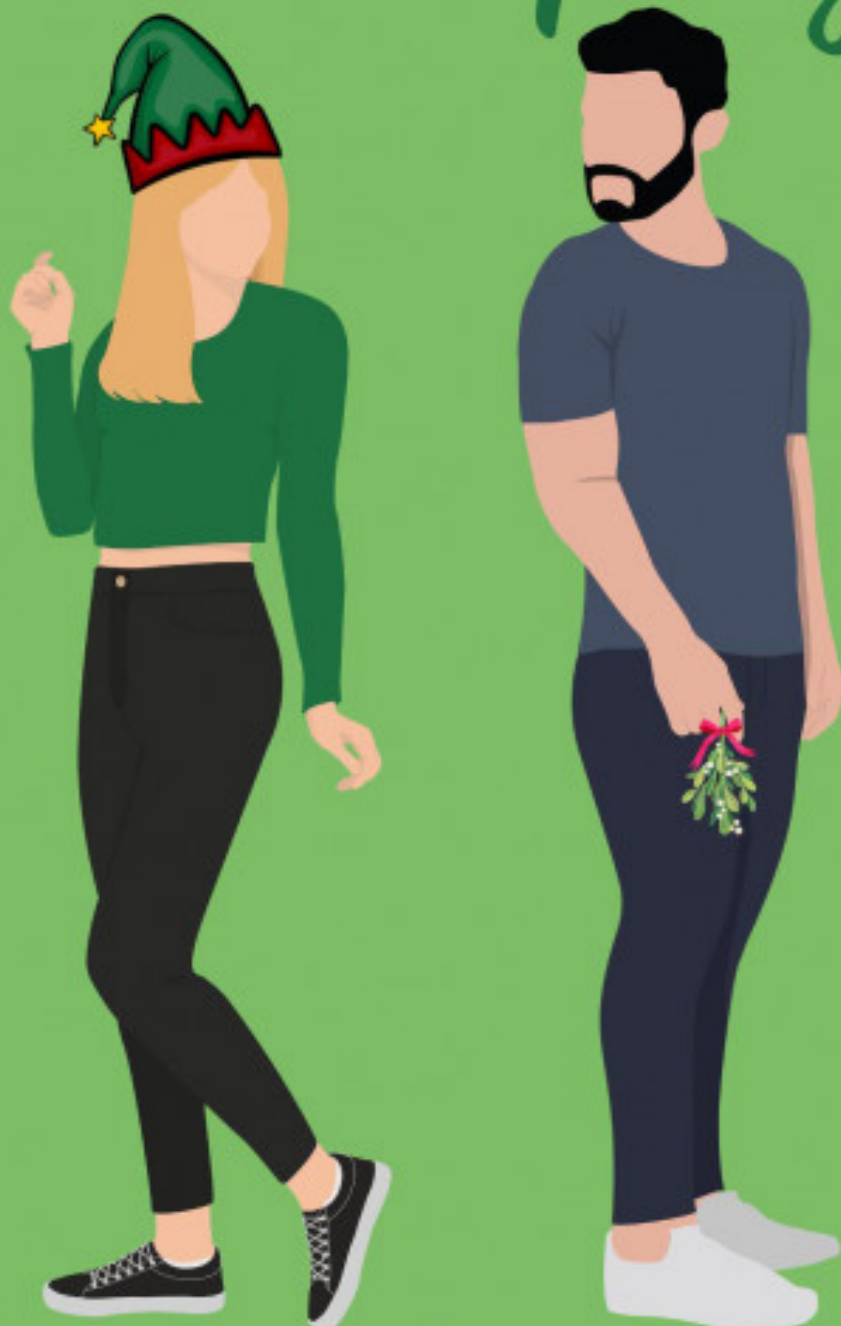


a steamy romantic comedy

# SILVER BELLS

&

# *Serendipity*



MARIE LANDRY

# SILVER BELLS & SERENDIPITY

by Marie Landry

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**Content warnings:** coarse language and open-door/on-page sexual intimacy

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\*Hung Up on You

\*A Very Perry Christmas

\*A Very Perry Wedding

\*Escaping Christmas

\*Matchmaking & Mixtapes

\*Reunions & Ruses

\*Do-Overs & Mixed Signals

\*Bucket Lists & Midnight Kisses

## **DEDICATION**

To anyone who has ever gone through a friendship breakup:  
this one's for you. Your pain and grief are valid. Just  
remember, you are loved and you are *worthy* of love, always.

And to Mum and Jaimie. I love you both more than you'll ever  
know.

## PART I ~ DECEMBER 2020

### CHAPTER ONE

“Paging Silver Bells. Silver Bells the Elf, your presence is requested at the Gate House.

“Isn’t that you?”

A pair of big brown eyes stare up at me. I’ve just taken a selfie—or, rather, an ‘elfie’—with this little girl and her family. Her eyes are still wide and awestruck at meeting one of Santa’s elves. I imagine that’s how I’d look if I met Pedro Pascal and got to take a picture with *him*.

“That *is* me,” I say, jingling the string of silver bells around my neck. “Elf duty calls, but it was so nice meeting you.”

“Does Santa need you now?” she asks, unwrapping the candy cane I gave her and sticking it where her two front teeth once were.

I attempt to match her earnestness as I nod. “Probably. An elf’s work is never done.”

With another jingle of my bells, I give the family a wave before making my way through Bellevue Village. After a month and a half of working as an elf, I’ve mastered the art of ducking and weaving between groups, always with a smile on my face, always ready to pause to hand out candy canes or pose for pictures. The Village is busier than usual for a Monday evening, but then again, Christmas *is* next week.

A few elves are positioned outside the Gate House, greeting people as they enter. The Gate House is more for show than anything since the Village doesn’t charge an

entrance fee, but it makes a convenient meeting place for people coming and going. Among the hustle and bustle, I spot a dark-haired man standing a few feet away from the Gate House, head bent, brows drawn in concentration, fingers flying over his phone screen.

Meredith, the Village's General Manager, is waiting for me inside. If the glitter dusting her cheeks is any indication, she's pulled elf duty herself at some point today. "Sorry to pull you off your regular rotation," she says. "I need someone for a special assignment and thought you'd be perfect."

Her words kindle a warm glow inside me. "That's nice to hear."

"I hope you still feel that way when I tell you what the assignment is." Her expression douses the rising warmth in my chest. "See that guy outside the Gate House?" She points to the man I noticed when I arrived; he's still typing away on his phone. "He's here from *The Buzz*. Do you know it?"

"I know *of* it." It's a fairly new website started by a pair of semi-famous influencers in Toronto. It began with just the two of them, and they branched out recently into hiring freelancers to do 'What's Hot' pieces in the Toronto area and beyond. My best friend, Mindy, is obsessed with the site, but I haven't had a chance to check it out.

"Well, apparently *The Buzz* got wind of Bellevue Village and wanted to do a piece on us immediately. They only gave us a few hours' notice and said they could have their writer do a piece on his own or, if we could spare someone, have an employee give him a personal tour. Shoshana agreed to do it, but she left early because she wasn't feeling well. I'd do it, but there's some crisis or other up at Santa's House I need to deal with. Then I thought of *you*: our Elf of the Month."

I can't help but laugh. The honor of Elf of the Month was bestowed on me at the end of November and came with a substantial cash bonus, which I plan to spend entirely on myself for my thirty-third birthday next week. "So I just have to show him around the Village?"

“Pretty much. Explain how everything works, show him some of the businesses, introduce him to a few of your fellow elves. Hopefully they’ll talk up the Village and give some helpful sound bites.”

“Sounds easy enough. Count me in.”

Meredith grips my upper arms. “You’re a lifesaver, Sylvie. When you finish with him, you can take the rest of the night off, okay? Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

When we step outside the Gate House, the guy has moved closer and appears to be waiting for us. His eyes sweep over me, taking me in from the pointy-tipped felt shoes covering my sneakers to my red and green dress to the string of silver bells around my neck.

“Sylvie, this is Cole from *The Buzz*,” Meredith says. “Cole, this is Sylvie, also known around here as Silver Bells the Elf.”

