

ALL THE *Jingle* LADIES



*Romanced*

BY THE

**SILVER FOX**

NIKA STONE

ROMANCED BY THE  
SILVER FOX

ALL THE JINGLE LADIES



# NIKA STONE





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## ROMANCED BY THE SILVER FOX INFO

### **Genie**

When a mysterious job offer brings me back to my hometown, the last person I expect to see is my former fiancé.

Turns out he's behind the company that wants to bring me on board — but he also wants to rekindle our relationship.

I'm still drawn to him, but I don't know if I can trust that he won't hurt me again.

### **Grant**

She's the only woman I ever loved — and the only one I've ever left.

I've thought about her every day since, and I'm desperate to win her back.

Getting Genie to give me another shot will take a Christmas miracle.

But I'll do whatever it takes to bring her back to me.

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# CHAPTER 1





## GENIE

THE SECOND I GET OFF THE PLANE, I STRETCH THE KINKS OUT of my neck, throw my carryon on my back, and check voicemail.

“Genie!” My big sister’s voice warms my heart, even though it’s a recording. “Dad and I got held up at the restaurant. Mrs. Kambara’s mother-in-law is coming from Japan, and she requested a rush order of char siu bao, and you know how Mom doesn’t like to say no... anyway: Long story short, the three of us are making six dozen of the things and we had to send someone else to pick you up. They’ll meet you in baggage claim.”

“I’m sorry, I gotta go help them until Mom’s assistant shows up. Love you, can’t wait to see you, bye!”

Finola’s message doesn’t surprise me. Our mother has always been committed to her customers, especially ones from the neighborhood. And with Mrs. Kambara being one of Mom’s dearest friends, there’s no way my mother wouldn’t drop everything to help her out.

My sister is the same way. Despite having a business of her own that needs her attention — what with it being the holidays and all — Fin’s jumped in to help our mom. I would have, too. Mom’s request for help is more like an order.

I can already picture the dozens of perfect, pillowy bao, each filled with steaming mounds of spiced pork and vegetables. My stomach growls just thinking about them. On the other hand, Fin gets to eat some of those delicious morsels.

My pity for her only goes so far. I'm already scheming to bring as many as I can when I return to New York.

I take in a deep breath of the West Coast. I know the air isn't really different, since I'm still inside the airport, but there's something about it that soothes me. It's good to be home. Even though this trip is completely last minute, and even if it's for a job I'm not one hundred percent sure exists.

I got a call from a headhunter a few days ago. They didn't say much, just that some fancy startup needed a project manager and someone recommended me. While the details of the project were vague, two things were crystal clear: One, if I took the job, it would involve a move back to Portland, and two, they required a meeting in person before the New Year. If those conditions were acceptable, the company was more than happy to fly me out and put me up at their expense for this meeting.

So I called up my sister and parents and invited myself home for Christmas. They said they'd be thrilled to see me, of course, but I got the feeling that I was interrupting their plans. No one's said anything specific. However, less than forty-eight hours ago, I was planning to stay in New York and do the classic Chinese food and a movie with a few friends from work. I hope I'm not putting my family to too much trouble.

Who did they send to get me? I wonder. The company I'm interviewing with —FLB Trust, LLC— offered to send a car for pickup, but I refused. My Dad would've been terminally offended if I had dared accept a ride from anyone else. Although, as it turns out, taking the car would've been just fine.

I hop on the escalator and head down to baggage claim, scanning the crowd for familiar faces.

Faint instrumental music drifts toward me from somewhere nearby. It takes a moment to pick it out of the crowd, but the young man in front of me with the giant headphones is rocking out to a metal version of "Santa Baby." I pinch my lips together, trying to hold back a smile. Guess the holidays make us all sentimental — even rock & rollers.

Down at the bottom, I scan the crowd again. Maybe Finola sent one of her business partners, Jade or Lane? Unlikely, I'm sure they'd be too busy. Maybe Leo, her significant other, is on the way? I know she didn't forget about me, but a knot forms in my stomach. I take a deep breath and try to relax.

"Excuse me. Are you Genie Carter?" A young blonde woman with a vaguely familiar face and the curliest hair I've ever seen approaches me with her phone out. She holds the screen toward me; it displays my firm headshot. Self-consciously, I smooth my hair, though it's already pinned into a bun. After six hours on a plane, I'm nowhere near as polished as my picture.

"I am," I admit. The girl's face lights up in relief. Now that she's smiling, I recognize her face from her email signature. A tiny stud in her nose sparkles in the light.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Marin Cox, with FLB Trust." We shake hands, and she passes me a business card printed on the lushest paper I've ever held. I might frame it.

"I recognize your name from our correspondence. But I thought —"

"We understood that your ground transportation arrangements were in flux, so made ourselves available."

Wow. That was convenient. But my sister Finola knows all kinds of people. It's not outside the realm of possibility that she's friends with someone at the company that's trying to hire me.

"Thank you," I say. Once she confirms that I don't have any more luggage to pick up, Marin escorts me through the massive revolving doors.

Outside, discreet swaths of garland are draped around the posts, ending in bright red bows. I take a deep breath. In my head, I knew I'd flown all this way, but the smell of freshly rained-on earth confirms it. It's the smell of home.

Marin smiles when she notices.

"I miss it when I'm away, too," she admits. "There's something about this rainy little town, isn't there?"

“It’s a wonderful place,” I say. I want to sound neutral. I think she’s right, but I need to keep my head. I don’t want to come across as too eager to return to Portland. This is part of the interview, too. I don’t want to indicate that I’ll commit before I know the scope of the job.

In the parking structure, Marin steers me toward a row of long, sleek limousines and sedans. My eyebrows shoot up. This seems like overkill, with me in my yoga pants and casual cable-knit sweater. Still, it’s their dime. If they want to pull out all the stops for me, who am I to tell them no?

Marin lets herself into the front passenger seat of a black Mercedes, smiling at the driver standing beside the car. He acknowledges me with a nod.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Carter. May I take your bag?”

“Thank you.” I hand it over, and he stows it in the trunk. The driver holds open the door and helps me into the back.

Where I come face-to-face with a man I haven’t seen in five years.

A million questions rush through my brain all at once: How is he here? When did he come back? What is going on? But loudest of all is the one asking how Grant Davies manages to look the same.

It’s unfair. Time should’ve changed him, somehow. Made him less beautiful. But his eyes are still the same bright blue, standing out against his slightly olive complexion. His body is still broad and muscular beneath the dark wool suit and coat he wears.

And his smile... oh, that smile is as sexy as ever.

I’m staring, I realize, but I couldn’t stop if I wanted to — and I don’t. Even after all this time, he is the most stunning man I’ve ever laid eyes on, and looking at him is a pleasure.

I should say something. Ask one of the hundreds of questions I have. But my tongue is tied in knots and I can’t think of a single thing to say that makes sense.

He runs a hand through the silver of his hair. He doesn't need to; it's perfect, just like the rest of him. It's the only sign that he might not be as relaxed as he appears.

Just when I think we might spend this entire trip in silence, he reaches over and grabs my hand. What's he going to do? Shake hands like we're old friends? Give me a fist bump? Apologize?

Grant lifts my hand to his mouth, placing a gentle kiss on my knuckles.

"Hello, Genie," my fiancé says.

## CHAPTER 2



## GRANT

“WHAT ON EARTH—?”

Genie’s face cycles through a parade of emotions at once. Shock, fear, and surprise — and dare I say it, a tiny slice of pleasure? At least before she remembers what happened between us.

Then there’s regret, disappointment, and hurt.

No matter what expression she wears, it’s still the most beautiful face ever seen.

“Grant, is this some sort of game?” Her eyes are resigned. Weary. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

I shrug, trying to seem nonchalant. “Your sister called me. She said you needed a ride after all. So here I am.”

“Dammit, Finola,” Genie mutters. “No wonder she didn’t specify who was coming.” She is right. Finola knows Genie would’ve rejected the idea out of hand. I thought it would be easier for her to accept a ride from me if it felt like something spur of the moment. As if it just happened.

Except, of course, that I’ve been planning this for weeks.

“Wait. You’re behind FLB Trust?” Genie’s face is stricken. “Marin works for you?”

For a moment, I misunderstand her words. It sounded like she said *marriage works for you?*

I was ready to go down on one knee and say *Yes. As long as it’s with you, yes. Only ever with you.*

Which would've been extremely awkward. She was referring to Marin, the very capable woman who helped arrange all this. Not confessing her undying love for me.

“Not exclusively for me. But yes, FLB Trust is her employer, and I am part of the company.”

Genie leans back in her seat and is silent the rest of the way to the hotel. She can't escape me, but she turns her body toward the window and stares out at the city we used to call home. All right, then. That body language is pretty clear. Message received.

When we reach the hotel, Ted, the driver, gets out. He hands her luggage and mine over to the valet before opening Genie's door. I exit the vehicle and follow her into the hotel lobby.

I had Marin book rooms here at Hotel D, in the heart of downtown Portland. It's one of my favorite places in the city. The lobby is stunning, with striking old-world woodwork, and a William Morris-style wallpaper frieze near the ceiling. This place oozes power, and wealth, and old-fashioned glamour. But the way they're all decorated for the winter holidays takes it up another level. Both of us stop and stare at the transformation.

