierce Automotive. Sparky, my trusty old Honda, turned over three times before she started up. Hopefully it's because the temperature has dipped into the teens this afternoon and not a sign something's wrong with the battery.

Although, I suppose, if there's something wrong with the battery, or the starter, I'll be with a mechanic. Not that I'm inviting a reason to linger. I'm going there solely to check out the inside of the coffee truck, get the dimensions, see what I'm working with as far as equipment goes, and be gone. Not hang out.

Especially after last night, when Trevor hit me with that same self-assured panty-melting smile he's always had. One beautiful people are born with. Their whole lives, those fortunate souls have known how attractive they are and have mastered the art of using their good looks to their advantage.

Not like the rest of us, or me, at least. Self-conscious could be my middle name. And rather than say or do something that might draw attention, I fade

into the shadows.

Hell, buying the Ravishing Diner is the hardest thing I've ever done. Not because of the long hours or physical labor. Nope, I'd happily spend every waking hour in that kitchen. But it took almost six months to even step foot in the front of the house, even though I've known most of the customers my entire life.

But that was years ago, and I've got enough problems here and now. I wave my gloved hand in front of Sparky's air vents, but the heater is either taking forever to kick in or has stopped working altogether. It's on full blast. The dial turned as far as it can go toward the thick red line, but I might as well roll down the windows. My nose is dripping, and my eyes are watering, thanks to the icy air blowing through the vents.

I swipe at my face with the sleeve of my jacket and squint through the slim, clear patch at the bottom of the windshield. The one spot the defroster seems to reach.

As if these indications weren't enough signs from the universe that heading to Trevor's this afternoon is a mistake, *Baby, it's Cold Outside* comes on the radio.

I roll my eyes so hard they almost get stuck up in the back of my head. The snow has been falling all day, but it seems thicker and wetter than earlier. I grip the steering wheel tighter and wonder when it's going to let up.

Deserted roads are a rare sight in our small Montana town, where folks are used to harsh winter weather, but there's not a single car in sight. The diner was so slow today we'll have enough chicken noodle soup to make it the soup of the day again tomorrow rather than the split pea I had planned.

But I told Trevor I'd stop by today, and even if it kills me, I'll be there. Kate was right. I've put off this visit long enough. Plus, I've always been the

type of person to do what she says she's going to do—no matter what.

At least, if I get stuck on the side of the road, I have sustenance. This morning, I baked enough cookies to feed an army and have a few dozen tied up with twine in a pink bakery box on the passenger seat. The double chocolate chunk, gingerbread men, and pecan sandies might be frozen by the time I get there, but the guys at the shop can always dip them into some hot coffee or pop them in the microwave.

It's taken me twice as long as usual to reach my destination on the outskirts of town, thanks to the fact I've been creeping along well under the speed limit in case of ice.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears as I pull into the parking lot, my headlights beaming through a solid wall of snow flurries. The four garage bay doors are closed and the front lot is vacant.

I slide into a rockstar spot and grab the box of cookies. The rubber soles of my fluffy waterproof boots squeak on the fresh powder-covered gravel while I fight the wind toward the front door.

A bell announces my presence as I draw a deep breath. The small reception area is warm and smells like a cross between fresh pine and motor oil, with a hefty dose of turpentine. A strand of multicolored lights loops around a crooked Christmas tree in the corner and blinks on and off. The same radio station I listened to in the car plays over a speaker, but the place is a ghost town. There's not a soul in sight.

Until all six-foot-two of Trevor rushes in through the door from the garage section of the building, his expression strained. "Sloane, I tried to call, but there was no answer at diner."

He steps close, his green eyes scanning me from head to toe. I have the sense he's going to reach for me, but he pulls up short, the hand at his side

curling into a fist around a set of keys.

Why would he try to call? And why is he so upset?

“I...uh...closed up early. Why?”

He rakes a hand through his thick sandy blond hair. “You said you’d stop by today, and when you weren’t here by four and it was getting dark, I didn’t want you out on the roads in these conditions.”

He lifts his smooth chin toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that cover the north wall facing the parking lot. Sure, the driving conditions weren’t ideal, but from this vantage point, it looks as if the two of us are alone in a snow globe with whiteout conditions swirling all around.

I spin back to him, my mind racing as I process his concern. “I...I didn’t think it was that bad.”

He reaches for me then, his hand landing firmly on my upper arm, as if he can’t go another second without reassuring himself I’m safe.

It takes every ounce of effort not to flinch from the touch. Not because I don’t like it, especially from a guy like Trevor who was voted *Most Likely to Come to Your Rescue* when we were seniors in high school. But recoiling is my natural reaction. I can’t help that my first thought is, his wide, calloused hand won’t fit around my arm even without the three layers I’m wearing.

“I would never have forgiven myself if anything happened to you.”

What? I shake my head as if that will clear up my confusion. “I’m fine... really. Look, I brought cookies.”

He glances down and accepts the box I extend, much to my relief, releasing his soft hold on me. “Thanks.”

“I brought enough for your guys, too. Where are they?” I lean to my left to peer over his shoulder through the door to the garage.

“I sent everyone home at three. Didn’t you hear about the storm blowing

in?”

“No, I...” I start, but stop, not wanting to admit I don’t really follow the weather, or any news, really.

I glance outside again. Sparky is already covered with a thick layer of snow that’s growing by the minute. My stomach drops as realization hits.

“How am I going to get home?”

He shakes his head and meets my gaze. “There’s no getting home tonight, Sloane. At least, not to your place.”

Trevor

WIDE-EYED PANIC DAWNS ON Sloane's delicate features. Her jaw drops, and she takes a step back. Then another. And shakes her head. "What? No! I need to get home, back to the diner, back to Pancake."

Pancake?

"I'm sorry."

Her despair slices through me like a knife. But the anticipation that floods my veins tempers the sensation. I couldn't have planned this better if I'd tried. If Sloane had come weeks ago, when I'd expected her, I wouldn't be staring down twenty-four hours—at least—alone with her. An entire evening of just the two of us where she can't slip away or shift the focus to someone else or try to fade into the background.

It's the chance I've waited for and one I'm determined not to blow. But I pump the brakes on my exhilaration. I need to follow her lead and have patience, even if I've been biding my time for an opportunity like this for years.

"Don't worry," I assure her. "Even if we lose power, I've got plenty of

firewood.”

“You have a fireplace?” Her brow furrows as her eyes dart around.

I bite back a smile. “Not here. At my place.”

“But don’t you live in a cabin near the bottom of the ridge?”

I shouldn’t be surprised Sloane knows where I live. After all, in our small town, the winner of the elementary school spelling bee is front page news. But a whisper of pleasure snakes through my gut, anyway. Maybe, she hasn’t been ignoring me as much as I thought.