His lips twitch as he offers me a hand to shake. “Nice to meet you. Sorry to spring this on you at the last minute.”

There’s an audible *zap* when our fingers touch, causing us to jerk apart before we can shake properly. “That’s what felt shoes on a carpet will do, I guess,” I say with a laugh.

Cole looks somewhat stunned, as if the static electricity zapped more than just his hand. After a few beats, he asks, “Is my hair standing on end?”

I use the question as an excuse to let my gaze wander over his face and hair. Now that he’s not frowning at his phone, I see he’s actually quite handsome, with beautiful blue-gray eyes and a head of thick, dark hair. He shifts, and the light catches on a few strands of silver mixed in with the dark tresses.

“Nope, you’re good,” I tell him. Meredith catches my eye and I don’t miss the amused curve of her lips or the little eyebrow wiggle she does. I suppress a smile and return my gaze to Cole. “Shall we?”



I could swear he releases a quiet sigh. “Absolutely. Lead the way.” To Meredith, he gives a polite nod and says, “Thanks again for setting this up.”

I set off past the Gate House, stopping just a few feet inside the Village and motioning for Cole to join me. “I assume you’re taking pictures for your article? This is a good place to start.” I make a sweeping motion around me to encompass the spectacular entrance of Bellevue Village. Colored lights are strung everywhere, the businesses are all decked out, and there are Christmas trees, life-size nutcrackers, and giant candy canes everywhere you look.

“Is this place for real?” Cole murmurs.

My grin widens at his quiet, awestruck tone. I turn to look at him, expecting wonder-filled eyes and a bright smile, but instead I’m met with...distaste?

“Wow, this place is *a lot*.” He blinks rapidly as his head swivels from side to side. “This must be what sensory overload feels like.” After another minute of casting his gaze around, he gives his head a little shake and lifts his phone to snap a few pictures.

Shaking off his words, I say, “Can I ask why you’re doing a feature on this place so close to Christmas? Bellevue Village closes for the holidays in a week and a half.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t my choice,” Cole says without looking at me. “I went in to pitch something completely different to my bosses, and they hit me with this assignment. Said if I could come to Bellevue and get this piece ready to go for tomorrow afternoon, they’d consider my idea.”

I make a little hum of acknowledgment, unsure what to say. I’ve seen my share of people who clearly didn’t want to be here: partners who were obviously dragged in against their will. Groups of teens and young adults with high energy, mixed with one or two people whose faces are masks of boredom or disdain. Parents with indulgent, grimace-like smiles as their kids run around excitedly. The Grinches have

been few and far between, though, likely because most people know what they're getting when they come to Bellevue Village in November and December: Christmas Central. Elves and garland, wandering Victorian carolers and twinkle lights. Christmas joy. Festive fun.

But unlike the regular occasional person who looks like they'd rather be anywhere else on the planet, Cole is writing a piece about this place. If his expression and the tense lines of his shoulders are any indication, I have a feeling the theme of his article will be something along the lines of 'Come to Bellevue Village if you want a massive headache, a case of overwhelm, and a lighter wallet'. I can't let that happen.

"Ready to move on?" I ask, my voice overly bright. He side-eyes me, but nods. "Okay, where should we begin? Are you hungry? Thirsty? The Village has several eateries, and there's also a chocolatier and a candy shop if you have a sweet tooth. Oh, and the café has amazing hot chocolate, the best you'll ever taste. Or we could check out some of the shops. As you may know, Bellevue Village is only Christmas-themed two months of the year, so while some of the shops cater to holiday lovers, many are regular stores. If you have any last-minute holiday shopping to do, I'd be happy to make suggestions or help you pick things out."

I'm rambling. I've always been a babbler when I'm nervous. Cole is looking around again with that same curled-lip expression he had a minute ago, and he keeps shaking his head and blinking rapidly.

"Whatever you think." His tone is resigned, and he follows the words with another quiet sigh. "I don't have any Christmas shopping to do, but I suppose it'd be good to highlight some of the stores, especially the holiday-themed ones."

He mutters something that sounds like 'even though that sounds like my idea of hell', but I ignore that part.

"How do you feel about nutcrackers?" I ask.

One side of his mouth twists in a bemused half-smile. “I don’t have any strong feelings about them one way or the other.”

Despite his whole pre-Christmas-ghosts-Ebenezer-Scrooge vibe, his dry tone makes me want to laugh. “Okay, well, I think we should start at the Nutcracker Emporium. They have every kind of nutcracker imaginable, ranging from teeny tiny ones to ones as tall as you are. The shop has been a huge draw for tourists this year.”

He studies me with slightly narrowed eyes as I speak. His unwavering gaze makes me wonder if I have something other than glitter on my face. Finally, he says, “You really love this place, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.” Part of me wonders if I should elaborate, talk up the Village in the hope it’ll make him see it differently or sway him to write something favorable, but I’m not sure it would help. He seems determined to be a Scrooge.

“Nutcracker Emporium it is, then,” he says. “Lead on, Silver Bells.”

And so I do. I set a meandering pace as we weave through groups of people and food stalls. Cole keeps his phone in his hand and snaps the occasional quick shot, but I’m doing most of the talking as I point out various things and introduce him to some of the elves we pass.

When we reach the center of the Village, I detour toward the giant Christmas tree. With so many evergreens scattered around the Village, I’ve often wondered if this place owns its own tree farm somewhere or if their yearly purchases empty out an entire farmer’s stock. While they’re all beautiful, the twenty-foot high tree in the heart of the Village is truly something to behold. Not only is it decked out with thousands of colored lights, but its lower branches are also full of ornaments visitors are allowed to take home. Many people donate an ornament in exchange for taking one, while others leave encouraging notes stuck in the branches. No matter where I’m stationed in the Village, I make sure to visit the tree

at least once during every shift, and I've left a few of my own little notes in the branches.

When the tree comes into view, I sneak glances at Cole's face for his reaction. If the way his eyes widen is any indication, I've finally found something even *he* is impressed by. We stop on the outskirts of the square so he can take a few photos of the tree. I watch as he crouches low to the ground and angles his phone to get as much of the tree as possible.

When he straightens, he closes the camera app on his phone and pulls up his notes. I peer over his shoulder as he taps away, and just manage to catch the words 'Loud. Colorful. SO MANY PEOPLE' before he hits save and closes it.

I should keep my mouth shut and move us along, but his attitude irks me. It's obvious he thinks this assignment is beneath him, but Bellevue Village—especially for the two months of the year when it's a Christmas lover's fantasy—is an attraction that brings in thousands of people every year from all over the world. The self-contained village full of shops, eateries, rides, and games brings joy to countless people. And I won't let him shit on that.

"So are you going for a jaded, cynical angle with your piece?" I ask casually. "Like 'This place is for suckers, come here if you want to waste both your time and money'?"

As soon as the words are out, I notice a young couple strolling by, watching me with wide eyes. I swallow a groan and plaster on a smile, not bothering to excuse myself to Cole before intercepting the pair.

"I'm so sorry you heard that," I say, fishing in the giant pocket of my skirt where I keep candy canes, game tokens, and other miscellaneous things I'm permitted to hand out at my discretion. I finally find what I'm looking for—a ten-dollar gift card that's good for any shop or eatery in the Village—and hold it out to them. "It was out of context and not at all how I personally feel about Bellevue Village. Please enjoy a treat on me this afternoon or during your next visit."

To my immense relief, they both smile. “No worries. We saw you around earlier and it’s obvious you love your job,” the woman says. “Actually, we wanted to get a picture with you before, but you were busy. Do you mind if we take one now?”

After they snap a few shots of the three of us with the giant tree in the background, I wish them a good day, and they wander off. With my back to Cole, I suck in a slow, deep breath, steeling myself for what’s ahead. If he didn’t plan to write a scathing piece about Bellevue Village before, he likely does now.

I spin on my heel, the bells on my shoes jingling merrily. Cole’s face is unreadable as I approach him. My brain is whirring with thoughts of what to say when he steps forward and holds out his hand.

“Hi. I’m Cole.”