The green, cream and bronze color scheme is much more formal than the rainbow of salt dough ornaments and multicolored tinsel we had growing up, but it's nice to look at. The tree must be at least fifteen feet tall, and generous swags of garland punctuated with creamy white bows are wrapped around the staircase in the lobby. Soft classical versions of Christmas carols play in the background.

The elegant setting suits Genie. Even in her casual wear, she looks perfectly at home. I place a hand on her shoulder. She flinches. Desperation makes a knot in my gut. Have I gone about this all wrong? Did I ruin whatever slim chance I had to get Genie back?

“Yes?” Impatience threads through her voice. If this were a normal interview, I might be concerned as to what that says about her temperament. In this case, having just discovered



that her ex-fiancé basically tricked her into coming back to town, she deserves all the slack.

“Would you please meet me at the hotel restaurant? I’d like to discuss... all this.”

She looks at me, scanning my face for something. Probably a sign of the man I used to be. The man she loved, once upon a time. I don’t know if she finds it, but she nods.

“Thank you. Is seven o’clock good?”

She glances at her watch, confused. It’s just after noon. It’s clear Genie doesn’t understand why I’m putting off our meeting until tonight, but she shrugs. She doesn’t want to ask and I don’t want to spill the secret just yet.

“Seven is fine. I’ll see you there.”

We look at each other again. It’s been too long. My eyes have been starved of the sight of her for five long years. Now that she’s here, they can’t get enough. Her gleaming dark hair shimmers next to the smooth gold of her skin. Her brown eyes are deep and endless, and those fierce cheekbones ... I could write poetry about her cheekbones. Knowing me, I probably did.

I don’t dare think about the tender curves of her body. The barest memory of them is enough to drive me crazy with need.

“Right.” Genie shakes herself as if coming out of a trance. “See you then.”

She abruptly turns and walks away. Too desperate for the sight of her to look away, I watch her check herself in. The easy smile she bestows on the gentleman at the front desk. I’d give my left arm to have that directed my way. I hope to earn back that smile after this week. Starting with the surprise I’ve set up for her in her hotel room.

A call from Marin disrupts my thoughts.

“Yes, Marin?” I find a quiet corner of the lobby. I’m frankly shocked that there is one during this very busy season.

“Has she told you to go to hell yet?” The amusement in my assistant’s voice is clear. I’m pretty sure she’s seconds away

from a full-on cackle.

“I know you think this is a bad idea. You’ve said so many times in many ways. But I have to try.”

“Grant, I’m trying to keep you from destroying my chances of recruiting the best candidate I’ve found. I’ve had multiple recommendations for her from some of the smartest people I know. People who never vouch for anyone unless they are one million percent on board.”

“I know, I know.” I’ve read the messages from Marin’s contacts. Genie is deeply admired by her peers in the nonprofit world.

“I can’t lie,” she continues. “I’m worried that your little ‘I want you back’ scheme will interfere with FLB Trust’s potential success. It’s feeling a little desperate, G.”

Her teasing tone makes me smile. “I think this level of smack talk is much more likely to harm your personal success.”

“I’m not worried.” She snorts. “You know perfectly well there’s no one else who’d have been willing to go to the ends of the earth to get you set up for this week. You have nothing to complain about.”

“So true, Marin. All the way across the Columbia Bridge. What was that, thirty minutes of travel?”

She huffs in feigned annoyance. “Fine. The metaphorical ends of the earth. Anyway, I’m simply calling to let you know that I’m done. All the arrangements are ready. I’ve emailed you the details — and I wish you luck.”

The sudden sincerity in her voice hits me hard. I clear my throat to push away the emotion.

“Thank you, Marin. Thank you. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Be grateful you don’t have to find out. Goodbye, and don’t try to call me. I’ll be in Bemidji.”

“Ice fishing with your dad again?”

“Yep. He’s determined to catch more bluegills than me. This year, I might let him,” she chuckles. “Take care, Grant.”

“Merry Christmas, Marin. See you in the New Year.”

I blow out a breath. I need this to work. Marin might be right about me sounding desperate, but I don’t care. If it means having Genie back in my life, I’ll take any chance, no matter how slim. I will do whatever it takes.

Including playing Santa Claus.

# CHAPTER 3



## GENIE

I HAVE ONE PRESSING QUESTION: ON A SCALE OF ONE TO TEN, IF I murder my big sister, just how badly will it ruin Christmas?

After leaving Grant in the hotel lobby, I check in and take the elevator upstairs.

Honestly, I cannot believe Finola asked him to pick me up. She knows how miserable I was when our relationship ended. Why would she ask my ex, of all people, to come get me?

Though I have to admit, I'm a tiny bit impressed that he and his assistant picked me up in a limo. It was overkill, but it was also flattering. It said I was a big deal to them, and that feels pretty darn good.

I sigh. If only Grant wasn't involved in this job offer. Then I'd trust it more. Right now, I'm wondering if this isn't an elaborate scheme to get me to move back home. Something to remind me of how much I love the Pacific Northwest, and how much I miss it when I'm gone.

Finola has made no secret of the fact that she wants me here. She and I have gotten closer in the last few years. It would be wonderful to be in the same town again. She even offered me a job with her company, Comfort Creek.

I refused. Not that I don't want to come back. But it's got to be for the right role. Finola's offer was sweet, but impractical. My heart has always been in the nonprofit world. That's where I've shined, and that's where I feel like I'm making a real difference.

But my sister seldom takes no for an answer — and she’s not above using my ex-fiancé as bait. Finola is the only person who knows that I still have a thing for Grant, despite the way things ended between us. She would happily dangle him in front of me like a prize if it meant I returned to Portland. What I don’t understand is why Grant would go along with it.

I get off the elevator on the eighth floor and turn left. When I reach room 826, I snap a picture and send it to my mother. She’s always said it’s her lucky number. When she and Dad were house hunting all those years ago, she even made him find a property with that address. I bet she’ll be pleased.

As I let myself into the room, I hear the ding of a message being received. That’s funny. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear that my mother’s phone is right here —

“Surprise!” A chorus of voices shouts. I reel in shock. My mother and father, as well as my sister Finola and her boyfriend, Leo, are standing in my hotel room. Even my grandmother is here.

My parents instantly pull me into a suffocating hug.

“What about Mrs. Kambara’s bao?” I ask over Dad’s shoulder.

Mom laughs and holds out her hand in my sister’s direction. “I told you she’d believe it.”

Finola shrugs, handing over a five-dollar bill. Mom looks completely smug as she tucks it into the pocket of her dress.

“All right, Mother,” Finola says. “No need to brag. I admit, you know best.”

Mom’s smile gets even bigger as she turns to my dad. “Richard, please tell me you recorded that. I will need proof in the future when she denies she ever said any such thing.”

Our grandmother —our lao lao— loudly clears her throat.

“I mean second best, of course, lao lao,” Finola corrects, kissing her on the cheek.

“That’s what I thought,” Grandmother says with a wink.

“It’s so great to see you all,” I interrupt, “but why is everyone here in my hotel room? I was planning to come to the house.”

Suddenly, no one can meet my gaze. I look from one person to the next. Every one of them — even my lao lao — looks slightly guilty.

“I knew it!” I fold my arms across my chest. “You’ve all got plans! You’re ditching me. Why didn’t you say?”

“To be fair, we weren’t expecting you to come this year,” Finola argues. “As far as we knew, you were staying in New York.”

“There was a screaming deal on tickets to Indonesia back in March.” Leo’s face is almost as red as his hair. “Remember, we asked if you’d want to come along?”

His words jog my memory. I do remember him and Finola inviting me to travel with them. Jakarta sounded amazing, but I couldn’t think of anything I wanted less than to be a third wheel on a romantic trip with my sister and her man.

“When we got married, your mom and I promised to take your grandmother to Hawaii someday,” my dad pipes up. “We’ve been meaning to go ever since you graduated from college, but there was always something happening with the restaurant, or at my university... this is the first time we’ve been able to get away in I don’t know how many years.”

“You’re actually closing the restaurant?” I stare at my mother in shock. That has never happened in all the years of my life.

“No, of course not,” my mother scoffs. “I found some young culinary students who’re studying Cantonese cuisine, and my friend, Nico Serra, agreed to supervise them. Your Grant helped me sort out all the legalities and the red tape.”

My stomach tightens when Mom mentions his name and calls him my Grant. The man is not ‘my’ anything. Not anymore.

Finola’s sharp eyes catch the look on my face. She claps her hands together briskly.

“Long story short,” she declares, “since we’ll all be gone, today is Carter Family Christmas!”

I look around the living area of the hotel suite. I was so excited to see my family I didn’t even notice the decor, but now, I’m realizing the entire place is beautifully decked out for the holiday. Creamy white poinsettias adorn the tables. A live tree dominates the living room. It’s covered with the hotel’s green, cream and gold ornaments, and accessorized with a cream garland. A pile of presents sits beneath it, including the packages I sent to my parents’ place.

Leo presses a few buttons on his phone, and a jazzy rendition of “My Favorite Things” pipes through the suite’s sound system. Dad bartends, serving up wine and cocktails for us, while Grandmother and Mom open the dishes in a miniature version of the restaurant’s buffet.

Just like at home, the food is a mix of American and Chinese dishes. Mom’s brought my favorite classics— bao stuffed with barbecued pork, crispy roast duck, spicy bok choy, candied sweet potatoes — as well as roasted turkey breast, garlicky green beans, and maple roasted carrots. In a nod to Dad’s midwestern roots, she’s even made chocolate peppermint pie. And while Leo doesn’t cook, his family traditions are represented, too. He’s brought along his mother’s Yorkshire puddings and a stunning selection of chocolate truffles made by his brother Jake, a chocolatier.