“As the crow flies, it’s not more than a mile and a half. When the weather’s nice, I walk, and this time of year, I drive my snowmobile as often as my truck.”

“Oh.”

She seems to process this, and I keep quiet, mesmerized by the progression of thoughts as they float across her features. The trail of thinking ends with a frown and a little V forming in between her brows.

That just won’t do. Distraction is the best policy at the moment. Before she uses that clever mind to brainstorm other ways to get home in the storm.

“How about we take care of business first? The coffee truck is just this way.”

A pause and then, “Oh, right, yes, the truck. I can’t wait to see it.”

And I can’t wait to show it to her. She’ll love it. I wish I could grab her hand, but I settle for holding out an arm to point her toward the door then follow as she heads into the shop.

“It’s in the last bay.”

This view from behind allows me a chance to appreciate her curves, tempting even hidden under a thick black bubble jacket that reaches mid-thigh. I don’t know if black is Sloane’s favorite color, but it’s the only color

she wears. The only color she's worn since middle school. Are her bra and panties black, too?

“Trevor, it’s...wow,” she murmurs, dragging my attention back to the present once the brightly painted truck comes into view. She circles all the way around it while I lean against a hoist point and watch the way her mouth forms a perfect little “O.”

“Yeah.” I rub the back of my neck. “It came together nicely. And with your coffee and goodies served inside, it’s sure to be a hit.”

“And raise a lot of money for literacy.”

That, too. Sloane’s generosity is one of the traits I admire most about her.

Here I am, helping with the project as a way to get close to her, yet she’s doing it out of the goodness of her heart. She’s always welcoming fundraisers to the diner, and she’s often the first to join in with community efforts.

“You really love to serve people, don’t you?” I ask quietly, the realization settling in my gut. That’s why Sloane’s a perfect fit for the diner that was failing until she took over.

She spins toward me, and her head falls to one side as if she’s caught off guard by my observation.

“I do.” Her confirmation is barely more than a whisper, but the look in her eyes shoots straight to my heart. As if no one’s ever pointed that out to her before.

I sink into that soft expression while she shuffles then adds, “But you must, too, for the line of business you’re in.”

I shake off her suggestion. “I’m just a guy who likes to work on cars.”

Her eyebrow arches as if she doesn’t believe me, but this isn’t about me, even though she’s a master at deflecting attention.

“Watch this,” I say, flicking on the string of twinkle lights that borders the

raised canopy and crisscrosses the ceiling in the truck.

The reflection of dozens of soft white bulbs flickers in her eyes as she gazes up at them. “Those will be perfect for early mornings or late nights.”

“Let’s see what you’re working with inside, hmm?” I drag my attention away from her illuminated face and skirt around her to hold open the door on the back. “There’s a water line direct to the built-in coffee maker from a thirty-gallon tank hidden behind a panel in the back,” I inform her as she steps up to explore the interior.

Sloane laughs, and the sound is so light and bubbly I can’t help but smile.

“What?” I ask, unsure what I said that’s so funny.

“Not a coffee connoisseur, are you?”

I climb in behind her. “No, why?”

“You referred to this top-of-the-line espresso machine as a coffeemaker.” She runs a finger along the sleek stainless-steel front of the machine that’s a good eighteen inches with more nobs and spouts and nozzles than a V6.

“Can it make coffee?”

“It can make an Americano.”

“Is that a yes?”

She chuckles again and spins to face me, her mouth open, as if to say something, but no words emerge from her lips.

Thanks to the close quarters, we’re only inches apart. Close enough that when I inhale her scent, sweet and buttery and delicious, it erases every thought in my mind. Except for how much I want to kiss her.

“What?” I murmur, prompting her to share what she planned to say.

“I...uh,” she starts, trailing off as she looks up and meets my eyes in the soft light. Her breath catches, and the tip of her tongue darts out to wet her lips as her eyes slide south to my mouth.

If I'm reading the signals right, Sloane wants me to kiss her, but before I can ask permission, she inches back, bumping into the built-in rolling rack.

The motion shatters the moment and instantly transforms her face. She tears away her gaze and an embarrassed flush sweeps up her neck and cheeks as she stammers, "I...uh, I didn't realize how small this space would be."

Her volume is too loud, and she suddenly takes a strong interest in the cabinets above the serving window that are stocked with sleeves of paper coffee cups and lids of various sizes. For the life of me, I can't figure out why she's reacting so oddly.

"It's almost claustrophobic," she adds, her voice tense when I don't move.

"Let me give you some space to explore. I'll be just outside if you need anything."

I silently curse our interrupted moment, but as I bound down the steps, Sloane blows out a shaky breath as if she's as affected by my presence as I am by hers. A flicker of hope filters through my chest. Maybe, I'm closer to convincing this woman to give me another shot than I think.

Sloane

IT'S EERIE BEHIND PIERCE Automotive. Even more so than inside the empty building. The awareness we're the only two people for miles creeps into my consciousness, but I shove it away and focus.

Not on what happened back there in the truck. That was what I'd feared from the minute I'd heard Trevor was helping. The way I wanted to kiss him, the way I wanted him to kiss me when we stood so close the heat radiating off his body was a warmth I wanted to sink into.

Thinking about the moment surfaces ugly memories from Robbie's birthday party. Memories I swallow down, determined to focus on the survival instead.

It's got to be close to zero degrees out here, and our breath is crystalizing into wisps of vapor the second we exhale. If we don't head to his place soon, I'll freeze to death. Not that the idea of spending the night alone with the man who played me for a fool is appealing, but I suppose it's the best alternative at the moment.

Thankfully, Trevor busied himself locking up while I jotted down some

measurements and took a few pictures of the interior of the truck. But now, with a gloved hand, he's brushing a six-inch thick layer of snow off the seat of his snowmobile. And the white flakes are still falling, thick and fast, as dusk ebbs into night.

He opens a small storage compartment and tucks in the box of cookies. "It's not a one-horse open sleigh but will have to do."

"Have you ridden with a passenger before?" I shoot a side eye toward the vehicle through the helmet Trevor passed me.

"No," he admits, "but it's a V8 and was made for conditions like this."

I'm not worried about the conditions. It's the seat. I stare at it, thanking my lucky stars that at least it's one you straddle, rather than sit side by side, but even so, the vinyl-covered area looks so tiny. Entirely too narrow for my wide ass.

"It's a two-person model." Trevor throws a leg over, starts the engine, and scoots forward to make space for me behind him.

A two-person model. Says the man who has never agonized over whether his hips will squeeze into a seat with arms on either side.

I send a quick prayer up to heaven that the V8 can handle our combined weight and climb on behind him, trying and failing to leave a gap between our bodies.