I automatically shake his hand, despite my confusion. “I… know?”

He laughs under his breath and squeezes my hand before releasing it and tucking both of his hands into his coat pockets. He looks sheepish as he says, “I was hoping we could start over. I’d like to show you I’m *not* a total asshole.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that, so what comes out is a less-than-eloquent, “Oh.”

“Why don’t we head to the Nutcracker Emporium like we planned, and then maybe I could buy you a cup of that amazing hot chocolate you mentioned?” His expression is hopeful and, if I’m not mistaken, his cheeks are tinged with a hint of pink that has nothing to do with the nip in the air.

I must look skeptical because his shoulders slump. “I really am sorry, Sylvie. I’ve recently gone through something that’s…well, not to put too fine a point on it, it’s left me with a major hate-on for Christmas.”

I can’t control my surprised reaction, and he laughs softly at my wide eyes. He has a nice laugh—deep and rumbly. I shove the thought aside.

“Anyway, this is the absolute *last* assignment I would have chosen for myself, but I didn’t have much choice,” he says. “It’s not fair to take my personal feelings out on this place, though. Or, more importantly, on *you*. Can we start over?”

I’ve never been one to hold grudges and I’m not about to start now with a stranger. Especially one who’s clearly hurting over something. “Well...it *would* be a relief not to have to report to Santa and make sure you’re on the naughty list.”

One side of his mouth curves in a way that makes me think he wouldn’t mind being on the naughty list. Something I haven’t felt in far too long—attraction? Curiosity? A hint of lust?—flutters in my chest and then lower.

He motions for me to start walking again and falls into step beside me. “You missed an opportunity for a name pun there,” he says, nudging me lightly with his shoulder. “Being on the naughty list would mean getting *coal* in my stocking.”

I let out a groan, followed by a laugh. A quick look at him shows a crooked smile that makes that fluttery feeling in my chest kick up a notch. We continue at our slow pace, pausing occasionally so Cole can ask questions and snap more pictures.

“So...Silver Bells the Elf,” he says. “Do all the elves around here get Christmas-themed names?”

“They can choose one if they want to, and a lot of them do. My last name is Bell and my dad has always called me Silver Bell, so it seemed like a good fit. Meredith encouraged me to play it up for visitors with the strands of silver bells and the bells on my shoes.”

There’s no way he’s missed my jingling shoes since they don’t exactly allow for stealth, but he pauses and looks down at them. I do a little dance on the spot to set them off. A few nearby people stop, clapping and laughing at my impromptu performance, which reminds me I’m constantly being watched. When I spot the smile creeping onto Cole’s face, I play it up, channeling my inner River Dancer.

Much to my delight, Cole lets out a full-body laugh. It transforms his entire face, softening the hard set of his mouth and making his eyes shine. He takes a couple of pictures, then steps back to snap a few more that include the small crowd that's stopped to watch. I finish with a twirl and a flourish of jazz hands, followed by a bow as the assembled crowd applauds.

Several people surge forward, asking for selfies. I shoot an apologetic look at Cole over their heads. He's still smiling as he steps back to the edge of the crowd and calls, "Do your elf thing. I'll wait."

It's at least ten minutes before the last person moves on. I caught glimpses of Cole through the crowd a few times and saw him keeping himself occupied by taking pictures and typing on his phone. I figured he was getting a head start on his piece, and found myself wishing I could peek over his shoulder again to see what he was writing.

"Is it always like this?" Cole asks as I rejoin him.

"Pretty much, yeah. You definitely have to be a people person in a job like this. It can be overwhelming and exhausting at times, but seeing all the smiles and knowing this place makes people happy is worth it."

He bobs his head thoughtfully, adding one final note to his phone before slipping it into his pocket. "How would you feel about reversing our plans? Hot chocolate now, nutcrackers after?"

I agree, grateful for an excuse to get off my feet for a few minutes. I direct us to the café, where we get a small table for two and order hot chocolate and a plate of shortbread cookies to share. Cole snaps a few shots of the elaborately-decorated café, then our steaming cups and the plate of cookies.

I wait until he's finished and has settled back in his chair before speaking again. "Can I ask why you only use your phone for pictures instead of a proper camera?"

“The women who own *The Buzz* want it that way,” he says. “They became famous using only their phones for all their social media posts, so they want all their freelancers doing the same. They say it makes the pieces more accessible to the general public, and since most smartphones have amazing cameras these days anyway...” He shrugs one shoulder, tapping his phone where it sits on the table. It’s several models newer than my own and likely has all the bells and whistles. “I miss using my professional camera, but sometimes it’s nice being able to just whip out my phone and not have to carry a bunch of equipment around.”

From there, we keep the conversation light, mostly sticking to assignments Cole has had lately, and bits and pieces of life in our respective cities. Now that Cole’s not so closed off and frowny, I find myself even more attracted to him. He’s articulate and funny, with a dry sense of humor, and when I speak, I feel like he’s really listening. I’d like to ask him more personal questions, but it doesn’t seem right since we’re strangers who will never see each other again.

After taking the last sip of my hot chocolate, I catch Cole staring at me. His head is tilted slightly to the side, and there’s a curiosity and warmth in his eyes that makes heat spread through my body. He blinks and gives his head a little shake, averting his eyes with a rueful smile. I expect him to say something, but he simply pops the last bite of his cookie into his mouth.

“You were right,” he says as we step back into the chilly afternoon a few minutes later. He follows me as I turn to the right, falling into step beside me once more. “That was the best hot chocolate I’ve ever tasted. The cookies were delicious too.”

“Good enough to make it into your piece about the Village?” I ask.

“Definitely.” He stops in his tracks, his eyes going wide. “Wow.”



I don't need to follow his gaze to know he's spotted the Nutcracker Emporium up ahead. The store is truly an incredible sight; it looks like a giant gingerbread house, with elaborate six-foot-tall nutcrackers standing sentinel every few feet along the exterior. The front window displays a variety of nutcrackers in every size, and beyond that you can see people moving around inside.

I study Cole's face, trying to gauge his expression. His 'wow' from before was tinged with something akin to horror, but I'm relieved to see genuine awe wash over his features now.

"This place is...I mean...I've never..."

"I know," I say. "I wasn't kidding when I said people have come from all over the world to see it."

"It's spectacular," he says. "My niece would flip her lid over this place."

We head inside, where I introduce Cole to the owners of the Emporium. We're allowed a brief glimpse into the workshop in the back, where half a dozen employees are hand painting nutcrackers. I lose track of time as Cole and I wander around the shop, pointing out our favorite nutcrackers and watching other people choose their own favorites.

When we come across a sparkly pink and purple nutcracker, Cole immediately takes it from the shelf. "I need to buy this one for my niece," he says. "My brother is going to kill me because I've already bought her *way* too much, but I can't help myself. The kid has had me wrapped around her finger since birth, and it's so much fun spoiling her."

God help me, but the glow on his face as he talks about his niece makes me like him even more. I love the thought of Cole as a doting uncle to a precocious little girl.

Since the store is getting more crowded by the minute, Cole suggests I wait for him up front while he goes to pay. Knowing he'll be awhile, I admire a few more displays before making my way to the front.

By the time we step outside again, it's getting dark. Cole pulls me aside to where there's less foot traffic and takes a few pictures of the Village bathed in the beautiful twilight glow. When he lowers his phone, he sighs and rakes a hand through his hair.

"I'd better hit the road. I have a lot of work to do to get this piece ready on time."

"Right, of course. Let me walk with you back to the Gate House."

As we stroll through the Village, we're quiet except for the occasional question from him, or me pointing out something we missed before. Now that Cole is leaving, I don't know what to say beyond what he might need for his article. Some of his enthusiasm has waned, which makes me wonder if he's as disappointed to be leaving as I am to see him go.

When we reach the Gate House, we both come to a stop and automatically turn to face each other.

"It was really nice meeting you, Sylvie Bell," Cole says. The words are formal, but his tone is warm and his eyes are soft.

I have to stop myself from blurting something stupid and embarrassing like 'I wish we had more time together'. Instead, I say, "It was really nice meeting you too, Cole."