Even though we’re a few days early, it really does feel like we’ve magically fast forwarded to the 25<sup>th</sup>. We eat ourselves silly, watch a ridiculous Christmas movie, and FaceTime with our cousins in Beijing. Then it’s present opening time.

My family is thrilled with the coordinating Christmas sweaters I bought them. Cheesy, I know, but my mom is always after us to do a group photo. With us girls being long out of the house, and me living in a different state, we almost never manage to be in the same place at the same time wearing appropriate gear. Since we’re all together now, we make the most of it, taking a bunch of cheesy “us-sies.” We even re-create one of Mom’s favorite family photos. Finola and I



stand on either side of our grandmother, making silly faces into the camera while she looks glamorous and unbothered.

The family's gifts to me are suspiciously coordinated: a stunning red silk shawl from my grandmother, a black dress from my parents, and a gorgeous red clutch and heels from my sister and Leo. This is definitely my sister's handiwork. I can't complain. It's fancier than I need in my day-to-day life as director of a children's charity, but I will find some place to wear it.

While the rest of the family enjoys a second helping of pie, I steal my sister away on a tour of the hotel suite.

"Finnie, why do I feel like Cinderella getting ready for the ball?"

"Ooh! Do I get to be one of the little mice who helps her clean? And is lao lao your fairy godmother? She does look good in a cape."

"Be serious, Finola." I gave her my sternest glare. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing." My sister blinks about fifteen times in a row. It's a sure sign she's lying.

"Finola..."

"Okay, look. I know you have mixed feelings about Grant right now—"

"Stop. Stop right there. If you're about to plead his case to me, don't."

"Gigi. Hear me out. Please."

I fold my arms across my chest and take a seat on the enormous king-sized bed.

"Go for it. I'd love to hear how he managed to win you over."

My sister pushes her bangs back. She slips out of her hoodie, revealing a sequined red crop top that says "naughty" across the front. When she notices me looking at it, she swipes her hand across the fabric. The sequins flip over to green and

the top now reads “nice.” I laugh, but I’m still waiting for an explanation.

“Last year, my partners and I were fundraising for Comfort Creek. Looking for just the right investor to partner with. During that process, I ran into Grant. He immediately offered unrestricted funding.”

I stare at her in open-mouthed shock. While I work in the nonprofit world, even I know that unrestricted funding is a dream for small companies like hers.

“Was there a catch?”

“Nope.” Finola shrugs, flopping down beside me. “My partners and I went over the deal, top to bottom, and our lawyers scrutinized it with a fine-tooth comb. It was on the up and up. So the three of us met with him to discuss his interest in our company.”

“What was the angle?” I ask. “No attempt at a hostile takeover or anything like that?”

She shakes her head. “We thought of that. Lane asked him flat-out what his interest was. We sell housewares. Vibrators. Salt pigs. Not exactly the products a hedge fund guy dreams about.”

I get up and pace. Talking about Grant makes me nervous. Needing something to do with my hands, I visit the beverage station in one corner of the room. I make us both a cup of hot chocolate, tossing a generous handful of mini marshmallows into Finola’s drink. Those are her favorite.

“So what did he say?”

“That he was changing direction. He told us that one of the things he promised himself at the start of his career was that in this new direction, he would do something to level the playing field.”

Setting aside my personal feelings about Grant, the story is consistent with everything I know about him. He was raised by a single mom who owned her own business. He saw how she struggled: the banks that wouldn’t give her a loan, how many so-called investors asked her out under the guise of business

meetings. Grant swore that when he got the chance, he wouldn't make those same mistakes.

“In the end, we chose to work with someone else,” my sister says. “But Grant and I kept in touch. I've watched how he operates. I've spoken to people he's funded or not. Believe it or not, I've even talked to women he dates. He's still a decent guy.”

“I appreciate that, I do —”

“Hold on, Gigi.” Fin's eyes sparkle, almost as bright as the sequins on her shirt. “I'm not done.”

I sit back down. Then I get up and start pacing again. I want to hear what she's going to say next, but I'm dreading it at the same time.

“He's also still madly in love with you.”

“I —” I stop short. This is a leap.

“How do you think we got early Christmas together so quickly?”

“No, I refuse to believe that. He's — he's just sweetening the pot for the job offer,” I stammer.

My sister gives me a look of pity. “Yes, his company is offering you this job. But this is more personal than that.”

I sit down heavily on the bed, leaning on my sister's shoulder. Is she on to something? My stomach roils with emotion. Finola ruffles my hair.

“He wants you back. You need to decide what you're going to do about it.”

# CHAPTER 4



## GRANT

THE MOMENT I SEE GENIE WALKING ACROSS THE RESTAURANT, I know I've made a terrible mistake.

I thought I could play it cool. Remain stoic in the presence of the woman I've loved for ten years. Watching her glide across the room looking like a goddess, I realize how foolish that assumption was.

She wears a green silk dress with an asymmetrical neckline. A long sleeve covers her right arm, while the other side is bare. She's pulled back her dark hair into a sleek, low ponytail that drapes over her left shoulder.

It's been a long time, but I can still feel those silken strands slide through my fingers. I remember how she used to gather her hair in a loose bunch, then she'd shove me down on our bed and straddle me. She'd lean down to kiss me, letting her locks cascade around us like a dark, shimmering waterfall.

I breathe deep and remind myself to slow down. Genie and I are so far from that level of closeness. Doesn't matter that it's seared into my brain like a brand. I can't rush her back into my arms, no matter how much I want her.

I stand up as she approaches the table. From this vantage point, I can better appreciate the way the dress skims perfectly over her generous curves, and the slight twist in her hips from those strappy heels.

I wonder if she still gets that Christmas pedicure on her toes this time of year. Every December, she'd have one foot done in red polish, the other in green, with delicate little

snowflakes on each big toe for extra pizzazz. She pretended to be annoyed with me when I told her how cute it was, but secretly, she loved that I loved it.

“I’m glad you agreed to this,” I say when she reaches the table. What is the etiquette here? Does one hug the ex-fiancée when meeting them for dinner? Shake hands? Neither of those feels right. Better to let her come to me.

“How could I not?” She offers me a tentative smile. “Especially when you arranged such a lovely surprise for me this afternoon. Thank you.”

“It was absolutely my pleasure. I know how much your family means to you.”

The server arrives, advising that tonight’s courses are chef’s choice. We’re both happy with that option. Chef Carlo is a legend.

I order a hot toddy, lifting an eyebrow when Genie does the same.

“As I recall, whiskey isn’t really your thing.”

“Didn’t use to be,” she replies. “But it’s been a long time. Things change.”

“And some things don’t.” I reach across the table and take her hand. She squeezes mine briefly and pulls back. Inwardly, I laugh at myself. So much for my big idea of letting her come to me. I want this woman too damn much to play it cool.

“Grant.” She lifts her eyes to mine. They are wide and vulnerable, appealing to every protective instinct I have. “I need you to tell me the truth.”

“Of course. Anything I can.”

“Why did you bring me here, really?” She tilts her head to the side and scoots closer to me. Her perfume wafts over to me, the sweet scent of roses and citrus teasing my nose. I take a greedy gulp of her scent before I answer.

“For two reasons. One, I’m part of a company that needs an extraordinary project director. Someone who understands the nonprofit world, yet has a foot in the corporate sphere as

well. You come highly recommend by the smartest people we know.”

“That’s nice to hear.” Despite the faint blush staining her cheeks, she holds my gaze. She’s gotten better at accepting compliments since I last saw her.

“Talk to me about your vision. What precisely would I be expected to do? Marin told me FLB wanted someone to build a charitable giving program from the ground up.”

“It’s true.”

“What specifically would that entail? Are there guidelines you’d want me to follow? Are there any preferred organizations? Are we soliciting funds, or are we a private foundation? What is FLB’s —?”

I hold up a hand. She pauses.

“That’s just it. There aren’t any guidelines. We need you to create them.”

“You want to give me carte blanche to build out this nonprofit?” She gives me a skeptical look. “How much money are we talking about here?”

“I can’t tell you.”

Her eyebrows slide up, and her expression turns incredulous.

“I can’t give you the specifics until certain pieces fall into place. But I can tell you it’s a private foundation, and the endowment will be substantial.”

“How many numbers are on the left side of the decimal?” Genie asks. I open my mouth to protest when she adds, “Ballpark?”

I can work with that. “More than seven, less than twelve.”

She blinks twice. Fair. We’re talking about a massive amount of money. I wish I could tell her everything right now, but I have my reasons for holding back.

“That’s a lot of money. “Genie leans back, deliberately taking a relaxed pose. “And you’re going to just give it to me

to manage as I see fit?”

“Basically.”

“I don’t know who’s crazier, you for offering or me for considering it.”

I laugh, but inside I’m doing cartwheels. She’s considering it. That’s more of a commitment than I thought I’d get from her tonight.

“I’d feel the same if I were in your shoes.” The server returns with our cocktails. I take a slug of mine, enjoying the soothing warmth. “But I want — no, we *need* someone with your expertise to make the decisions. That’s what we’ll be paying you for. Assuming you take the role.”