"Hold on tight around my waist." His words are muffled through our helmets as he calls over his shoulder, but I do as I'm told.

"Tighter," he insists, drawing my arms further around his torso.

I grip a little harder, but he must not be satisfied because he places both hands on the handles and we shoot forward a dozen feet.

If it's a death grip he wanted, then I'm delivering. My face is turned to one side and smushed across his back and every muscle in my body is clutching

him.

The bastard chuckles, and the rumbles from his chest vibrate through his leather jacket to my breasts. The sensation, along with the reverberations from the engine through the seat to my core, is enough to distract me for the moment.

“Good girl. We’ll be there before you know it.”

Good girl?

I shouldn’t like the way that sounds, but a trickle of pleasure slides through me like a drizzle of caramel sinking into a dollop of whipped cream on top of an ice cream sundae.

A few minutes into the ride, I crack open one eye then the other. We’re flying down a path on the west side of the ridge that seems as if it’s cut through the middle of nowhere, though we’re only a few miles out of town.

Trevor slows the snowmobile to a crawl and then stops, raising a hand to point out something in the distance. I squint but can’t make anything out in the thick forest and near whiteout conditions.

“There,” he says, pointing again. “Near that fallen log. It’s a caribou.”

The animal moves, not more than a flick of its ear, just below a massive set of antlers, but it’s enough. “I see it!”

“He’s a beauty.”

He sure is. The huge beast eyes us as we watch him. With the snow swirling and the towering trees and Trevor’s broad back against my chest, I feel somehow...small. As if the vastness of the universe, of what’s possible, is expansive and infinite, and all is right in the world during this magical season.

Before I can process the thought fully, our friend leaps away.

“You’re lucky,” Trevor says over his shoulder. “There aren’t many like that

out here this time of year.”

“You mean *we’re* lucky then.”

A pause and then, “Today does seem to be my lucky day.”

What?



Minutes later, when we’re nearly upon it, Trevor’s A-frame surges into view. It’s dark and doesn’t sport a single holiday decoration. No wreath on the front door or lights hung on the eaves. No decorated Christmas tree or candles visible through the windows.

He can borrow some decorations if he’d like. This time of year, the diner looks more like Santa’s workshop than a place to grab a slice of pie.

Trevor pulls smoothly into an area attached to one side of the cabin where the roof extends over enough firewood to fuel a wood-fired pizza oven for a year.

I breathe a sigh of relief once both feet are back on solid ground. And not a moment too soon. I’m wet and freezing. I draw the helmet off, shaking out my hair.

“See, wasn’t so bad, was it?” he asks.

It wasn’t, but I’m not about to admit that to him. “You weren’t joking about the firewood.”

Trevor cuts the engine, draws off his helmet, and reaches for mine. “I told you we’d be fine even if power went out.”

He flashes me a wicked smile, and it’s like a one-two punch, hitting me square in the chest and also a bit lower.

“Yes, well, let’s hope that doesn’t happen.” I spin on my heels and beeline toward the front steps, but it’s like wading through quicksand, thanks to the knee-deep snowdrifts standing between me and warmth.

My teeth chatter as I shrug off my jacket and leave my boots on the mat while Trevor does the same. He sets the box of cookies on the coffee table then gets to work starting a fire.

Squatted in front of the stone hearth, his worn jeans hug his thighs and an ass that is the stuff of dreams. I enjoy the sight until dancing orange flames lick up a handful of logs and he rises, setting the screen into place.

“No Christmas tree?” I ask, taking stock of the small but neat family room of his bachelor pad.

“It’s just me here,” he says with a shrug, brushing his hands on his jeans. “And usually I’m at the shop, anyway.”

“I know the feeling.”

“But I’ll bet you wouldn’t have it any other way, right?” he asks, his head cocking to one side. “Working ‘round the clock, I mean.”

He’s right.

“Got to do what you’ve got to do when it’s your business, hmm?”

“At least, yours provides sustenance. Sometimes, I’m so busy I forget to eat.”

I’ve never had that problem in my life.

“I can make some dinner,” I offer, glancing toward the kitchen. “If you’ve got any food, that is.”

“I might be a bachelor, but I do have more than beer and condiments in the fridge, believe it or not.”

“I didn’t think that was all you’d have,” I bristle, even though that’s exactly what I pictured.

His eyebrow arches, and I relent. “Well, beer and condiments and maybe some steak or chicken or something, too.”

“So, protein?”

I wave a hand at his long, lean frame. “You don’t exactly look like you exist on carbs, if you know what I mean.”

He rubs his chin. “You’d be surprised. But,” he adds, glancing toward the kitchen, “you’re not cooking tonight, even though I’m sure whatever you could whip up would be amazing.”

“I’m happy to—”

“You do enough taking care of everyone else.” His head shakes as he steps closer, holding my gaze with grass-green eyes that seem to pierce deep into my soul, then adds in a low, delicious tone, “It’s time you get taken care of, don’t you think?”

My breath hitches. *Taken care of how exactly?*

No. No, no, no. I close my eyes to pull myself together, dragging my mind from the gutter. “Trevor, you’re kind enough to let me stay here, and I appreciate it—”

“It’s my pleasure, really.” His hand twitches as if he wants to reach for mine, and I step back and eye it warily. He seems to pick up on my unease and tucks both hands into his back pockets. “How about some warm clothes first? You’re soaked through.”

Trevor

YOU'D THINK I'D ASKED Sloane to strip naked by the way her eyes widen and her jaw drops.

“Oh, no, I’m fine, really.” She holds up both hands and shakes her head from side to side.

“Sloane, you’re wet and—”

“I said I’m fine.” Her tone invites no further discussion, but a full body shiver runs through her, and she wraps her arms around herself.

“Surely, you’re not going to sleep in those clothes. Let me get you something to change into.”

“I’m sure you don’t have anything that...” she starts, then trails off, not finishing the thought as she glances away.

Fits. She was going to say fits. The clarity of why she’s being so stubborn hits me like a sucker punch. Because Sloane is gorgeous, but it’s clear she doesn’t see it that way.

“I promise you,” I assure her quietly. “I have something that will be perfect.”

Her eyes dart to mine, and there's something close to hope in their mahogany depths. I take her silence as reluctant acceptance and head down the hallway, returning a moment later with a pair of flannel pajamas and thick wool socks. She hasn't moved, but her eyes lock on the folded red-and-black plaid stack.

"They're not new, but I promise they're clean."

She accepts the items, but there's a hesitation in the press of her lips. "I'll try them on."

Progress. Inside, I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Bathroom is the first door on the left." I point to the back hallway I just emerged from.

While she's occupied, I get to work in the kitchen, first opening the bottle of pinot noir I picked up on my way home last night. It was Sloane's drink of choice at the party and first on my list of essentials to stock up on before the storm. Not that I thought I'd need it this soon, but it seems serendipity is on my side.