Despite him knowing my last name, it occurs to me I don't know his. It feels weird asking at this point. It doesn't matter anyway; it's not like we'll ever see each other again. And besides, I'll look for his piece when it comes out on *The Buzz*, so I'll find out his full name then.

"Thanks for the tour and for..." He trails off, his gaze darting away from mine. He reaches into the paper bag from the Nutcracker Emporium and pulls out something small wrapped in red tissue paper. "Thanks for giving me a second chance and not just writing me off as a jerk."

I don't have a chance to respond before he thrusts the tiny parcel at me.

“I saw this when I went to pay for my niece’s nutcracker, and it made me think of you. I hope it’s not too weird that I bought you a gift when we’ve only known each other for a couple hours.” He tilts his head and lifts one shoulder, giving me a self-deprecating smile.

“Definitely weird,” I tease, unable to contain my own smile. “Really, *really* weird. In fact, I’m not sure I should accept it.”

“Okay, well...” He starts to pull his hand away, so I grab his arm with one hand and pluck the gift from his fingers with the other. He huffs out a laugh as I nestle the bundle in my palm and pull the tissue paper away.

Inside is a sparkly silver nutcracker holding a staff topped with a pair of tiny silver bells. I’m embarrassed by the emotion that clogs my throat. I’m even more embarrassed when I blurt out the words I kept to myself a few minutes ago: “I wish we had more time together.”

Cole’s eyebrows inch up and his lips part in surprise. He closes his mouth, pressing his lips together and nodding. “I do too. I’d stay if I could, but...”

“It’s okay,” I say quickly. “Thank you for this little guy.” I hold up the nutcracker. “I love it. That was really sweet of you.”

“It was my pleasure.” He gives me another nod and starts backing away. He pauses and, for a brief, wonderful moment, I think he’s going to say something else or maybe sweep me into his arms and hug me goodbye. Instead, he gives me a sad little smile and says, “See you around, Sylvie,” before turning and walking away.

## CHAPTER TWO

I think about Cole the entire drive home. The way he relaxed and allowed his smiles to come easier as the afternoon wore on. The way those smiles gave me a bubbly feeling inside like when you down a glass of sparkling wine instead of taking the intended sip. That spark when our hands first touched. The rational part of me knows it was static electricity, but after spending nearly two hours with Cole, it feels like it was something else.

I try to push thoughts of him aside as I climb the stairs to my apartment. I'm never going to see him again, so it would only end in heartache for me to stoke the fires of this unexpected crush.

The second I pull my keys from my purse, I hear the telltale thump of my cat, Milo, jumping from the couch to the floor. I unlock the door and catch the glow of his eyes in the darkness as he streaks across the room to greet me, ramming his giant orange body against my shins in greeting.

"Hello, Mister." I drop my purse on the floor and scoop Milo into my arms. He presses his squashy face into my shoulder and starts his battered engine purr.

I adopted Milo from the animal shelter two years ago. My best friend dragged me to the shelter one day after deciding she wanted to adopt a dog. The minute I entered the room with the cats, Milo let out a human-sounding yowl that raised every hair on my body. When I realized the sound was coming from a cat who was the size of a small dog, with freakishly long legs and a face that looked like it had been hit with a frying pan, I was equal parts horrified and intrigued.

The employee showing Mindy and me around zeroed in on where I was looking and told me Milo had been in the shelter since his previous owner passed away six months before. When she said he was overlooked time and time again because people wanted a younger cat—“and a more attractive one” she’d whispered, as if worried Milo would understand her and take offence—my heart nearly broke. She let me play with him while Mindy visited the dogs. Mindy left empty handed that day, but I filled out the paperwork to adopt Milo, and I brought him home a few days later.

“How’s my best guy?” I ask Milo, burying my face in his fur. He lets out a crackly-sounding meow and butts his head against my shoulder. He’s always been a lovebug, but he’s been extra lovey lately, as if he senses I’ve been a bit lonely.

I set him down when he squirms in my arms. He darts toward the kitchen, then stops and looks over his shoulder to see if I’m following. I already know he’s going to lead me to his half-full food dish and let out a plaintive meow as if I haven’t fed him in days and he’s wasting away. That’s exactly what he does and, because I’m home early and in such a good mood—and because I feel bad about how strict his diet has been since the vet told me he needed to slim down—I open a can of his favorite wet food and serve it to him on his favorite dish. Cat Mom win or Cat Mom fail? I don’t know, but either way, the little squawk he makes as he dives in makes me happy.

Despite my best efforts, thoughts of Cole creep into my consciousness as I search for something to eat for dinner. Until a few months ago, I would have messaged Mindy the second I got home to tell her about my time with Cole. She’s been so absent lately, though, taking forever to answer my messages, wanting to hang out less, canceling plans with no warning or explanation. We’ve been friends since college and, while we’ve had what I refer to as ‘growing pains’ along the way, I expected us to be friends forever. I knew we wouldn’t always be as inseparable as we once were, but I never thought those growing pains would someday lead to us growing *apart*.

Even though there's a good chance she won't respond right away or maybe even tonight, I send her a message to let her know I got off work early. I'm not sure what it says about me or the current state of our friendship that I'm shocked and excited when she replies immediately.

*What great timing, I was just thinking about you! Feel like meeting at the diner?*

I had hoped to put on my pajamas and veg in front of the TV while eating the leftover chickpea curry in my fridge, but it's been ages since Mindy and I met at the diner. I could really use some girl time, so I fire back a text telling her I'll meet her there in thirty minutes.

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I de-elf myself as quickly as possible, take a minute to snuggle Milo, and then head back out into the cold evening air.

After the short drive to the diner, there's a pep in my step as I walk down Front Street. The city has gone all out this year with its holiday decorations. The downtown area is bright with a mix of colored and white lights strung on nearly every available surface. I smile when I see the familiar neon sign for B&H Diner up ahead. I've always lived in Bellevue, so I've been coming to the diner since I was little, and I've known the owners, Bea and Horatio, for most of my life. When I met Mindy during freshman year of college, the diner became one of our favorite hang-out spots. We'd spend hours there doing homework, talking about future plans, or lamenting about bad dates over endless plates of fries and chicken fingers. We both decided to stay in Bellevue after college and have spent countless hours in the diner over the last decade. I need this tonight.

As I approach the diner, my phone buzzes in my coat pocket. I try to ignore the dread that begins bubbling away in my stomach when I see the text notification from Mindy on

the screen. I tell myself she's letting me know she's already inside or maybe running late. But when I swipe open the text, the air rushes out of me in a gusty sigh, leaving me feeling like a deflated balloon.

*Hey girl, something's come up so I'm gonna have to rain check our diner plans. Enjoy your unexpected time off!*

I close the text without responding and shove the phone back in my pocket. *Something's come up.* No apology for bailing on me at the absolute last minute. No explanation, when we used to tell each other everything. This isn't my idea of friendship, especially with the person who's supposed to be my best friend. I thought once I got to this age, things would be easier. I expected friendships would be locked in and there wouldn't be any of the drama and heartache of fickle or fake friends I experienced in high school.

But Mindy's and my lives have been heading in different directions for months. She got a new job at the beginning of the year and made new friends. I was happy for her because I adore the people I work with, even if I *could* make more effort to be proper friends with them. Mindy and I used to spend evenings at one of our apartments or at a quiet bar or restaurant. Sometimes we'd check out a local gallery or show, and we often took advantage of cheap nights at the movie theater. Those things no longer seem to appeal to Mindy, though. Her new friends are all in their early twenties, and they're still into the party scene, which Mindy and I left behind a decade or more ago. Or so I thought, anyway.

Somehow we went from seeing each other several times a week to seeing each other once or twice a month. The constant back and forth stream of texts has trickled to sporadic messages and long wait times for replies. I've been too busy with work to allow myself to overthink it, but I'm lonely. And I'm tired of settling for crumbs. I crave deeper connection, and I'm no longer getting that from the person I thought would always be there for me.