Our dinner arrives. We keep talking, laying out the basic parameters of the role. Genie draws out some ideas: the need for a Board of Directors, a review committee to vet the organizations we partner with, the number of staff she would want in an organization like this one. I am listening, but I’m also having the time of my life. I forgot how fun it is to talk to her like this. Genie is never more impressive than when she’s animated about one of her passions.

Or more beautiful. I can’t stop staring at her.

“What do you think, Grant?”

The server stands silently beside Genie. They both look at me expectantly.

“I think... Yes?”

Genie bites her lip, holding back a grin.

“I’ll stick with the pots de creme. He’ll have the crème brûlée.”

“Of course, Madame,” the man replies. He and another member of the staff whisk away the remnants of our dinner, refresh the cutlery, and vanish in a matter of moments.

“Sorry,” I apologize. “I got distracted.”

“By what? Was my discussion of fiduciary duty that boring?”



I lick my lips, nervous. “Of course not. You could never bore me. I’d listen to you recite the alphabet.”

She blushes. “Flatterer.”

I’ll let her think I’m just flattering her if she likes. It’s probably for the best. If she knew how serious I was, it might scare her away.

Dessert is presented to us with a flourish. My crème brûlée and her pots de creme both look incredible.

I take my spoon and tap the crisp, caramelized shell. It shatters in the most satisfying way. I slowly slide my spoon beneath the crust, gathering a generous scoop of the creamy custard underneath.

I hold it out to Genie.

She leans forward, placing her hand over mine. Together, we guide my spoon toward her lips. The creamy white of the dessert is a shock against the vivid red of her mouth. My cock throbs when her lips part, and her delicate pink tongue sneaks out to lick the spoon.

“Thank you,” she says. Her voice is husky. Charged. I put down the spoon and push the ramekin to the side.

“Maybe it’s time we discussed the second reason I brought you here.”

Genie shifts her own dish out of the way. Her face is carefully controlled. Neutral. Except I’ve known her for most of our lives, and I can tell from the set of her mouth that she’s bracing for impact. I take a deep breath and dive in.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, Gigi,” I declare, using her old nickname. “But I’m an idiot.”

Startled, a laugh escapes from her lips before she can contain it. She pinches her mouth closed, but there’s no hiding her bright smile.

“You realize that’s the least effective sales pitch ever? Especially coming from a man who just asked me to move across the country to work for him.”

The rueful expression forming on my face is likely a mirror of hers. There's no arguing with her facts.

I rub a hand across the back of my neck. God, I wish I had a script for this. I'm flying blind, hoping sincerity will help me make my case.

"It's the truth." My throat tightens. "Leaving you was a terrible mistake."

"Was it a mistake?" Her eyes are fierce.

"One hundred percent," I answer without hesitation. "I should never have given up on us."

"But you did," she says softly. Something complicated moves across her face. "And maybe that was for the best."

"I don't believe that." I can't. Not the way I've spent years missing everything about her.

Genie takes a sip of water. I can't help staring at the line of her throat as she swallows. Every cell in my body wants to reach out and stroke that gorgeous stretch of skin. I clench my hands tight to contain the impulse.

"We've both been successful in the last few years," she points out. "You, especially, from the looks of things. Putting me up at the poshest hotel in town, wining and dining me in style? Would any of this have happened if we had stayed together?"

"I can't answer that, Genie. But I do know that I have thought about you, and regretted leaving you, every day for the last five years."

"Oh, Grant..." She reaches across the table, covering my hand with her own. Her eyes are bright, and this time she doesn't let go. I kiss the back of her hand.

"I swore to myself that if there was ever the slightest possibility of being with you again, I would do everything in my power to convince you to take me back." I stroke the back of her hand with my thumb, drawing lazy circles on her skin.

"Let me convince you."

She twists her mouth and raises a doubtful brow.

I barrel on. “Please. Give me three days. Let me try.”

She forgets to protect herself for a moment. It’s not much. A tiny gasp. A flash of hope in her eyes. But it’s all I need. Maybe, just maybe, she wants me back, too.

Genie swallows hard. “And after that?”

“After that, if you don’t agree that there’s still something here, walk away. No harm, no foul, no strings attached.”

“And the job?”

“The job is yours,” I admit, “regardless of what happens between us. Name your price.”

Marin will be annoyed with me for handing over a blank check, but I see no reason to play games. Genie is the candidate we want. Everyone agreed on that before I invited her to Portland.

She’s quiet as she contemplates my words, which makes me anxious. My first instinct is to keep pushing. Desperation makes me want to offer more reasons, to push until she gives in. To persuade her with the force of my will. Experience, though, tells me to hold my peace. I’ve laid out the choice, and the ball is in her court. Pushing will make her balk at taking this seriously.

So I wait.

“Let me get this straight. You want three days to — to woo me?” she asks. “And no matter what I decide about the personal side of our relationship, I get the job.”

I nod. She looks at me in that searching way of hers, like she’s trying to figure out what’s the catch. Ironic, really. There’s never been a catch with her. I always wanted Genie too much to hold back. Always needed to prove myself worthy of her. Getting a second chance to do that is everything to me.

“Only if you do something for me first.” Her words are soft but clear.

“Name it.”

“Kiss me.”

# CHAPTER 5



## GENIE

FOR A SECOND, GRANT LOOKS SHOCKED. GOOD. TURNABOUT is fair play, and he's had me on the ropes since I got here.

“When would you like me to kiss you? Right now?” he tries to sound nonchalant. He almost manages it.

But I know him better than anyone, or at least I did. And I can tell he's not quite as confident as he seems. Somehow, that makes me want him more.

“Not here in this restaurant. I can think of a better place than that.”

He swallows hard at the implication. I'm holding back a cocky smile, but only just.

We finish our desserts, although I don't think either of us tastes a thing. Grant whisks me out of the restaurant, tossing a hurried “Charge it to my room, please” at our server. I am gob smacked. I have literally never heard anyone say that in real life before.

In the elevator up to my room, every part of Grant's body is tense. He's poised for action as if I asked him to do a base jump, instead of something as simple — and as complicated — as a kiss.

We reach the room, and I turn to him.

“You remembered.” I gesture at the discreet signage. “Mom's lucky number.”

“I remember everything,” he says, and my heart leaps in my chest. “Everything about you, everything about us. It was all I had to hold on to after...”

He winces, like he hadn't quite meant to say that much. I get it. If we could make our way back to each other after all this time, it would be a Christmas miracle. Although right now, it feels more like a sugar-induced fantasy.

“May I?” Grant holds out his hand for my key card. Surely, he's got to be joking. But when I scan his face, he is absolutely serious. I pass it over with a smile. If he wants to try on chivalry for size, I won't argue with him.

He unlocks the door and opens it, waits for me to go through. As I pass by him, he takes a deep breath and smiles broadly.

“I love that you still wear that scent.”

The warmth in his eyes makes me blush. On our first Christmas together, Grant had given me this perfume with a note saying, “a beautiful gift for the most beautiful woman I know.” After our engagement ended, I kept the note tucked in the back of a drawer until it didn't hurt to look at it anymore.

The room has been transformed since I left. All the Christmas decorations are still up, but the dishes and food have been swept away like they never were there. More of Grant's doing, I'm sure. As was the car service that picked up my family and delivered them to the airport. All very thoughtful, very practical, and very Grant.

“Can I offer you a drink?” I ask. Truthfully, I'm not even sure what I have to offer.

“I'm fine,” Grant says softly.

His eyes roam over my body, heating my skin with just a glance. Beneath his gaze, my breasts grow heavy, and my skin feels too tight. I look away, unable to meet his eyes.

Grant drapes himself on the sofa and pats the seat beside him. “Come here,” he orders.

I want to resist, but the command in his voice thrills me to the core. I take a seat.

He unbuckles the straps on my high heels, carefully setting them on the floor one at a time. Then he takes my feet in his large, strong hands and starts to massage them. I moan in grateful bliss and immediately relax into his touch.

He takes his time, rubbing my feet, ankles, and calves with firm strokes.

“Yum. You’re still so good at this,” I murmur.

Grant makes a noise somewhere between a laugh and a bark. “You are easily satisfied.”

It’s true. I’ve always been a sucker for a good massage. Or even a mediocre one. But Grant is the only person who has ever put me in this state of semi-conscious bliss.

I moan as his hands coast up and up, past the back of my knees, and dig into my thighs. It’s been a long day of travel and I am more than a little worn out. I should put a stop to this and go to bed now. But I’m so relaxed on this couch and Grant’s hands feel so very good...

“Are you comfortable?” His voice is tense.

“Mm-hmm.” I’m positively boneless. He gently shifts my dress higher. This feels like *déjà vu*. So many nights, we ended up like this, sprawled across the couch in our tiny apartment. I smile lazily at the memory. Inevitably, we’d end up making love right then and there.

“Genie?”

“Yes?” I make my way up to a sitting position. The sight of him between my legs makes my pussy throb.

“Do you still want that kiss?” he asks. His voice is deep. Urgent.

Grant’s hands are on the inside of my thighs. I feel them tremble with need. If I say yes, I have no doubt that he will turn my world inside out.

“I do.”



Grant shifts the thin fabric of my thong to the side and presses his mouth to my pussy. I make a strangled, desperate noise as he licks and teases and strums my body like a guitar. I thrash wildly beneath his onslaught, alternately gripping his hair, holding on to his ears and calling his name.

He is relentless in his pursuit of my pleasure. Grant uses his lips and tongue and thumbs to work me over, bringing me just to the edge of pleasure again and again until he finally twists two fingers deep inside me while gently sucking my clit. I call his name in a long, keening cry as my orgasm explodes from the depths of my soul.