I start a pot of water boiling and pull a bag of frozen meatballs from the freezer. If there's one thing I can make without too much thought, it's spaghetti and meatballs. And I need all of my attention for the woman here in my cabin, the woman who baffles me but yet I can't get out of my system even after all this time. Despite the fact my attention is the last thing she wants.

I'm opening a jar of marinara from the pantry when a flash of red slides into view from the corner of my eye. Sloane stands in the doorway in the plaid pajamas and socks. My hands fall still as I spin to face her and admire the view. The woman I've wanted for years is here, in my cabin, only a few feet away, wearing pajamas and a reluctant smile, looking as lovely as ever.

“They work?”

“Yeah...thanks.” She’s still got her hands wrapped around herself, and I wish she didn’t feel the need to hide her beautiful body.

“There’s a glass and bottle of wine if you’d like a drink.” I dip my chin toward the pinot noir I set out on the table.

Sloane eyes me for a long minute, as if trying to work out if something more than basic hospitality motivates my offer. I turn back to heat the sauce and breathe a sigh of relief when she doesn’t question how I know pinot noir is her drink of choice but simply pours herself a glass.

“What are you making?”

“Spaghetti and meatballs.”

“Sounds delicious. Are you sure I can’t help?”

“You can help by keeping me company.”

She arches an eyebrow but refrains from commenting and draws back the curtain back to peer outside. The winter night is a deep dark shade of black, like motor oil tainted with soot.

“It’s still snowing,” she murmurs, more to herself than me. Then, dropping the curtain, she slips onto a chair at the kitchen table and takes a sip of wine.

“Did you have fun at the party last night?” I ask, adding a dozen or so meatballs to the pot of sauce.

“Yes, it was so nice to celebrate the season and catch up with everyone.”

The water starts to boil, and Sloane makes a move to rise, but I shake my head. “I told you; I’ve got it. You’re not to lift a finger for this meal.”

She rolls her eyes, but a half smile forms on her lips. “I’m perfectly capable of helping, you know?”

I reseal the bag of meatballs and shoot her a side eye. “From what I see, you’re perfectly capable of almost anything.”

“Almost anything?”

I thought that might get her. I bite back a smile and debate how fast and hard I want to push at the moment. And whether I’m ready if this goes south fast. Only one way to find out.

“From my perspective, you’re really good at a million different things.”

“But what am I not good at? What am I not *capable* of? You know, from *your* perspective.”

I love that she’s taken offense, that she’s ready to spar, at least in Sloane’s *would never hurt a fly* kind of way.

I let the questions hang in the air like balloons on a string while I salt the boiling water and drop the spaghetti strands into the pot, then I lift a shoulder.

“I can think of a few things.”

“Like what?” Her voice has an edge to it.

I spin to face her and lean back, gripping the counter with both hands and holding her gaze steady. “Like taking a compliment.”

She opens her mouth but snaps it shut. Then it opens again, and lifts her chin. “I take plenty of compliments. Just last night, Noah praised the scones I brought to the party. And last week, Blanche said Ridgeview was the most festive business in town.”

The challenge in her eyes sends a spark through my core. I can’t wait to see how she reacts to the way I’m about to dispute every point she just made. I bite back a smile then press off the counter and give the spaghetti a stir.

“I don’t doubt you receive loads of compliments every day on anything and everything related to the diner. But,” I start, taking my time stirring the sauce before I find her eyes again. “What you seem to have trouble with is accepting *personal* compliments.”

She huffs and shakes her head. “Like when you tried to call me beautiful

last night in front of Savannah?”

She remembers. “Oh, I didn’t try. I did.”

“But you didn’t mean it.” She dismisses my confirmation with a wave of her hand.

“Says who?”

“Says me.” She takes a gulp of wine and tries to brush off the conversation, but I interrupt.

“And since when are you an expert on all things Trevor Pierce?”

“You’re being ridiculous.” She rises, as if this discussion is over, but from my perspective, it’s only just begun.

I halt her exit by taking a step toward her, not blocking her way, but close enough to watch her pulse thrumming in the hollow of her neck. It takes a minute, but she raises her dark eyes.

“I’ve never been more serious in my life, Sloane. If you only knew how much—”

The harsh sizzle of water boiling over on the stove cuts me off, and I spin to manage the mess. Once I’ve slid the pot to the back burner and turned down the heat, I glance over my shoulder. Sloane is nowhere to be seen, and the bottle of wine has disappeared along with her.

Sloane

FIFTEEN MINUTES AFTER THE absurd conversation in the kitchen, I'm on my second glass of wine, wrestling with the mounting confusion that's turned my insides out. How did I get here, settled on the rug in front of the roaring fire at Trevor's cabin on the day before Christmas Eve? How in the world am I dressed in warm flannel pajamas that smell like him, while snow blankets the earth outside, burying us in this cozy cocoon?

It's hard to think straight for a million different reasons, not the least of which is the way my stomach rumbles from the tantalizing smells wafting in from the kitchen. But I couldn't keep Trevor company in those close quarters for another minute. Not when he was lying through his teeth.

Or was he? A sliver of something close to longing slices through the barricade erected around my heart. The one that's protected me since the first time I felt self-conscious about my size when I was in fifth grade and was marked *overweight* during the health screening at school.

The barrier protecting my core seems to be crumbling at the corners, even though it was reinforced two years ago, after Trevor tried to breach it when I

was the target of his pity. I need to fortify it again now, and fast.

It doesn't matter that the mechanic in the other room has a well-known reputation for honesty. Maybe, that's true where his business is concerned, but it's clear, when it comes to me, things couldn't be further from the truth.

Before I can plan my strategy for keeping this dangerous liar at arm's length, Trevor clears his throat as if to announce his presence as he pads in from the kitchen. He sets two plates of spaghetti and meatballs on the rug, along with napkins and silverware he pulls from his back pocket. Then he drops next to me.

I meet his gaze, the emerald depths reflecting the flames dancing in the fireplace. "Thank you for dinner."

His lips curl up into a lopsided grin that somehow sets me at ease more than anything he could have said, then shrugs. "It was nothing. Plus, you haven't tried it yet. What if it's awful?"

"You looked like you knew your way around a kitchen."

"You sound surprised."

I fiddle with a napkin. "I...I guess I just didn't expect that."

"We're more alike than we're different."

I scoff. "I can't fix a car to save my life."

He twirls a bite of spaghetti on his fork. "I could teach you."

Why is he offering? Why would he take the time? I don't dare assume his intentions, and I don't ask. It's better if I don't play into his hand and try to uncover his motivations. Not because I fear what I'll find, but because of... something else. What, I'm not sure, but the less that I learn about Trevor's feelings, the better because one way or another I'm bound to land in heartbreak city.