A full-body shiver ripples through me, making me realize I've been standing in the middle of the sidewalk, lost in thought. I stare up at the B&H Diner sign, then at the illuminated wreath in the front window. The colors waver and blur as tears sting my eyes. Giving myself a shake, I draw myself up to my full height and breathe deeply until the threat of tears subsides.

I turn to head back to my car, then decide I might as well stay since I'm already here. I could drown my sorrows in something full of carbs and fat. Nostalgia had me contemplating an order of fries and chicken fingers, but now the thought leaves a sour taste in my mouth. Then I have a brainwave: I could do one of the things I've wanted to do recently that Mindy doesn't want to do anymore. I've never had the courage to do things on my own, but how else am I supposed to meet people and make new friends?

I spin on my heel and make it a few steps further than last time before it dawns on me that I have no idea where I'm going. I could go to the movies, but I don't know what's playing. There's a gallery down the street, but I'm not sure if it's open this late. Maybe there's some fun Christmassy activity I could do somewhere in town...

I need to regroup, and the diner is the perfect place to do it. I turn yet again, hoping nobody inside has seen me pacing around out here, looking lost and confused. This time when I stop outside the diner, it's because someone has approached from the other side and is paused outside, hand hovering over the door handle as he studies me.

*"Cole?"*

"Sylvie." The surprise on his face quickly morphs into a bright smile. "I thought that was you, but wasn't sure now that you're...de-elfed?"

"I get that a lot," I say with a laugh. "Although if you were closer, you'd see I didn't quite get all the glitter off my face. That stuff really sticks."



I didn't expect him to take my words as an invitation, but he approaches slowly, his smile growing with every step. When he stops in front of me, his gaze moves slowly over my face. I have a feeling he's doing more than inspecting me for sparkles. He lifts his hand, letting it hover near my face before he gently brushes the pad of his thumb over my cheek.

He looks at his thumb and lets out a low, rumbling laugh. "They really do stick. They suit you, though."

"My inner Spice Girl thanks you."

He nods knowingly as he takes a step back and shoves his hands into his coat pockets. It's cold out here, but I can't help wondering if the movement is because he's holding himself back from touching me again. "My sister went through a Spice Girls phase," he says. "Our bathroom was perpetually covered in glitter, and I was always tripping over platform boots."

I grin at the image. "Your sister sounds like my kind of girl."

"You'd like her. I mean, I think you would. Is that weird to say?"

I shake my head. "Not weird." Several beats pass while we stare at each other. My cheeks ache from smiling, and I bet my expression holds the same hint of stunned wonder that Cole's does. "I thought you were heading back to Toronto when you left the Village."

"That was the plan, but I got a flat tire on my way to the highway," he says. "I didn't want to drive all the way back to the city on a spare, so I came into town and found a garage that was still open. They offered to change the tire and check out the strange clunking noise I've been hearing for awhile, so I thought I'd grab something to eat while I waited."

"Does it make me a bad person that I'm glad you got sidetracked and ended up here?"

He lets out a quiet huff of a laugh. "No. The second I saw you, I silently thanked whoever dropped the nail that got lodged in my tire."

My answering laugh comes out on a puff of white from the cold air. I draw my coat tighter around myself, pulling my hands up inside my sleeves.

“I should let you get on with your plans,” Cole says.

“No plans,” I say quickly. “Well, I *had* plans, but they were canceled at the last minute.”

“So you’re free right now?”

“Free as an elf the day after Christmas.” I immediately wince at my own bad joke—hazards of the job—but Cole chuckles.

“Feel like keeping me company in the diner while I wait for my car?”

I nod and follow him inside. Just like he silently thanked whoever dropped the nail that left him with a flat tire, I silently thank Mindy for bailing on me. I have some decisions to make regarding the future of our friendship, but for now I’m going to enjoy this unexpected time with this equally unexpected man. Chances like this don’t come along every day.

Inside, we pick an empty booth near the window and settle in. I can’t seem to keep my eyes off Cole as he unwinds his scarf and removes his coat, all while glancing around the diner. When his eyes land on mine, I realize I’ve been sitting here staring, so I quickly remove my own outerwear and grab a menu even though I know what I want. At least it gives me something to do with my hands.

“What’s good here?” Cole asks.

“Honestly? Everything. I was thinking about ordering poutine. Horatio, the cook, makes the best gravy.” I stop myself short of telling him I was craving comfort food.

“Ah man, I haven’t had poutine in forever. Does that make me a bad Canadian?”

“Nah. Maybe just a more health-conscious one?”

He chuckles. “Want to share an order?”

“Nope,” I say, popping the P and loving the way Cole’s eyes go wide in amused surprise. “I want one all to myself. *But* if you order something else, I’ll let you have a few of my fries. Maybe even a cheese curd or two.”

He lets out that full-body laugh again, the one that warmed my insides back at the Village when I broke into a jig. “That’s very magnanimous of you, but if it’s that good I guess I’ll have to order my own.”

As Bea approaches to take our order, I can see the curiosity written all over her face; she’s only ever seen me in here with my parents or Mindy. When Cole glances at the drink menu, Bea wiggles her eyebrows at me and tilts her head in his direction. I press my lips together to hold back a laugh, hoping she doesn’t say anything embarrassing or ask if we’re on a date. Bea isn’t exactly known for her filter or subtlety.

Luckily, she takes our order and leaves without comment, returning a moment later with our drinks.

“So...” Cole says as he fixes his coffee with milk and sugar. “I’m guessing you’re only an elf for a short time of the year?”

“November and December, yeah. The rest of the year I work as an assistant coordinator at the Village.”

“Do you like it?” he asks.

“I do. I always wanted to work with children or families. This is different from what I expected, but I still love it. I took Early Childhood Education in college, but after doing a string of placements in daycares and schools, I decided I’m not cut out for that. I worked as a nanny for a few years, but when the family moved away, I got an office job and then eventually the job at the Village. It allows me to work with families and kids in an indirect way.”

“And you’re satisfied with that?” Cole asks.

My eyebrows lift at the question.

“Sorry,” he says quickly. “I don’t mean to pry, I’m just genuinely curious. I wanted to ask you a thousand questions at the Village, but figured it might be weird.”

“That’s okay,” I tell him. It’s nice to have someone take an interest in me and my life. “I’m *mostly* satisfied. I love the job itself and I really do love the Village. I’d like to work directly with families, but I’m not sure in what capacity. I guess it’s something I need to add to my list of things to figure out next year.”

“Let 2021 Sylvie figure that out,” he says, waving a hand.

I laugh. “Exactly. What about you? Do you like your job other than this one less-than-desirable assignment?”

He raises his mug to his lips, but I can see the smile in his eyes. “For the most part, yes. It’s not exactly what I thought I’d be doing with my degree in photojournalism, but it’s led to some fun opportunities and a bit of traveling. Plus it’s allowed me to meet some great people I wouldn’t have met otherwise.”

“Present company included, of course,” I say, motioning to myself.

“Naturally.” He inclines his head and toasts me with his cup. “Present company is actually at the *top* of the list of people I’m grateful to have met through this job.”

I’m not sure whether I’m relieved or disappointed when Bea arrives right then with our food. I’m also not sure how I would have responded anyway. Is Cole flirting? Simply being friendly?

When Bea leaves, I say, “I wanted to ask you a thousand questions back at the Village too.”

“Well, ask away.”

I hesitate for a moment before deciding to dive right in and ask the question that’s at the forefront of my mind. “You said you’d been through something that caused your Grinchy attitude toward Christmas...”

“Hey, not so Grinchy now.” His words are followed by that crooked smile that does funny things to my heart. “You helped me see the error of my ways.”

His casual words feel like a deflection, which is fine. We’re still practically strangers and he doesn’t owe me any explanations or back story. I mentally fish around for a change in topic.

Cole releases a barely audible sigh. “Do you really want to know?”

“Only if you want to tell me.”

He ponders that and then nods. “Okay.” He drops his gaze to his plate, where he roughly spears a fry with his fork. “I was supposed to get married this week.”

I nearly choke on a cheese curd. It’s a good thing I’ve only taken a few bites because I’m sure the fries would feel like lead in my stomach otherwise. “Wow. Okay, um...wow.”