A DELICATE GONG SOUNDS SOMEWHERE NEAR MY RIGHT EAR. My eyes peel themselves open and I find myself staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling.

Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I reach for the very gentle alarm clock, with its lovely soft chime, and turn it off. Leisurely, I sprawl across the bed, rubbing myself on the sheets like a cat. The thread count on these must be in the thousands.

I check the time. Usually I'm up at 5:30, but I didn't bother setting an alarm. It's probably just being on the West Coast. Except that it's 8:30 here, which means I've slept in for three hours. Add in the time difference between New York and here for an additional three hours to my total.

I never sleep this long. Goodness. Whatever I did last night needs to happen again. That was —

Memories of last night flood into my brain. Me asking Grant for a kiss. Him giving it to me in the hottest way possible. The silver of his hair gleaming in the light as he worked between my thighs. Me calling out his name as wave after wave of pleasure hit me.

Grant carrying me down the hall to the bedroom, and the feel of his broad chest as I clung to him. The way he so gently helped me out of my dress and tucked me in.

A knock sounds at the door of my suite. Oh, crap. I throw on one of the hotel robes, hurry to the entrance, and look through the peephole.

Of course it's him.

Okay. I can do this. I just need to be cool. I did sort of agree to spend the next three days with him if he kissed me. I should have known he wouldn't play fair. Though I certainly can't complain about the way he completed the assignment.

I paste on a smile and open the door.

"Morning came all too soon, eh?" He breezes past me with a chipper grin. Oh. It's going to be one of those mornings with an annoyingly cheerful Grant. If the phrase 'morning person' is in the dictionary, his face is next to it.

"Mm," I grunt, rubbing my temples.

He takes one look at me and gives a knowing grin. "Oh, I see. It's grumpy Genie day."

"I am not grumpy," I say, in a tone of voice that immediately proves me a liar. "Fine. Maybe I am somewhat happiness challenged before coffee."

Grant laughs and moves into the kitchen. "Why don't you hop in the shower? I'll make you a cup and we can discuss the agenda for today."

"The agenda?"

"Of course," he confirms. A cocky smile lights up his face. I ignore the way my nipples tighten when he does. "For day one of my quest to win you back."

I stare at him open-mouthed. He's serious about this. The man probably has it all laid out on spreadsheets and flow charts. I wander off to the shower, shaking my head.

Twenty minutes later, I feel almost human again. Taking my cue from Grant's outfit, I've put on a long sleeve t-shirt, my favorite comfortable cardigan and jeans. The look in his eye says he approves.

I gratefully accept the cup he slides across the counter. Too desperate to be polite, I snatch it up and take too quick a sip — and swallow it just as quickly, massaging my throat as the heat blazes down my throat.

“Someone’s a little too eager. Should I leave you two alone?” Grant teases.

“You know coffee and I share a forever love,” I reply. “It’s the one thing that never lets me down.”

A pinched expression quickly crosses Grant’s face before he smooths it over. My conscience twitches. It’s not that I’m wrong, but I didn’t mean to toss that emotional grenade at him.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “That was harsh.”

“Nope. Regrets are not on the agenda. Today is all sweep you off your feet all the time.”

“Grant, shouldn’t we talk —”

He holds up a hand to interrupt my words. “And no negativity about my process. You agreed I could try to win you back. This is me trying.”

I lean back and relax. That’s fair. I’m going to give him what he asked for, even if it kills me.

“What’s on the agenda?”

“A little mountain climbing.”

It takes a moment before I get it.

One night, about two years into our relationship, we discovered that even though we’d both grown up here, neither of us had visited Mount Hood.

“Soon!” We’d say. “We’re gonna go mountain climbing.”

Neither of us meant it literally. Mountain climbing became a convenient shorthand for taking time off to be with each other. But that time off never happened. We were always so busy trying to build our careers, and there was always another meeting, or more travel for work, or some networking that just had to be done.

I shake my head, thinking of all the wasted time. We put so many things before our relationship. And then we broke up, and had all the time in the world, but not each other.

“Gigi?” A tiny frown appears between Grant’s brows. “Are you up for it?”

“Yeah, yeah. Of course. Let’s do it.” I flash him a quick smile and push away the memories. Time to focus on the here and now.

I’m going to let Grant have his three days. What can it hurt? My family is out of town, and my friends back in New York have made other plans. Spending time with a gorgeous man who wants to please me is hardly a difficult choice.

We can have fun together. We’ll get this attraction out of our systems, then go back to our own lives. And this time, when it’s over between us, our story will end with fond memories instead of broken hearts.

After all, it’s Christmas. A few days of no-strings-attached pleasure are the perfect gift.

The drive up to Mount Hood is the most fun I’ve ever had in a car. Grant gets lets me DJ — which means 80s and 90’s dance tunes the whole way — and not once does he make fun of my terrible singing voice. When we’re not rocking out to the bands of our youth, we catch up on the last five years.

Grant left Portland and went to a tech firm in Colorado. He stayed there for a couple of years before transferring to the Connecticut office, where he’s been ever since.

As for me, I moved to New York soon after he left. The children’s literacy organization I worked for offered me a role at the head office. I was desperate for something to keep my mind off my broken engagement, and they needed someone with a killer work ethic and no personal life. It was a win-win.

Lately, though, I’ve got itchy feet. I need to take some time and consider my next steps. Although Grant’s offer is tempting, I don’t know if I’m ready for the job at FLB. Professionally, I know I could handle it, but how would it work if I turn him down? Grant says it’s fine to take the role

even if things don't work between the two of us, but can I trust his promises?

When we arrive at Mount Meadows, I realize what it must be like to be a rock star. It's like magic. Grant has a quick chat with someone at the entrance, and we are whisked away for the VIP treatment.

We get a tour of the facility, and a personal shopper who takes us to the ski shops where we get fitted from head to toe with all brand new outerwear, sunglasses and ski boots. Afterward, two of the instructors meet with us. Grant decides to ski, while I try snowboarding. After choosing the proper equipment, we spend the next few hours in private lessons.

By the end of the session, I'm just about able to make it down the bunny slope without falling over, though I'm lapped several times by a group of giddy ten-year-olds.

The two of us retreat to the restaurant, where we nurse hot toddies and our sore hips.

"That is the most fun I've ever had outside," I say.

"Better than the time we almost got caught messing around in your parents' backyard?"

"Fair. The best time with my clothes on, then," I correct.

"That's more like it." Grant's eyes sparkle with laughter. When he leans in to graze my lips with his own, I don't pull away.

This all feels so easy. Like the years have fallen away, and we were never apart. Like we finally made the time to be together, just the way we always wanted.

I don't trust that feeling.

And as much as I wish I could, I don't trust Grant.

# CHAPTER 6



## GRANT

I SEE THE MOMENT I LOSE GENIE AGAIN.

She's always been easy to read. At least for me. Even when her body language is cool and collected, her eyes always tell me her secrets.

Right now, they're telling me that bringing up our history is a risk. Because while we have a lot of good memories together, they inevitably lead back to how I broke her heart.

I'm trying my hardest to replace those bad memories with new good ones. I hope it's enough to earn a second chance.

It has to be.

A dark-haired woman approaches our table. She looks vaguely familiar, although I'm picturing her with a tan instead of the pale, rosy-cheeked thing she's got going on today. I'm usually good with names, but I'm drawing a blank in her case.

Genie looks over at me, curiosity evident. I stand up when the woman reaches our table.

"You're Grant Davies, right?" Her smile is tentative.

I hold out my hand. "That's right. I'm afraid I don't recall your—"

"We haven't met yet," she explains. "Although you've probably seen my class picture? We sent it in with our application."

Yes! The memory snaps into place. This woman sent a proposal to my firm and included a picture of her fourth-grade

class.

She turns to Genie. “I’m Violet Glass. I’m a teacher at Swanson Elementary. I think you might have run into some of my students during your snowboarding lesson.”

Genie laughs in delight. “I did, indeed. They’re amazing. They definitely kept me from bragging too much about my new skills.”

“They keep me humble all the time,” Violet agrees. “I always say teaching elementary school kids is not for the weak.”

She turns back to me. “I’m sorry to interrupt your time together, but I wanted to thank you. My students don’t often get opportunities to do things like this. It means a lot that you’re sponsoring season passes for them.”

“Truly, it’s my pleasure.” I project a cool façade, but inside I’m squirming. Genie isn’t the only one who has trouble taking a compliment.

“The class is making a giant thank-you card for you. I was planning to send it in the mail, but I would love for someone to come pick it up in person, maybe talk to the kids about careers in an interesting way...?”

“We’ll make that happen,” I promise.

We say our goodbyes and watch Violet return to her class.

“Where were we?” I say. I am suddenly very interested in the menu. It’s just a coincidence that it keeps me from making eye contact with Genie.

“I don’t know where you were,” she says, with an amused lilt in her voice, “but I was enjoying watching you squirm.”

“Ms. Glass chose her moment well. It was pretty clever of her to ask me for a school visit in front of the woman I’m obviously trying to impress.”

“Or she could tell you’re a soft touch who will do anything to help kids.”

I give Genie a dirty look. She laughs in delight.



“Anyway,” I point out, determined not to talk about me anymore, “this is the kind of thing you can make happen if you take the job.”

“I like the way you deflect attention away from your good deeds with the promise of more good deeds.”