I lift my chin toward the deck of cards next to the TV remote on the coffee

table at our side. “What do you play?”

“Solitaire, mostly. Hope Deferred, sometimes.”

“Hope Deferred? I’ve never heard of that.”

“It’s a game of...patience.”

There’s something odd, or maybe telling, about the way he said that last word but I can’t quite put my finger on what exactly it is. Must be the wine.

I’m tempted to ask how to play, but I don’t. Things between us are already intimate enough as we eat only inches from each other.

The heat of Trevor’s gaze is as blistering as the warmth from the fireplace. And causing fantasies to weave deep in my belly. Sexy daydreams that have zero chance of being fulfilled.

We eat in silence for a few more minutes until he sets down his plate, as if he’s got something to say. Something I have the feeling I don’t want to hear.

“Sloane,” he starts, taking a deep breath, “I—”

“How about a movie?” I blurt out, snatching up the remote control and knocking the deck of cards askew.

There’s an awkward silence as he presses his lips together. He seems to debate his reply, but drops his head rather than push the conversation. “A movie sounds perfect.”

He draws the remote from my grasp and aims it at the TV mounted above the mantel. “Anything specific in mind?”

I hadn’t gotten that far. And I’m unlikely to watch anything when the man at my side is commanding the full attention of every nerve in my body.

“Maybe a holiday movie? ‘Tis the season and all.” Ugh, could I sound any more awkward?

“Let’s see what we can find.”

He clicks on *Holiday* on the streaming service and starts scrolling. I take

another bite and crane my neck to see one Christmas rom-com after another suggested. My trepidation that we're going to be stuck watching a couple fall in love despite one misunderstanding or miscommunication or convenient coincidence after another hits a little too close to home.

"How about *Elf* or maybe *Home Alone*?" Hell, I'd even take *Die Hard* at this point.



Turns out my brilliant idea to watch a movie to avoid talking is anything but. The TV is too high on the wall to see the screen comfortably, so we have to move to the couch. Together. Because it's literally the only place to sit.

What kind of person doesn't have an armchair or a loveseat or even a bench, for heaven's sake? A bachelor, that's who. And the sofa isn't what anyone would consider generous.

We both face forward, sock-covered feet propped on the coffee table, as the movie starts. I'm determined to keep an appropriate distance between our hips even if, in this case, appropriate is measured in inches rather than feet.

Before the storybook opening credits are done, Trevor leans forward to set his empty plate on the table.

"More wine?" he asks, eyeing my nearly empty glass.

"No, thanks."

Two generous glasses have taken the edge off, but anymore and I'm sure to do or say something I'll regret. Either that or doze off slumped against Trevor's shoulder, drooling onto his shirt.

I finish up my dinner and the last sip of wine then set my plate aside to sink back just as baby Buddy gets his name up at the North Pole. Trevor adjusts

on his cushion, and his warm thigh grazes mine. The touch zings all the way to my core, but not in the way I'm used to. Rather than cringe or recoil, I want to lean into it. To feel it again.

I hold my breath, watching to see if the brush was accidental. It had to have been, right? There's no way this man, who could have any woman he wanted, would intentionally touch me.

But as the thought floats through my mind other, contradictory moments surface. The way his eyes tracked my every step at the party last night. The near kiss in the coffee truck earlier. And the heated look in the kitchen less than half an hour ago.

I bite my lip and try to focus on the movie, but my concentration is shot. Every flex and shift of his long, lean body commands my attention and jolts my nerve endings alive.

And, for the millionth time, I wish I had the type of body men wanted. No, scratch that. What I really want, what I'd never admit aloud in a million years, is to feel comfortable in my skin. To find peace with the shape I've always been.

But it's not that easy. Maybe, I should ask Santa for that for Christmas this year. For whatever some people my size have that I don't. Whatever it is that gives them the confidence to wear or do things I can't bring myself to. Because now that I'm here, alone with this man, this kind, honest hot guy I've secretly wanted for years, even though I turned him down flat, I have the sense he would kiss me back if I turned and pressed my lips to his.

But I can't. Even though I want to more than anything in the world.

Trevor

SOMETHING'S GOING ON WITH Sloane, but I have no idea what. She's pretending to watch the movie, but her brown eyes have been sliding sideways to my leg every ten seconds. And she's nibbling her lip.

I'm trying not to stare, but deciphering what's going on in that pretty mind is my singular goal. Because cuddling up alone together, in my cozy cabin in the middle of a winter storm, is likely the best shot I'll ever have to discover the truth. To find out if I have a chance in hell with this gorgeous woman or if I need to accept I'm not her type and move on. Two years has been long enough.

"I need to stoke the fire," I murmur, rising to poke the charred logs and add another. The flames pop and crackle, and when I set the screen back in place and turn around, Sloane's eyes aren't on the movie. They're on me.

I shoot her a smile and settle back on the couch, close enough our shoulders touch. The warmth of her arm seeps through the fabric separating us to sear my skin. I prop my feet back up on the table and slide over, *accidentally* nudging her.

“Sorry,” I murmur, gauging her reaction.

“No,” she assures me, her eyes fixed on our feet. “It’s...fine.”

Well, in that case... I shift so that my leg is pressed against the length of hers from hip to knee. She sucks in a breath but doesn’t flinch or pull away. In fact, her toes curl and brush against my feet.

Her words, along with the soft touch, knocks the air from my lungs. I test my luck but am careful to keep my eyes focused on the TV while I inch my hand over and let a few fingers rest on her thigh.

“Um,” she murmurs, the sound so low it’s barely audible.

“Oh,” I say, pretending to realize I’m touching her, even though I’m barely containing the desire to caress every inch of her body. I turn to face her, holding her gaze. “Is this okay?”

Her lips are parted, and her tongue darts out to wet them. Rather than answer, she nods. The movement is so small it’s barely perceptible, but it’s consent, nonetheless.

I skate my fingers along her thigh and test my luck with a little squeeze. “How about this?”

Her breath comes fast, and her gaze now zeroes in on my hand.

“It’s...” she starts, trailing off, and my heart skips a beat, dreading what she’ll say next until she finishes. “Will you turn the lights off?”

It’s the last thing I want, but if it will make her more comfortable, I’m happy to. After all, there’s still the glow from the fire to illuminate the room. I rise, my cock throbbing in my pants, but adjust myself. First, I flick off the TV, plunging us into silence, save for the quiet roar from the fire. Then I switch off the light.

When I return, Sloane hasn’t moved and doesn’t meet my eyes, but I study her flushed face, radiating a look that shoots straight to my heart. An

expression of yearning tempered with doubt.