“Sorry. Guess I should have started at the beginning.” He gives me a rueful smile as I clear my throat and wipe my mouth with a napkin. “I was engaged until about two months ago. My now *ex*-fiancée wanted a Christmas-themed wedding. I didn’t love the idea at first, but it had always been her dream, so I went along with it. Even got really into the idea eventually and enjoyed helping her plan everything.”

“What happened?” I ask.

He lifts one shoulder, shaking his head. “Cold feet? Second thoughts? I’m not even sure *she* knows why she called it off. I told her if she needed more time, we could wait until next year. Or even elope if she was overwhelmed by the idea of a big wedding, even though it wasn’t that big. I was stunned and upset about her not wanting to get married, but I wanted to work things out and stay together. For whatever reason, *she* didn’t. She packed up and moved out of our apartment the day after she called off the wedding.”

I cringe. “That sounds brutal. ‘I’m sorry’ feels like such a stupid thing to say, but I *am* sorry.”

“Thanks. I thought I was doing pretty well—coping in my own way by burying myself in work and staying busy—but then December hit and it was a stream of constant reminders. Every time I turned on the radio, it was Christmas songs. Christmas movies on TV, Christmas decorations everywhere, a Santa Claus around every corner.”

“No wonder you hated the Bellevue Village assignment.”

“I felt like the universe was mocking me,” he says with a weary laugh. “Shoving reminders in my face in a steady barrage. But then...”

“Then...?”

He waves a hand and picks up his fork again, stuffing a giant bite of gravy-soaked fries into his mouth.

“It’s funny you think that’s going to deter me,” I say, pointing my fork in his direction before taking another bite of my own poutine.

Cole presses his lips together and laughs, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. After chewing and swallowing, he says, “Okay, fine. I was *going* to say...then I met you and it felt like a silver lining in the bleak shit clouds the universe has been throwing my way.”

Warmth rushes through me. Before I can say anything—which is probably a good thing because I’m tempted to make an embarrassing joke about silver linings and silver bells—he continues.

“I had forgotten how much I love this time of year. My initial hesitation about having a Christmas-themed wedding was because I liked the idea of celebrating our marriage and then subsequent anniversaries properly and not having them blend in or compete with Christmas.”

“Now *that’s* something I completely understand,” I tell him. “My birthday is right before Christmas and, even though my parents were amazing about keeping things separate, I always felt like my birthday was overlooked by other people because they’re so swept up in holiday stuff.”

“Right, exactly.” He leans forward slightly, his earnest expression lightening a fraction. “Also, happy early birthday.”

“Thank you.”

“Any plans for the big day?”

“Not really, no. The Village closes at noon that day, and I opted to work that morning so I could be around people.” He tilts his head to the side and, while I wouldn’t call it a look of pity, his expression has changed. Before he can ask anything else, I rush to add, “I’ll have the rest of the year off after that, so it’ll be like one long celebration of birthday, Christmas, and New Year’s.”

“That sounds fun,” he says, his smile returning. “Even though I’m feeling better about Christmas in general, I’ll likely work as much as possible through the holidays. I managed to get some of the deposits back for the wedding, but a lot of it was non-refundable. Plus we were supposed to go on a mini honeymoon right after the wedding, so I think it’ll be good to stay busy rather than sitting around and dwelling on that.”

“Good call,” I say. “Not to rub salt in the wound, but where were you planning to go?”

His lips twitch at my words. “Well, my ex wanted to go somewhere tropical, but I convinced her to do a short, local honeymoon and then plan something bigger later. We were going to go to Niagara Falls.”

“Oh.” My heart gives a little squeeze. I was supposed to go to Niagara Falls this month myself. “That would have been nice.”

“Yeah, it would. I’ve been to the Falls before, but always in the summer or autumn. I’m actually disappointed not to see the Festival of Lights.”

“You could still go on your own. Niagara Falls isn’t that far from Toronto.”

He makes a non-committal sound. “I think it’s still a bit too raw. You know those people who go on their honeymoon even though the wedding didn’t happen and they end up miserable because they imagine all the things they’d be doing with their new spouse? And even though nobody else knows, it *feels* like everyone knows and pities them? I think I’d feel like that. Maybe next year, though.”

“You could pitch it as a piece for *The Buzz* if they haven’t already done it. That way I could read about it and live vicariously. I’ve always wanted to visit Niagara Falls and see the Festival of Lights myself.”

“Why haven’t you?”

I consider taking the easy way out and simply saying I haven’t had the time or opportunity. But Cole opened up to me, and that couldn’t have been easy, so I decide to do the same. “I was actually supposed to go this month,” I say slowly. “My best friend told me we’d go for my birthday, but...”

“What happened?” he asks.

“I honestly don’t know. Things have been a bit strained between us this year; she made some new friends and we’ve been growing apart ever since. She was the one who came up with the idea of going to the Falls. She said we’d go all out and celebrate my birthday in style: get a nice hotel, have fancy dinners and cocktails, do a bit of gambling and shopping, plus see the lights. Then last week when I asked if she’d booked a hotel, she said she had to cancel. Well, technically, she said ‘*postpone*’, but I’m not holding my breath.”

Cole reaches across the table and lets his hand hover over mine where it rests on the table. I think he’s going to cover it with his, but he brushes my knuckles with his fingers and retracts his hand. “That’s really shitty. I’m sorry, Sylvie.”

I lift one shoulder and attempt to smile, hoping it doesn’t look too much like a grimace. “Thanks. It is what it is. I



haven't felt like a priority with her for a long time, and this just cemented it."

"Still, it has to hurt," he says. All I can do is nod. "Could you go on your own?"

"I purposely picked up extra shifts after my birthday plans got canceled. The next week is going to be intense at the Village, and I couldn't leave them hanging. Besides, like you said, if I went on my own I'd likely spend the entire time imagining what could have been."

Now it's Cole's turn to nod wordlessly. I've never had anyone look at me with such kindness and sympathy before; I don't think he pities me, just genuinely feels bad about the situation.

"Hey, maybe we'll both go next year and we'll run into each other," I say, hoping to lighten the mood.

He lets out a quiet laugh. "You never know. Could happen."

It's unlikely; the festival runs from November through most of February, so the odds of going at the same time are extremely slim. Still, it's a nice thought, and I succeeded in making Cole smile again with my suggestion.

We finish our food, and I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. On my way there, a flyer on the notice board catches my eye. It's an advertisement for the gallery down the street; they're open every night this week and they've waived the usual entrance fee, but are requesting donations for the local food bank. Now I know where I'm going when Cole and I leave. Maybe I can even convince him to stick around for another hour or so to accompany me.

When I return to the table, our plates have been cleared and mine has been replaced with a huge slice of chocolate cake.

Cole grins when he sees me. "I considered asking them to make a big thing of it—y'know, stick a candle in, sing the

birthday song—but didn't know if it would embarrass you. Personally, I hate that stuff.”

“I do too,” I say as I slide back into my seat. “Thank you so much for this.”

“Of course. I hope you get to do something fun on your actual birthday, but I liked the idea of getting to have a small, early celebration with you.” His voice is soft and his smiling eyes are locked with mine.

A sudden, intense sense of longing kindles inside me. Longing for him, for *this*. Laughter and food, meaningful glances, sharing bits and pieces of ourselves. And more: fingers lacing, lips brushing, bodies entwining. What would it be like? That familiar ache of loneliness I've felt for months creeps up again, settling in my chest like a heavy weight.

It disappears as quickly as it came when Cole hands me a fork and raises one of his own. “Bea brought two forks. I know you didn't want to share your poutine, but how do you feel about sharing cake?”

I clench the hand in my lap, digging my nails into the skin of my palm to shake off the last of the melancholy. “Normally? No dice. But for you, I'll make an exception.”

I clink my fork against his and we dig into the cake. We keep the conversation light now, talking about work and our plans for the holidays: he'll be spending Christmas with his brother, who's a single dad to the niece he mentioned earlier, and I'll be visiting various family members between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day. The cake is as delicious as it looks, but I don't think I'm the only one eating it extra slow to prolong our time together; I saw the bites Cole took while eating his poutine, and they were nothing like the almost dainty bites he takes now.