“It’s hard to look like a dashing romantic hero when you’re busy being embarrassed,” I complain. Genie rubs her index finger and thumb together, like she’s playing the world’s smallest violin for me.

We share a quick lunch, then get back out on the slopes for another couple of hours. Afterward, I drive us over to a cluster of cabins just outside of Government Camp.

“What are we doing here?”

“We’re checking in.”

“I know I just said this, but what?”

“We’re staying here for the night.”

“What?” Genie looks confused. “What about the hotel in town?”

I shrug. “What about it? We will go back to those rooms tomorrow.”

“What about my clothes?”

“Relax. It’s taken care of. Now wait here, please.” Genie shakes her head at me, but she does as she’s told.

She’s clearly skeptical. I smile to myself. She doesn’t know how efficient Marin can be.

I run into the lobby of the main hotel and trade the keys to my vehicle for the keys to our cabin. The woman at the front desk takes the keys to the SUV and offers to drive us over to our cabin, but I decline. I’m ready to be alone with my fiancée.

“Ex-fiancée,” I say aloud. I need the reminder. We’ve made good progress today, but good progress doesn’t mean she’s mine just yet.

I make my way back to the SUV where Genie waits for me. She sits quietly on the passenger side, resting her eyes. She looks so peaceful. I almost don't want to disturb her.

"I can feel you staring, Grant." Her smile stretches from ear to ear. I open the door with an exaggerated flourish.

"Your cabin awaits, my lady," I announce in a terrible British accent. She laughs at my silliness and lets me help her out of the vehicle.

We tromp over to the cabin. Although the inn is busy — the parking lot is full, and I spot a snowshoeing class lining up in front of a different cabin — the other guests are far enough away that it feels like we're alone here. In the waning twilight, all I hear is the two of us crunching through the freshly fallen snow.

"You hungry?" I ask.

"Starving." She loosens the hood of her puffy coat, pushing it back to reveal her dark hair. "I never knew snowboarding would work up such an appetite."

She's looking up at me, smiling. It's the kind of smile she used to give me when we were first dating. The sort of smile that says, *oh, hello. You must be worth keeping around.*

And I'm so busy staring at Genie that I don't notice a slight rise in the ground beneath me until it's too late. The world tilts on its axis, and I find myself lying on my back in the snow.

"Oh, no, Grant! Are you all right?" Genie's face is concerned. She kneels in the snow, reaching for me. I sweep her into my arms and roll over so I'm on top of her. I know it's my imagination with the thick layers of winter clothing between us, but I swear I can feel the softness of her pressed up against me.

"Ahh, you stinker!" She's breathless, and her tone is less stern and more aroused.

Her cheeks are flushed and the long braid of her hair hangs over her shoulder.

“Did you really hurt your— ”

I cut her words off with a kiss. She’s startled, but immediately responds, surging up to meet my lips with her own. She opens for me immediately, and I plunge in, tasting the very essence of her.

We kiss over and over. The sweetness of her mouth on mine turns to raging desire. I start to unzip her jacket. I need to be closer to her, to feel her skin against mine.

“Grant,” she murmurs against my lips, “isn’t there somewhere else we could take this? Somewhere not quite so cold and damp?”

Fair point. I roll off her with a groan. I stand up and then help her off the ground, scooping her into my arms. She squeals in protest.

“You’re not carrying me to the cabin!” She attempts to wiggle out of my arms, but I’ve got her secured.

“Why not?”

“You’ve already done that once on this trip.”

“I don’t mind doing it again. I love having you in my arms.”

“Grant, no.” I can hear that she’s serious. Gently, I put her down.

“What is it?”

Genie ducks her head. She looks everywhere but at me, toying with the end of her braid.

“Genie? Sweetheart. Look at me.” Our eyes meet. The pain in hers takes my breath away.

Oh, shit. I really am an idiot. How could I forget?

I promised her that when we bought our first home, I would carry her over the threshold. Dammit. I hate that I keep bumping up against tender memories for her.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “I’m trying, Grant. I really am. But I can’t forget our past.”

“I know. I don’t want you to forget.” I tug on the end of that braid. “You and I are here to make new memories. Starting with this one.”

I scoop her up again, but this time shift her to my shoulders.

Genie laughs, wobbling a little as she settles in place. “A piggyback ride? Are you kidding me?”

“Humor me.”

She makes a skeptical noise. I can practically feel her rolling her eyes, but she locks her arms around my neck and her legs over my shoulders.

I trudge through the snow, a little slower since I’m carrying her, but it’s an easy trek. She giggles when I exaggerate my movements, zigzagging back and forth. When we reach the cabin, I kneel in the snow, and Genie slides gracefully off my back.

“You ready?” I stomp a few times on the doormat before unlocking the door and holding it open for her. I’m suddenly nervous. I want her to be thrilled.

The last gamble I took worked out better than I could ever have imagined. I hope this one will, too.

She drops a playful curtsy as she enters. Once she sees the room, Genie stops in her tracks.

“Oh, Grant,” she whispers. “This is wonderful.”

I have to agree. The cozy log cabin is decorated for Christmas. There’s a red and green theme this time. A fire roars merrily. And the table is set up with a bottle of bubbly chilling in an ice bucket, two glasses, and two domed platters.

“There’s one more thing,” I point out.

“What’s that?”

I point up at the ceiling. Genie looks up. A smile so sweet it hurts crosses her face when she sees the spray of a mistletoe hanging above our heads.

“Well,” she says, in the husky voice I adore. “Can’t argue with that.”

She reaches up to me for a blazing hot kiss. I respond, nibbling my way down her jawline and stripping off her winter coat. I pull her close to me and place both hands on her back. The heat of her skin is intense, even through her sweater and t-shirt. I slip a hand underneath both layers, needing skin to skin contact. She gasps.

“Too cold?”

“No, it feels good.” She pushes my own coat off my body. “I want more.”

“You can have it all,” I promise. I’ve never meant anything so much in my life.

We kiss and undress each other, discarding our clothes as we make our way to the floor in front of the fireplace. Shirts, sweaters, and pants land everywhere in our eagerness to be skin to skin.

I know I should slow down. If I were a better man, I’d worship every inch of her luscious body and take my time doing it. But I can’t wait. It’s been too long and I want her too much.

I can’t even get her all the way naked. I scoop her up, still in her black lace underwear, kissing her clit through the fabric until she falls apart in my arms. Then I bend her over the ottoman, slide her underwear to the side, and plunge into her warm, wet heat. Genie cries out as I thrust inside her again and again, faster and faster as lightning zooms up my spine. We collapse in a satisfied puddle on the floor.

“What are you thinking?” I ask her afterward, holding her in my arms. I can’t stop stroking her soft skin. I can never get enough of how good she feels.

A mischievous gleam sparkles in her eyes. “I’m wondering if you have something against beds.”

“I absolutely do not, and I am about to prove it to you.”

For the rest of the night, I do exactly that.

# CHAPTER 7



## GENIE

“I HAVE TWO WORDS FOR YOU.” THE RUMBLE OF GRANT’S baritone in my ear is a quiet thrill, even in my barely awake, just turned over state.

“If they aren’t ‘here’s coffee,’” I declare, “I don’t want to hear them.”

Grant chuckles and plants a kiss on my left shoulder. Although my eyes are closed, I can feel the air shift as he waves something in front of my face. The siren song of caffeine snatches me from my slumber and demands my attention. I sit up instantly.

Somewhat more awake, I turn to Grant. He’s wearing another one of those gorgeous cabled sweaters with a pair of khakis. He hands me a tumbler. Greedily, I take it from him, inhaling half of the orange mocha in one go.

His eyes darken with lust.

“Do that again,” he urges. His voice is thick.

“Do what?”

“Take another sip of your coffee. I’m trying to memorize this moment, because it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

That’s when I realize the sheet has fallen down to my hip. Since I am wearing exactly nothing, my former fiancé and current lover is getting quite the show.

Heat paints my cheeks. Grant has never been shy about his appreciation of my body, but in the last forty-eight hours, he's taken it to a new level. The intensity in his eyes snatches away my breath.

He pretends to weep when I pull the sheet up beneath my arms. I roll my eyes. I'm grateful that despite the intense attraction, we can keep things light between us. That way, it'll be easier when I go.

"Tell me." I take another long sip of my coffee. "What are your two words?"

"Snowshoes and reindeer."

"Technically, that's three words, but I'm in."

I hop into the shower, intrigued by Grant's plans. This week hasn't been anything like I thought it would be. I'd mostly packed sensible, go-to-a-job-interview clothes for this trip. I haven't needed them once. And this morning, just as he promised, there are multiple outfits in my size waiting for me. I choose a pair of fleece-lined leggings, another long-sleeved t-shirt and a buttery soft merino wool cardigan in my favorite shade of red. To complete the outfit, I pick out a comfy pair of fur-lined boots from my favorite brand. I make a note to thank my sister — and Grant's assistant — for the outfits.

Two hours and more 90s jams later, we're at a farm in windy, rural Washington state.

The hosts offer a brief introduction of facts about the animals, then make sure we've disinfected our hands and cleaned our shoes. The effort is one hundred percent worth it, because just like that, I am inches away from my very first herd of reindeer.

They're magnificent. Around four feet tall, they wander up to us on long, skinny legs. I'm not sure how those limbs support them, but each of the deer is as graceful as a ballerina. They're covered in a light brown coarse-looking fur that I immediately want to stroke. The bulls don't have antlers at this time of year, but the cows still boast absolutely enormous racks of antlers that add about three feet to their height.