I sink next to her, facing sideways toward her, and return my hand to her thigh. She squirms, but rather than shrink away, she lays her hand on mine, her fingers sliding in between mine. The touch gives me the courage to lean toward her.

“Sloane,” I murmur, so close the delicate floral scent of her shampoo tickles my nose. “I’d really like to kiss you.”

She presses her lips together and swallows, squeezing her eyes shut. “Okay.”

The word is more like a breath, but it's a green light. I keep my hand on her thigh and steal the other back around her shoulders as she turns her head toward me ever so slightly, her eyes still closed.

I close the gap between us and kiss her slowly, softly, letting my lips linger against hers. She’s stiff at first, but it’s not more than a few seconds before she melts against me, as if yielding to the unmistakable pull between us. Her lips part, and I tease her bottom lip, gliding my tongue along its length.

Her free hand grips my forearm, and a moan erupts from low in my chest. I deepen the kiss, exploring every inch of her mouth. She meets me stroke for stroke, and each flick sends a wave of pleasure through my body. Her fingers curl and squeeze mine, still intertwined on her thigh.

I cup her cheek as our mouths move in unison, my thumb brushing back and forth against the smooth skin along her jaw. The kiss is hungry but gentle and full of promise. She squirms, shifting on the couch, her nails raking my scalp.

I’m breathless when I finally wrench away just enough to kiss my way over to her ear as her head falls to the side.

“You are beautiful,” I murmur, my hand sliding up her thigh to her waist.

“No,” she replies, the disagreement automatic as her head shakes from side to side. I brace myself for the emergency brake she’s about to pull, but she doesn’t. Instead, she cups my face and pulls me back down to kiss her again, as if it’s the distraction she needs to erase whatever’s running through her mind.

And I’m more than happy to oblige. To test the waters and see how far I can take her pleasure. I double down on the kiss, swallowing every tiny whimper she utters, and glide my palm up her side, over the flannel, to cup her full breast.

Her back arches, but she doesn’t pull away. I kiss my way down the column of her neck while I stroke her nipple, already hard and pointed. I pinch it gently between my thumb and finger, drawing a gasp from her that shoots straight to my balls.

I tease a few more circles over the taut bud before drawing away to slip the first button on the pajama top through its hole.

Sloane freezes, and so do I. Her eyes are wide, and I give her a minute to consider what I’m doing. Her mahogany depths stare straight down between us, as if she doesn’t want to meet my eyes.

In this moment, I swear to myself that one day—if she’ll let me—I’m going to make love to this woman in broad daylight. Do everything in my power to convince her she’s perfect and show her how much she turns me on.

Her lip tucks back between her teeth as if she wants to say something but holds back.

“I’m going to keep going,” I say softly, praying she doesn’t stop me.

“O... Okay.”

I waste no time undoing the top few buttons. Enough to draw back the flannel and find her heaving breasts on full display. Indeed, she’s wearing a

black bra, and the contrast of the creamy skin of her cleavage against the dark lace is even more pronounced in the dim light.

I slip my finger into the cup, dipping low enough to free the generous globe, and waste no time sucking the nipple into my mouth. While I free the other breast, Sloane's hips rock as she cries out.

I glance up to find her head thrown back as her fingers grip my shoulders, not pushing away, but rather holding on tight, as if to anchor herself.

It's just what I want. To be her harbor. For her to feel safe enough with me to let go.

I lavish attention on the nipple before working my way over to the second one. Her breath comes faster while I nibble gently, and when a full body shiver runs through her, my cock goes as hard as steel.

I shift enough on the sofa to slip a hand down between us, between her thighs. My fingers cup her sex through the pajamas, and her hips buck. She moans but then sucks in a breath and pushes me away, scrambling to her feet. She stumbles backward as she clutches the pajamas in a white-knuckled grip over her breasts.

"Trevor, I... I can't." Her head shakes from side to side, her long dark hair swirling around her face. There's a tremor in her voice that breaks my heart, and her eyes dart around the room, looking anywhere but at me.

Sloane

“WHY NOT?”

Blood roars through my ears as Trevor levels me with his gaze. The question emerges from his chest like a low growl, but not in a threatening way. More like a dare. As if he knows exactly *why not* but wants me to admit it.

Why? So he can try to change my mind?

When I don't answer, he rakes a hand through his rumpled hair and takes a deep breath. I can relate. My heart is pounding, and I'm a touch lightheaded, but I can't tell him the truth. There's no way I can confess I'm too self-conscious about my body to enjoy his touch.

Okay, maybe, that's not quite true. I was enjoying his touch very much. So much, in fact, I almost lost myself. Almost.

I stare into the fire. “I—”

“You don't find me attractive?”

My gaze snaps to him. That couldn't be further from the truth. “No.”

“No, you don't?”

“No, I do.” The confession is out before I can stop it.

His eyebrow cocks. “Well, I’m glad we cleared that up.”

I roll my eyes. As if this man could, for even a second, think a woman wouldn’t find him attractive.

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself,” he observes. Again, the words aren’t hurled like a weapon, rather, like a plea.

Still, I cross my arms over my chest and scramble for something to say that doesn’t deny his spot-on impression but sets him straight.

I’ve got nothing.

He stands and makes his way toward me, reaching up a hand to brush my hair away from my face. “I certainly was.”

His voice is like melted chocolate over a scoop of vanilla ice cream and tempting, but a biscuit-sized lump in my throat threatens. I swallow it down. “Trevor, I...I can’t.”

“You said that,” he says quietly. “But you haven’t told me why.”

My insides twist, and I grip the flannel tighter. “Why do you want to know? So you can try to change my mind?” I throw out the questions as a challenge and meet his eyes. It’s a mistake. The green depths flicker with distress, as if they’re begging me to let him in.

“I want to know why, so I can understand.”

“But why?”

“Because I’m desperate to know why you keep pushing me away.” There’s an edge to his tone now, as if his patience is wearing thin. But so is mine.

“But why do you care so much?”

“Because, Sloane Wainwright. Because I love you.”

What?

“No,” I insist, my brow knotted as I lurch backwards. “No, you don’t.”

He holds my gaze in the golden glow of the fire and lets his silence speak for him. He doesn't need to utter another word. The unwavering look in his eyes confirms the truth. A truth I've sensed deep down in my gut for years but have denied because it's the most terrifying thing I can imagine. And the reason I've avoided him. Because he challenges me to see myself in a different light. One that goes against everything I've always believed.

I can't. I spin to flee, unsure where to go, but desperate to escape the sting. He grabs my wrist only until I stop. Then he releases it—releases me—if I choose to go.

But I don't.

I don't turn around, but I don't leave either. I want to, but something stronger overrules the desire. Something just out of reach, but I want it, desperately.

"It's true," he says to my back, with a sharp edge of steel in his tone as if daring me to believe him. "I've loved you for years, Sloane. Hell, why do you think I asked you out at Robbie's party?"