When we reach the last mouthful, he sets down his fork and pushes the plate closer to me. I take my time eating it, savoring the chocolatey goodness and what might be my last few moments with Cole.

A beeping sound draws his attention away from me. He rifles in the pocket of his coat and pulls out his phone, glancing briefly at the screen. “I really hate to say this...”

“Your car’s ready?” I ask.

He nods. “I wish we had more time, but I should get going. I’m going to be up half the night at this rate.”

I glance around for Bea, not wanting Cole to see the war of emotions playing out on my face. Sadness, indecision, the desire to ask him to stick around for just a bit longer. Or maybe even the whole night. “I’ll go find Bea and ask her for the check.”

“I already took care of it when you were in the bathroom,” he says. “Happy birthday, Sylvie. And Merry Christmas and... thank you. For everything.”

Heat floods my cheeks, although I have no idea why. Better that than tears flooding my eyes, I suppose. “Thank *you*. I had a great time with you today.”

“I did too,” he says. “Can I walk you to your car?”

I think about returning home to my quiet apartment. Putting on my pajamas and cuddling with Milo in front of the TV. Trying not to think about how abandoned I feel by Mindy or how much I like Cole, who I’ll probably never see again. “I think I’ll head to the gallery down the street, actually. It’s in the opposite direction from the garage, so...”

“I’d like to walk with you anyway if that’s okay.”

At my nod, we climb from the booth and don our coats. I wave to Bea, who’s now standing behind the front counter. She waves back, shooting me a wink. I’m sure she’ll have a million questions the next time I see her.

I lead the way into the cold, clear night, inhaling deeply and watching my breath puff out in a cloud of white. Without a word, we turn in the direction of the gallery and walk side by side, both of us with our hands stuffed in the pockets of our coats.

From the corner of my eye, I see Cole glancing around at the lights strung on every surface and the evergreens in front of all the businesses lining the street.

“Is this evoking your Christmas hate-on?” I ask.

“Nah, it’s not so bad. One of Santa’s elves helped me see the error of my ways. And *wow*, that’s a sentence I never thought would come out of my mouth.”

I laugh and he chuckles along with me. He frees his hands from his pockets and catches my sleeve, pulling me to a stop. I turn to face him, sliding my hands from my own pockets and feeling a little thrill when he reaches for them and grips them both loosely.

“I don’t want to leave,” he says quietly, all traces of humor fading from his expression.

“I don’t want you to leave either.”

“I wish I could suggest we exchange numbers and see where this might go, but I don’t think that’d be fair to either of us. Long distance sucks, even if it *is* only two hours, and I’m still kind of reeling from everything with my ex...”

“It’s okay, I get it.” I contemplate asking him to stay. To come to the gallery with me and then maybe get a drink afterward, then go back to my place to spend the night. That thought has a completely different thrill zipping through me, one that causes warm tingles low in my belly.

But Cole would have to return to Toronto in the morning regardless. Who knows what complicating things with intimacy would do to my heart, which is already feeling a bit bruised. At least if he leaves now, I’ll be left with the memories of this wonderful day. Being with Cole has stirred up so many long-forgotten feelings. It’s also stirred up that growing sense of loneliness, which has shown me it’s time to make some changes in my life. At least now I realize the connection I crave is possible because I feel it with him, even if it’s fleeting.

His grip tightens on mine, and I realize I've been completely spaced out, staring at our joined hands. I look at him now and his face is turned up, eyes trained on something above us. "Is that mistletoe?"

I follow his gaze to the greenery attached to the light post above us. "Actually, I think it's holly."

When my eyes drop back to his, he's watching me. I don't remember moving, but somehow we're standing closer. It's like our bodies are magnetized, drawing us together. I can feel his warm breath on my face and the heat of his body only inches from mine.

"Can we pretend it's mistletoe?" he asks.

The words are soft, barely above a whisper. When I sway closer, he releases my hands to wrap his arms around my waist. The few remaining inches between us disappear as he pulls me against him. His lips hover a breath away from mine, as if waiting for me to give consent. Rather than speaking, I lift up on my toes and press my mouth to his.

The kiss is soft and exploratory, sweet and lingering. I forget about the chill of the night and the people on the sidewalk up ahead. I forget about everything but the two of us, enjoying our last few moments together before going our separate ways.

When our lips part, Cole rests his forehead against mine, sighing softly. "Maybe...maybe I could...or we could..."

I press my lips to his briefly to cut off his words. "As much as I hate to say this, I think we should say good night here. We both have a lot going on and, like you said, long distance sucks."

His arms are still around me, his hands sliding up and down my back over my coat. I wish I could wiggle my nose and make the thick material disappear so I'd know what it feels like to have his hands on my bare skin.

"You're probably right." With another sigh, he releases me and takes a step back. The air suddenly feels several degrees

colder. I draw my coat tighter around me, and he does the same.

“Who knows, we might run into each other again someday,” I say. “You were supposed to have another elf show you around the Village today. And then we met again when I thought you’d already be halfway back to Toronto. Maybe *The Buzz* will send you back this way sometime next year and we’ll run into each other again.”

“Or maybe we’ll both end up at the Festival of Lights at the same time next year.”

“Right, you never know.” Despite the grins on both our faces, I can feel mine wavering around the edges. It’s a nice thought, but I think we both know it’ll never happen. Still, we’ll always have this one perfect day, and I’m certain I’ll pull up memories of Cole often.

“Well.” Cole stuffs his hands in his pockets again, then immediately pulls them out and lifts his arms. “Should we hug goodbye? We’ve kinda done things out of order, haven’t we? Kissing before hugging.”

I throw my arms around his shoulders, closing my eyes tightly as his arms encircle me and hold me close. He turns his face into my hair, breathing in deeply before pressing a kiss just above my ear. “Have a great birthday next week, Sylvie. I hope all your birthday wishes come true this year.”

“Thank you.” My voice wavers, and I clear my throat. “I hope you have a good Christmas despite...everything.”

He laughs under his breath, releasing me slowly and taking a step back. “After tonight, I’m a bit more willing to embrace the magic of the season, so I think it’ll be okay.”

“Good. Well...drive safe.”

I wait for him to say something else, but he simply nods again, looking resigned. “Bye, Sylvie. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Cole.”

He grips my arm as he steps around me, giving it a quick squeeze. I stay where I am for several beats, listening to the sound of his footsteps fading. A huge part of me wants to turn around and run to him, suggest we find a way to see where this might go. But I don't need any more complications in my life right now, and I don't think he does either.

I resist the temptation to glance over my shoulder for one last look at him. Instead, I hurry the rest of the way to the gallery and step inside the bright, warm space.

## **PART II ~ DECEMBER 2021**

### **CHAPTER THREE**

Niagara Falls is everything I hoped it would be.

When I told my friend Janie I was planning a solo birthday trip to the Falls in December, she thought I was nuts. “Won’t it be too cold to do anything? Will places even be open? Will the Falls be frozen?” I pointed out that we live in Canada, so if we’re going to be cold anyway, it might as well be somewhere beautiful.

Her next question was: “Do you want me and the girls to go with you?” I had laughed, even as my heart swelled with affection and gratitude. I told her I appreciated the offer, but this was something I had to do on my own, and we’d plan a trip for spring or summer when it was warmer. She’d liked that idea much better.

So here I am, alone in the Honeymoon Capital of the World, celebrating my thirty-fourth birthday and the amazing year that just passed. When I turned thirty-three last year, I sensed big changes were ahead, and the thought had me equal parts excited and nervous. This past year has been one of beginnings, endings, trials, and triumphs.

Tonight is my last of four nights in the Falls. Since it’s off season, all the hotels are cheap, which means instead of the budget motel I initially planned to book, I was able to splurge on a nice place with a view of the Falls and an indoor pool. I’ve spent more time than I can account for simply wandering the promenade in front of the Falls, mesmerized by the sights and sounds of the rushing water. I’ve also played tourist and



walked up and down Clifton Hill countless times, checking out some of the wonderfully cheesy attractions like Louis Tussaud's Waxworks and Ripley's Believe It or Not! I was able to take my time—and as many ridiculous selfies as I wanted—because most places are half empty.