I hold out a handful of oats. Peaches, one of the bigger cows, wanders just close enough to take it out of my hand. Ever so gently, I reach a gloved hand out to stroke an antler. It's shockingly soft, as is the coarse-looking fur covering her sides.

She stays next to me, nudging my hand when I put out a fistful of grain too slowly for her liking. I look over at Grant. He's got his phone out, taking pictures of me and Peaches. One of the other deer dips into his pocket, pulling out a few of the apple leaves tucked in there. We take a few selfies with Peaches and her herd mates, then settle in until all the leaves are gone. I flatter myself that we've made a genuine connection, but once she's sure I'm all out of treats, Peaches huffs out a breath and walks away.

We warm up with a cup of hot cider before heading over to Cooper Spur Resort for lunch. Then we spend the afternoon snowshoeing.

After lunch, we get back into our ski gear and into snowshoeing lessons. Once our lesson is complete, our instructors lead us on a track that spans from the late afternoon into early evening. By the time we return to the trailhead, the sky overhead is full of stars and magic.

Back at the cabin, we devour the simple dinner laid out for us— crusty bread with three cheeses, salami, soup and fruit. Then we play strip Scrabble until one of us deliberately loses his shirt and we both get distracted by other things.

In the morning, we head back into the city. It's Christmas Eve, and day three of Grant's whirlwind plan to get us back together involves spending quality time in Portland proper. I can't imagine how he plans to top the previous two days. He's got something elaborate up his sleeve, I'm sure.

But it turns out I'm wrong. When we get back to Portland, Grant and I leave the car at the hotel's parking lot and walk down to the riverfront.

"What's so exciting down here?" I ask.

“You’ll see.” Grant’s expression is gleeful. He gets like that sometimes, I remember. Whenever he had a gift, he knew I would love or a blockbuster idea, he’d practically bounce off the walls, like he couldn’t wait to share it with me. I honestly think he got more pleasure out of giving it to me than I got out of whatever the present was.

I’ve missed this side of him.

If I’m being perfectly honest, I’ve just missed *him*. His sense of humor, his dedication to taking care of me, his intense passion... all of it reminds me forcefully of why I loved him so much—and why, in my heart of hearts, I love him still.

My secret plan to walk away at the end of this week? I don’t know if I can.

But I have questions. This week has been full of extravagance. I know he’s been very successful working for that tech company, but while it’s nothing to sneeze at, tech company money is not this kind of “throw it around and never notice” kind of money. Where did all of this come from? How is he going to fund the charity he wants me to run? And why does he want me back in Portland now? I need answers before I can seriously consider coming back to him.

Grant taps my shoulder. “Look over there.”

When I turn my head in the direction he points, I see a line of a dozen boats all decked out in Christmas gear. When I look more closely at the lead boat, there’s a man and woman dressed as Santa and Mrs. Claus. I turn to Grant, beaming.

“Christmas Ships?”

While we weren’t poor growing up, neither of our families were exactly rolling in it. And my mom’s schedule at the restaurant often meant we were working at least part of Christmas Day. But every year, we made time to see the Christmas Ships parade down the Willamette River. I was obsessed with the tradition and waited for this all year long. I swore that when I grew up, I would get to ride on one of those vessels in the parade if it was the last thing I did.

“Let’s go.” In shock, I meekly follow along as Grant grabs me by the hand and leads me down to the dock.

Once we get down to the gangplank, Santa — a jaunty fellow with rosy cheeks and a long beard I’m pretty sure is real — calls out to us.

“I hear there’s a very good girl who wants to help Santa steer his water sleigh,” he says. “Is that so?”

I am blushing and giggling like a kid. My smile feels a mile wide.

“She’s the best girl I know,” Grant answers on my behalf. “Genie is at the top of the nice list.”

“Well then, let’s see what we can do.”

Santa helps me on deck and takes me to the steering wheel. He gives me a short tour of the controls, then leaves me to steer. I guide the ship while he and Mrs. Claus wave to people on the shore. Grant is by my side, watching my face with the kind of open joy that made me fall for him all those years ago.

“Are you happy?” he whispers in my ear.

“This might be the best day of my life,” I answer. “How on earth did you make this happen?”

Grant shrugs. “I know someone who knows someone, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Grant, this is more than knowing someone. Arranging all this is a big deal.”

“You can thank Marin by accepting the job with FLB,” he suggests. “But it’s not about that for me. It’s worth anything to see that look in your eyes.”

I reach up and kiss him, trying to tell him with my body what I can’t say with words. After a while, Mrs. Claus clears her throat dramatically, and we break apart, laughing our faces off.

The Clauses drop us off a few miles down the river. We watch the parade for a while before taking a car back to the hotel. Grant won’t tell me what the next event is. He simply

says “put on something gorgeous.” I decide to wear the outfit my family gave me a few days ago.

I’m just finishing my makeup and spraying on perfume when he arrives at my door. The second he sees me, his mouth falls open.

“Damn, woman.” His voice goes low and urgent. “You look like a dream come true.”

“Likewise,” I say, swallowing hard. It’s the honest truth. His silver hair is swept back from his face, emphasizing his cheekbones and the jawline that makes my knees weak. But it’s the way he wears his tuxedo that’s got me obsessing over how soon I can get it off of him. It’s black, of course, with a ribbed shawl collar and matching tie. I’m impressed when I catch a glimpse of a coordinating ribbed waistcoat beneath his jacket.

He is unquestionably the most stunning man I’ve ever seen. I’ve never been prouder to be by his side.

The evening is a whirlwind: a private concert at the Schnitz. Dinner at the Heathman. Afterward, Grant takes me over to Laurelhurst, and we take a romantic walk down Peacock Lane, the city’s most decorated Christmas street.

Somewhere between the carolers and the Christmas lights, the hot cocoa booth and the man holding my hand, two things hit me.

I have never been more content. I want more of this.

Not just for now, but forever. I want to be here in Portland. I want to take the job with FLB. I want Grant Davies in my life.

I just need him to show me that he wants to be with me, too.

When we reach the end of the lane, we stop beneath a spray of mistletoe. I point it out, and Grant obliges me with a kiss.

“Do you want to go back through the other side?” I ask.

“I have a better idea,” he replies. “Let’s head this way.”

Grant takes me up Southeast Stark and up 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue. We walk in silence, still holding hands. Just when I think it couldn't get any more romantic, the tiniest flakes of snow begin to fall. I have to laugh: Even Mother Nature is on our side, making the night even more perfect.

We come to a stop in front of a gorgeous green colonial.

"Hold on a second," Grant says. He kneels down to adjust his laces. I drape my wrap more securely around me and admire the house. On each stair, there are candles suspended in ice lanterns. Wide red ribbon threads through the banister, and poinsettias fill the planter boxes on both sides of the porch. Lighted garland drapes the doors, which is graced with a large evergreen wreath hanging from more of that stunning ribbon.

I sigh in admiration. It's the house of my dreams. I'm glad I got to see it.

When I turn to Grant, my breath catches in my throat. He's down on one knee, holding out a ring box. He pops it open. A platinum band, designed to look like ivy, with a teardrop shaped stone at its center, is nestled inside.

"Genie. My dearest love." Grant's voice is husky. "These past few days have been exquisite. I'm reminded over and over that letting you go was the biggest mistake I've ever made. I need you by my side. I want you in every way possible. As a business partner, as a friend, as the woman I come home to, that I make love to, that I will adore for the rest of my life.

"Please. Marry me."

I look at the ring. At the man I still love. At the house. It's everything I could ever want, being handed to me on a silver platter.

"No."

# CHAPTER 8



## GRANT

THE WALK BACK TO THE CAR IS THE LONGEST TWENTY MINUTES of my life.

Fuck. I thought... I don't know what I thought. That three days would be enough for her to remember how good we were together? Or maybe that she felt the same way I did about how much she and I belong with one another?

*Nice try, my brain spits out. Completely foolish choice, but nice try.* My gut twists and my throat tightens in shame at my arrogance.

Genie stares resolutely ahead, like she's determined to avoid looking at me as long as possible. I don't blame her. This awkward silence makes my skin itch. The sooner we get back to the hotel, the sooner I can lose myself in the bottom of whatever bottle is handiest.

The damnedest part is that I didn't intend to propose tonight. I meant to give her the key to the house and let her explore. If she liked it, then I would've given it to her. Let her know that the property was hers, no strings attached.

But that ring has been burning a hole in my pocket since the day I saw it. From the second I laid eyes on it, I knew it was meant to be Genie's. It's like her. An unusual cut but made of the strongest material.

When I saw her all dressed up tonight, looking like a siren in that black dress, her hair in that updo with little tendrils hanging down, I lost my mind. I wanted to ditch my plan for the night and take her straight to bed. I should have. It

would've been a better night. That part of our relationship, at least, is solid.

Instead, I made a fool of myself, and very likely ruined any chance at us getting back together.

“Grant?” Her voice is soft. Careful. Like she's not sure how I'll react, and she doesn't want to spook me. It's a reasonable approach. I feel like a wounded animal, miserable and desperate. I'm sure it shows on my face.

“Yeah?” I hate how short my voice sounds, and the way she winces. It's not her. Just frustrated with my overeager self having blown it so badly.

“We should go inside and talk.”

I'm confused when I look up and see the hotel parking lot. Huh. Guess I was on autopilot all the way here.