Maybe, it's his ridiculous confession, or the question I've asked myself a thousand times, but something inside me snaps. I can't keep playing these games. I'm seething when I spin to face him with both hands clenched at my sides as if I'm ready to go to blows.

"That's a great question. Why did you ask me out, Trevor? Lose a bet? Accept a dare? Take pity on the heavy girl who has never once been asked out before? Why? Because there's no way a guy like you would ever be interested in a girl like me. No way."

I'm shaking violently, and it's almost as if I'm floating up in the vaulted ceiling, looking down at the two of us facing off. I don't feel like myself and

can't believe my outburst. Tears threaten, but I fight them back, swiping one away with the back of my hand when it spills out and trails down my cheek.

But I don't have time to think because he's there, pulling me into his powerful arms and crushing me against his chest.

"Sloane, honey," he murmurs, stroking my hair and holding me tight. "If it takes every day for the rest of my life to convince you how beautiful you are, to prove how irresistible and sexy and perfect every inch of you is, then I'll do it. I'm up for that challenge, and I'll do anything and everything in my power to change your mind."

I squeeze him to me as tears pour down my cheeks because there's nothing else I can do. With nothing more than words, Trevor has disarmed me. With one vow, he's cracked the barricade around my heart. Not enough for it to crumble, but enough to let the light of his love shine through.

I sniffle and burrow into his touch, savoring the way he's holding me, the way his arms are wrapped around me as if he'll never let go.

After what feels like forever, when my breath has returned to normal and my heartrate has slowed, he pulls back and takes my hand, leading me back to the couch. He sits first, and when I try to settle next to him, he tugs me onto his lap.

"No," I insist. "I'm—"

But he silences me with a kiss.

"Perfect," he murmurs against my lips. And his kiss is so full of love and reassurance I can't help but melt against him, my ass fitting snugly between his legs while his arms envelop me.

I kiss him back, pouring every ounce of pent-up emotion into the touch. My arms snake up around his neck and weave through his hair as his hands roam

over every inch of me, and it feels...good. More than good. His touch is firing neurons I didn't know I had.

As my breath quickens, I wriggle against him, seeking friction, seeking anything that will quell the heat building in my core, and he chuckles.

“I'm going to take that as a yes.”

I pull back and meet his heady gaze. “A yes?”

“That you'll go out with me.”

I'm sure my face looks like a blotchy trainwreck, but I smile anyway. “This time, it is a yes.”

Trevor

AS FAR AS FIRST dates years in the making go, so far this one has been perfect. Not that I ever would have imagined my first time taking Sloane out it would be so public, with nearly the entire population turning out for the New Year's Day 5k.

But, for the two of us, who have built our business serving our neighbors in this small mountain town, it feels somehow...right.

And, from what I can tell from the whispers around us and the covert—and not so covert—glances at Sloane's gloved hand tucked snugly in mine, folks are pleasantly surprised to see the two of us together.

“It's a beautiful morning, isn't it?” Sloane's breath crystalizes in the frigid air as we wait for the official introduction of the coffee truck and start of the race.

Her face, flushed a soft pink hue from the still below freezing temperatures, is more gorgeous than ever. Maybe because she's mine now. My girlfriend. The past few days have proven that. We've spent hours getting to know each other, cooking together, in bed together, and making up for lost time.

“Sure is.”

After days of the blizzard that seemed to camp out over Ravish Ridge for Christmas, the snow has let up and a bright, clear blue sky stretches for hundreds of miles in every direction. The cheery atmosphere has a palpable electricity buzzing through the air as well, from the hundreds of runners warming up behind the starting line.

Savannah, along with Robbie, in his uniform, approaches with a wide smile. “Trevor, Sloane, you both must be so excited to see the coffee truck finally ready to serve customers, hmm?”

“We are,” Sloane replies, speaking for both of us. I nod and release Sloane’s hand to tuck her against my side. I wrap my arm around her shoulder and ignoring Robbie’s interested eyebrow raised ever so slightly that acknowledges my no-longer-single status.

Sloane freezes for an instant before melting against me, and it’s another reminder to take things slowly. There’s no rush, especially now that we’ve cleared the air between us after the misunderstanding at Robbie’s birthday party, but Sloane’s insecurities run deep and I’m finding new ways they’re emerging all the time.

I’m doing my best to dismantle every last one of them and reinforce how amazing she is, but there’s only so much I can do. Much of the work she’s going to have to do herself.

“Be sure to try the maple walnut scones,” Sloane tells Robbie. “There’re not cinnamon rolls, but I think you’ll enjoy them none the less.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” he replies, slipping a hand around his pregnant wife’s waist.

Just then, the program starts with the “Star-Spangled Banner” crackling out from the sound system as we turn toward the flagpole in front of the city

building on the corner across the square.

The program kicks off with a few remarks from the mayor, who then turns the microphone over to Sally, from the library. The organizer of the community service project takes a moment to share what folks can look forward to sipping on or nibbling from the coffee truck and looks out over to crowd in search of the amazing woman at my side.

Sally calls Sloane out with a special thank you and everyone within a dozen yards spins to see her as she lifts an arm in acknowledgement. But it's the thin line of Sloane's lush pink lips that presses together that distracts me from Sally's added appreciation for the work that I, along with a dozen other volunteers, did for the truck.

"You okay, babe?" I murmur in her ear as Sally invites the mayor to assist with the official ribbon cutting in front of the brightly painted vehicle.

Sloane glances up and slips her arm around my waist. "Yeah," she says. "I just...this...me, you, it still feels so..."

"Odd? New?"

"No," she insists, shaking her head. "I was going to say perfect."

Perfect? Her strained tone and the little V between her pinched eyebrows tell a different story.

"Perfect is a good thing, but you make it sound as if it's not."

"Because," she says, swallowing hard. "I'm scared that any minute I'm going to wake up from a dream."

I press my forehead to hers, our breaths warming the air between us. "If you're dreaming, honey, then I sure as hell am, too. But," I add, "would this ever happen in a dream?"

I bend down and kiss her soundly. A sear of my lips against hers as I lift her off her feet and make it clear to everyone around us that Sloane Wainwright

is mine.

When I finally set her back on solid ground, she pulls away and shoots me a scowl like she wants to murder me, but it disappears as cheers erupt all around us. I can't help but smile wide and pull her close, tucking her against my chest and wrapping my arms around her.

This community we both love had a project and the outcome, this coffee truck that's going to do so much good, offered a chance to work with the woman I've wanted for years. A twist of fate allowed me time to uncover the truth and break down her defenses until I could convince her how perfect she is. And now, here we are staring a new year—together.

“Ready for a cup of coffee?” she asks, her eyes sparkling as she pulls away and glances up at me.

“Don't you mean an Americano?” I reply with a grin.

With a laugh she grabs my hand and hauls me over to the long line of folks eager to do some good this New Year's morning.

Epilogue | Trevor | Five Years Later

“HONEY, DO YOU SEE where the instructions went?”

Sloane, sitting on the couch, glances up from the present she’s wrapping on the coffee table and scans the floor in front of the roaring fire. The rug is littered with a hundred pieces from the toddler workbench and toolset with ‘realistic electric drill’ I ordered a month ago, and now, on a snowy Christmas Eve at nearly midnight, am trying to assemble.

Thanks, Santa.

“There.” She dips her chin behind me, toward the towering Christmas tree, and bites back a smile. “You are a mechanic, right? Good with tools and such?” Her playful tone and amused expression erase my frustration in an instant.

“Care to see how good I am with my hands?”

My tone and the offer catch her attention. Her hands still, and she arches an eyebrow. “Right now?”

“Right now.”

Ever since I convinced this gorgeous woman to let me take her out and

eventually, to be my wife, I've tried not to let any opportunity to show her how much I love her, how much she turns me on, pass by without taking full advantage. And it's getting harder and harder now that our son is in a big boy bed rather than in his crib.

Sloane glances at the baby monitor, and her bottom lip tucks between her teeth. "He is sleeping."

"And," I say, making my way through the mess to kiss those delectable lips, "we're not."

"But how would you show me how good you are with your hands?" she asks, pretending to be confused as she pulls one tie of her pale pink robe until the knot comes undone.

"Well," I murmur, drawing open the robe to reveal her matching pink pajamas, "I'd start here." Kneeling between her legs, I cup both breasts through the soft knit, each palm caressing in a slow circular motion until her nipples harden and she sucks in a sharp breath.

I move my hands lower, sliding over her waist and down, coasting over the swell of her hips before moving back up to her shoulders.

She pouts, but I lean in, skimming her neck with my lips as I whisper in her ear. Declarations of love and adoration. Appreciation for being an amazing wife and mother.

I match my words with my touch, letting my hands wander the length of her body, exploring every familiar inch along the way before returning to her breasts. But when I do, she moans, and her head sinks back, and her eyes fall shut.

My fingertips trace circles around each nipple before finally reaching for the buttons on her pajama top and slowly undoing them one by one. I press light kisses on Sloane's exposed skin while I peel back the soft fabric like

pages in a book, revealing Sloane's amazing breasts and lavishing them with attention. Her fingers thread through my hair as I draw each nipple into my mouth, sucking and nibbling until it peaks and she's writhing.

Her body trembles as I continue my journey south, pressing soft kisses on her stomach and over her curves until I reach the waistband of her pajama bottoms. Her breath hitches as I slide them off, along with her panties, my cock rock hard and aching at the sight of my nearly naked wife.

I spread her thighs and slip between them, exploring every gorgeous wet inch with my tongue. She moans, her hips arching, as I increase the pressure and tease her clit.

Years ago, I learned quickly exactly what she likes and how much I can get away with before she's begging for release. I'm tempted to test the limits tonight, but as her hips rock and she squirms, I can't help but slip a single finger inside her channel. It clenches around me like a wrench, and my cock twitches.

"Trevor," she moans, squeezing her thighs together.

"Mmm?" I murmur against her as I add a second finger.

She cries out and arches her back, and I double down on her clit, licking and sucking as I pump her with my fingers. In a shuddering wave, her body trembling with pleasure, she comes, biting back a cry as her fingers twist in my hair.

Before I can even sit back on my heels, Sloane is reaching for the button on my jeans, rubbing my throbbing cock through the denim.

"I thought you wanted to see how good I was with my hands," I say as her fingers make quick work of the zipper, and I fight back a groan.

"I did," she confirms. "But now, I want more."

"And I want you to ride me."

It took a long time, years even, before Sloane didn't hesitate whenever I suggested she climb on top. But now, she doesn't miss a beat. Her eyes darken, and she shoots me a sultry smile.

"Happy to," she says, patting the sofa next to her.

I waste no time taking a seat and gripping her hips as she climbs on to straddle me, sinking down onto my length and taking every inch of me inside her.

"Sloane," I warn, my tone low as I grit my teeth to keep from coming too fast.

But she just giggles and rocks her hips, knowing it's a move that drives me wild. And the confidence is sexier than anything because it was hard won and shows how comfortable she's gotten with her gorgeous, full, curvy body.

I can't help but pull her mouth down to mine and kiss her thoroughly because love pulses through every inch of my body, and I still can't believe how lucky I am to call this amazing, generous, hardworking, beautiful woman my wife.



Dear reader,

Thank you so much for reading **One Mistake with the Mechanic**! I hope you enjoyed Sloane and Trevor's happily ever after!

If you haven't read the other steamy short reads in the **It Only Takes ONE** series you can see them all **[HERE](#)**.

Or, if you're already enjoyed all of those, you're sure to love **[Scorching Santa](#)**, a Kissing Springs, Kentucky novel.



**Small town hero. Single dad. Sexy as hell stripper.
Not that I'm looking. After all, he used to be my best friend.**

Hannah

Hunter had me strictly in the friend zone. For years. Until he knocked up my cousin and I told him to go.

True to his word, he's left me alone. For six long years. Damn him.

I still miss his easy charm and gorgeous grin, especially now that he's captain of the Kissing Springs Fire Department.

When I agree to watch his son for a week during the holidays, somehow I'm convinced to let him stay at my place too.

I guess soon enough I'll know if Christmas present will be enough to make up for Christmas past.

Hunter

Six years ago, I made a mistake. A reckless one-night stand that changed everything between my best friend and I. I slept with her cousin.

That stupid move cost me our friendship and I ended up with a son. Hannah told me to go, but that's not why I stayed away. No, I had my reasons.

But the holiday season is here again, and it's been long enough. I miss her like hell, and it's time to confess the truth. Plus, thanks to a Christmas miracle, I have a good reason to reconnect. One she can't refuse.

And this time, I'll do anything to win her over. After all, I've always wanted so much more.

Sink into **Scorching Santa**, a steamy small town friends to lovers holiday romance today!

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About the Author



Ellen Brooks believes in love at first sight, eating cake for breakfast, and staying up way too late.

She's a classically trained pastry chef who now spends her days whipping up sexy and satisfying modern day love stories.

When she's not dreaming up her next characters, or plotting a happily ever after, you'll find her absorbed in a book, relaxing into shavasana, or downing an iced coffee.

Ellen lives in the desert southwest where she still *occasionally bakes a batch of cookies for her real-life hero and two girls.

*code for not often enough, if you ask them

Ellen loves to connect with readers everywhere.