I get out of the car and come around to open Genie's door. When she puts her hand in mine, I grip hers tightly. It's the last time I'll get to hold her like this. Any further contact will be on a professional basis. That is, if she takes the job. Failing that, Marin might convince her to consult with whomever we pick for the director position. I will stay far away from all of that.

Our walk across the lobby and the elevator ride is equally silent. I steal glances at her profile. Her ski slope of a nose, her sharp cheekbones, her perfect bow-shaped mouth are imprinted on my soul. Now that I've tasted her again, I don't know how I'm supposed to give her up.

I escort Genie to her door. She hands me the key, a faint smile dancing on her lips. I answer it with one of my own. Even in my distressed state, I can't help responding to her.

She pulls off her wrap, draping it across the sofa. She steps out of her heels. Her sigh of relief is so long and loud, I'd swear people in the next county over can hear it. Gracefully, she settles onto the couch and starts taking the pins out of her hair.

I clear my throat. Lay her key card on the table. “I'm going to go. You have the room until the end of the week, so stay or



not, as you like. Your return ticket is open, so whenever you want to return to New York, you can do that, too.”

“No.”

She says it so casually. Soft and firm. As if she didn’t just cut me in half with the same word half an hour ago.

“No, what?”

She pats the sofa beside her. “Don’t go.”

I stare at her beautiful face. She can’t mean it. Genie simply stares back and pats the cushion again. I go to her and sit down.

“That house we stopped in front of. It’s yours, isn’t it?”

Not trusting myself to speak, I nod.

“That’s what I thought,” she says. Genie reaches over, takes my hand in her own. “It’s nice to know I still get you.”

“I bought it, but it’s for you. I wanted — I *want* you to have it. Still.” I confess.

Genie sits back with a satisfied expression, like I just confirmed something for her.

“So this proposal. I get the feeling it wasn’t quite what you intended?” She hesitates. “Almost like...you proposed by accident?”

“Yes... and no. I lost my head for a minute. It felt like—like we were closer to a reunion than we are.”

Genie strokes my cheek. I close my eyes and lean into her touch. She caresses my jawline with infinite tenderness. When I turn into her palm and plant a kiss in the center of it, she sighs.

“Oh, Grant...”

“I know you aren’t ready to hear this, but I still love you. There is no one else for me. I want you to be my wife.”

“There’s the little matter of you’re breaking my heart the last time we tried this.”

“I told you, that was my worst mistake...”

“No,” she says. “Don’t say it was a mistake. Because it wasn’t. You chose to leave me. It was very much on purpose.”

“You know why I left.”

“I do.” She looks at me with sorrow in her eyes. “Because you didn’t trust me.”

I stare at her in complete shock. What on earth is she talking about?

“I lost my job six months before our wedding.” Even now, I feel the sting of that loss. My gut squeezes tight with an echo of the frustration and shame that haunted me then. “I couldn’t marry you then. Not without being able to provide for you. For our family.”

“I could’ve supported us,” she argues, clasping her hands over her heart. “I was making decent money. But you pushed me away because you had this ridiculous idea in your head that I’d start to hate you if needed to lean on me for a while.”

“I was trying to be the man you deserved. One who could stand on his own two feet. It’s taken me a while, but I am that man now.” I take her hand in mine. “That’s what I’ve been trying to show you this week.”

Genie sighs, running a hand through her hair.

“Grant.” She shakes her head. I obviously don’t get it. “This time together has been wonderful, but it’s not reality. What happens when we need to get real? What if you lose your job again? Or something happens to our health? What if \_\_\_”

“I’ve worked hard enough, and made enough money, that we’ll be protected. Reality doesn’t have to touch us.”

“You know what I mean. There’s only so much money can do for us. We still need that foundation of trust.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. As much as I’d like to argue, she has a point. Time to put up or shut up. If I want her in my life, there can’t be any more secrets.

“Speaking of trust...” I begin. Genie groans. I smile. I might not be a dad, but I can Dad joke with the best of them.

“I’m trusting you with this. The seed money for FLB? The basis of our endowment? Is because I won the freaking lottery.”

Genie’s shock reminds me of my own face the day we found out. “What?”

“I have this betting pool with my friends,” I explain. “We set it up a few years ago, when I first came to the Connecticut office. Every week, our pool played the lottery like clockwork. It was just for fun. Nothing we took seriously. We all kind of forgot about it.”

“I remember hearing about a multibillion dollar payout...” she looks at me in shock. “That — that was you?”

“Yeah,” I shrug. “Fortunately, the state allows lottery winners to stay anonymous if you claim it through a trust. Long story short: the five of us are set for life.”

Genie looks at me in wonder. “So FLB Trust...?”

“Stands for Five Lucky Basta—” I stop, embarrassed. “Boys. We’ll call it Five Lucky Boys.”

Genie reaches out to stroke my hair. “You are not a boy. That’s part of what I love about you.”

I freeze. Does she know she said that?

“Yes,” she smiles, seeing the look on my face, “I love you, too. I never stopped. I wanted to stop. I tried to stop, but you’re too deep in my heart. You’re always going to be the one I want.”

I have to kiss her then. She responds with the same pent-up passion she always does.

“If that’s how you feel,” I say when we come up for air, “Why’d you turn me down?”

“When I said no, I didn’t mean no forever. I just meant not yet.” She grazes my lips with her own. “It’s going to take a while for me to trust this. It might take you a while, too, to trust that I’m not going anywhere.”

“But you’re willing to try?”

“I am. Are you?”

“Every day, every night, forever and ever, as long as it takes.”

As I take her into my arms, I’m certain of two things.

One, I’m the man who loves her more than anything. Two, I will spend the rest of my life learning to be the man who’s worthy of her.

The third thing I’m certain of: that’s the gift she wants most of all.

# EPILOGUE



## GENIE

### *ONE YEAR LATER*

“OH, GOOD GRIEF, GRANT!” FINOLA YELLS IN THE DIRECTION of our SUV. “Would you please come and carry my sister over this threshold already? My fingertips are turning as blue as lao lao’s hair!”

A snort escapes, despite my best efforts to hold back a laugh. Our grandmother recently discovered temporary hair colors. Since her hair’s gone totally white in the last year, she’s embraced all sorts of wild choices. Her current color is called Blue Christmas.

“Don’t be jealous, Finola,” our grandmother retorts. “If you’re very lucky, someday you can be fly like me.”

“Oh, my, goodness.” Finola turns to Leo in distress. “Did she say fly?”

“She said fly,” he confirms. He looks over at the tiny, bossy dynamo. “And it was adorable.”

Grandmother pats him on the head while Fin mutters something that sounds a lot like ‘suck up.’ I can see her point, but Leo is no fool. He knows lao lao is making her egg tarts this year, and he’s determined to get first pick. If he has to suck up to our gran to do it, well, no one could blame him. Those tarts are delicious.

Suddenly, I am swept off my feet. I giggle as I link my arms around Grant’s neck.

“You ready, wife?” He shifts his arms to hold me more securely. I smile up at him, shamelessly batting my eyelashes, threading my fingers through the silver of his hair.

“I’m ready, husband.” My sister makes a face at our mushy display, but I know it’s all an act. She cried harder than anyone at our wedding. Our mother and Grant’s both had to hand over their handkerchiefs for her.

Speaking of mothers. Mrs. Davies (she’s asked me to call her Joan, but I’m still not sure I can) and my mom are sitting in the car chatting away, but I know they’re anxious to get started on Christmas dinner. Grant and I offered to have our chef cater the meals so that our families could just relax, but all the cooks vetoed that idea. I’m secretly glad. There’s something about the tradition of home cooked Christmas that just feels right.

Grant carries me over the threshold of the cabin. It’s the third — or is it fourth? — time he’s done this since our wedding. I can’t say that I mind, especially when he stops under the mistletoe hanging overhead and gives me a deep, delicious kiss.

By the time he puts me down on the ground, I’m clinging to him, slightly dazed. He caresses my face tenderly as he promises, “There’s more where that came from.”

I can’t wait.

Just like I can’t wait to give him the best gift of his life tomorrow. He has no clue that Baby Davies will be making an appearance in just a few months.

Dad and Leo are bringing in the luggage, Finola and Grandmother exploring the rooms and declaring every view better than the last, Mom and Joan are checking out the kitchen and planning what snacks to bring for the big snowshoeing excursion tomorrow night. Since everyone’s occupied, I take advantage of their distraction to check my email. I only manage to get through two of Marin’s messages in before Grant sneaks up on me and snatches away my phone.

“FLB can wait,” he declares, pocketing my device. “Family time is precious. Lean into it.”

“Guess all our time in therapy really paid off,” I say. I’m impressed. We’ve done good work on ourselves this year, and I’m excited to see how the next one goes.

No matter what, I’m certain with Grant at my side, every day of it will feel like a gift.

**Thank you for reading. We’d love to hear what you thought in a review! [Romanced by the Silver Fox](#).**

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### **Billie**

I hate Christmas for a very good reason.

My vow for the holidays is no men, no problem.

I’m making some extra holiday money dressed as an elf.

That’s when I meet Raff, my gorgeous new manager.



And suddenly, all bets are off...

**Raff**

I'm in a good place after being an out-of-control DJ for years.

Now I'm in Snowflake Falls looking after my brother's event space.

That's where I meet Billie and she entrances me.

The problem is, I have a huge secret.

But this bad boy is determined to get his Christmas angel.

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