I've also wandered through the Festival of Lights every night. It's beautiful and peaceful and fills my Christmas-loving heart...but I'd be lying if I said I haven't been keeping an eye out for Cole. I've met other tourists along the way and was even invited to join a group of women at the Rainforest Café for drinks on my second night here, but my eyes are always peeled for a man with tousled dark hair, blue-gray eyes, and a heart-stopping smile.

The night is cool and damp, and mist hangs in the air from the Falls. It's not as cold here as I expected it to be, but the fresh air has had the effect of clearing my mind and helping me reflect on the past year while preparing for the year ahead.

I stop in front of a display of giant, glowing silver bells. I saw them my first night here and snapped a selfie to send to my dad. He and my mom didn't love the idea of me coming here alone or spending my birthday on my own, but they understand how much has changed for me this year and that I needed this. The day I left, my dad showed up at my apartment, telling me he wanted to be with Milo when I left—Milo doesn't travel well, so my parents offered to check in on him while I'm away—and right before I walked out the door, Dad slipped some cash into my hand and told me how proud he is of me.

I'm about to carry on down the path when the sound of a man humming reaches my ears. I slip my hand into my pocket and finger my keys; I've felt safe here, even at night, but you can never be too careful. The hand gripping my keys trembles slightly when the hummed notes become clear and I realize the tune is "Silver Bells".

I turn slowly in the direction of the sound. It's a coincidence. It's simply someone with a popular holiday song

stuck in their head. I've heard at least a dozen renditions of it since I've been here; in fact, a souvenir shop was blasting Michael Bublé's version when I passed on my way here tonight.

My eyes land on Cole as he saunters under a nearby lamppost, the yellow glow illuminating him like a spotlight. He sings, "It's Christmas time in the city," in a clear, soft voice that makes me understand the phrase 'weak in the knees' for the first time in my life. He stops in front of me, cocking his head to the side. "Is Niagara Falls a city? Or a town?"

"A city," I say, giddy laughter bubbling inside me and making the words shaky.

"That's what I thought." His gaze seems to drink me in, sweeping over me before returning to my face. His eyes are bright in the darkness, and I don't think it's my imagination that he's feeling the same excitement and wonder I am at this moment. "Well, Silver Bells, are you gonna hug me or what?"

I launch myself at him, letting the laughter spill from my lips as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me tight to his body. He chuckles softly in my ear, his breath ruffling my hair. I'm almost afraid to release him in case I suddenly wake up back in my fancy hotel room and realize I've been dreaming.

"You're here," he says, loosening his hold on me. He releases me in increments, his hands gripping my shoulders, then my upper arms, then finally sliding to grip my glove-covered hands. "You're really here."

"*You're* really here," I echo, unable to form any other intelligible words. It's my turn to drink him in now; a five o'clock shadow has sprouted on his face, and his hair is a bit longer than it was last year. The mist in the air has made it curl around his ears and forehead in a way that's both adorable *and* sexy as hell. Somehow, he looks even better than he did a year ago.

"The first thing I did when I arrived yesterday was check out the festival," he says. "I felt a bit ridiculous looking for

you, but I couldn't help it. I came again earlier tonight too, around dusk. Even saw someone I thought was you and stopped myself just before accosting her. I went back to my hotel and was about to leave town when I felt this weird pull to take one more stroll through the lights."

"I feel like I should make a joke about a journalist trusting their gut, but..."

"But it seems like more than that?"

"Exactly. Like...serendipity."

Cole's crooked smile draws my attention to his lips, reminding me what it was like to kiss him last year while standing under a lamppost decked with maybe-mistletoe.

"Are you here alone?" he asks. The question is tentative, making me wonder if he's not quite sure he wants to hear the answer.

"I am. Are you?"

He nods, releasing one of my hands to brush a fly-away bit of hair from my face. I can only imagine how I must look right now; besides my bewilderment at seeing him, I likely have a halo of frizz around my hairline from the moisture in the air. When I returned to the hotel the first night, I cackled when I saw my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I'm used to my hair looking like that in the heat of summer, not in December temperatures.

I'm not sure what I expect him to say next, but it's not, "Did you read my piece about the Village on *The Buzz*?"

"I did. It was fantastic. You have a real gift with words, Cole. And photography too, especially with just a camera phone."

He smiles again, ducking his head. "Thank you. It was a fun piece to write."

I poke his arm, my finger sinking into the thick material of his coat. "I particularly liked the bit about how it's not every day you see an elf dancing a jig."

He peers down at my boot-clad feet. “Care to do a jig for me now?”

“Sorry, I’ve hung up my elf-slash-jigging shoes for the season.”

“Does that mean you worked as an elf again this year?”

I ponder how much can be said in the short amount of time we have together. “I did part-time elf duty in between my new full-time gig.”

Cole studies my face for a long moment. He releases one of my hands again, this time to glance at his watch. “Do you feel like wandering for a bit? Maybe getting a drink?”

His suggestion makes my heart surge with something akin to hope. “I thought you were heading back to Toronto?”

“That was the plan, but it seems fate or serendipity or some cosmic force had something else in mind, don’t you think?”

I press my lips together to hold back a smile, but it’s no use. “I mean, it seems disrespectful to the universe to squander this serendipitous encounter.”

“Agreed. So...*do* you have time for a wander and a drink?”

“I have all night.” The words come out quiet and weighty, sounding like an invitation. That wasn’t my intention and yet it *does* feel as if some higher power has intervened to bring us together again. I’ve thought about Cole so many times in the last year. I’ve wondered how different things might have been if we’d had a bit more time together that night or if I’d invited him back to my place. I can’t let this opportunity slip through my fingers.

“Well, then, so do I.” He turns to the side, offering me his arm. I link mine through his and we set off through the Festival of Lights.

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“To serendipity,” I say, lifting my glass toward Cole.

“To serendipity,” he echoes. “And Niagara Falls. And *you*. It’s really damn good to see you again, Sylvie.”

“It’s really damn good to see you again too, Cole.” I clink my glass against his and take a sip of the bright red liquid. The cocktail is called Christmas Punch, and it’s fruity and fizzy with a kick of rum. Cole was going to get a beer, but it took less convincing than anticipated to get him to try the Christmas Punch with me.

We spent the last hour wandering through the Festival of Lights before visiting the beautifully illuminated Falls. We didn’t say much as we walked, or as we turned in unison and began the trek up Clifton Hill.

I was so wrapped up in Cole—his wintry scent, the warmth of his hand in mine, his deep voice and quiet laughter—I didn’t even notice the name of the bar we slipped into. The low-lit room is about half full, and every inch is decorated for the holidays.

My face hurts from smiling and laughing so much, and I laugh again now at Cole’s puckered expression as he sets his drink down.

“Tell me about the last year,” he says.

“Wow, that’s a tall order.”

He tilts his head. He’s still grinning at me, and I can feel the growing smile on my own face just from having his attention on me. “The highlights, then.”

“The highlights.” I take another sip of my drink. “Okay. Well. After the Christmas holidays, I went back to my regular job as an assistant coordinator at the Village. I was torn about what to do; I loved my job, but wanted something *more*, you know? I decided to be honest and tell my boss where my head was at when I went in for a performance review in the spring.

“He’s a philanthropist who not only owns Bellevue Village, but also does a ton of work around town with various groups

and charities. He told me he'd been working with the local family support center and was planning to open a second branch within the Village. The new center opened last month and, long story short, Hugh pulled some strings and I'll be starting a new job there the first week of January."

"That's fantastic, Sylvie," Cole says. "I'm assuming it's the type of thing you were hoping for or you wouldn't have taken it."

"It's *exactly* what I was hoping for," I tell him, my voice growing more animated by the second. "I'll be working with families and, because of my background with my previous job, I get to help organize activities and events—everything from parent/baby classes to toddler tumbling classes to special events for tweens and teens."

"That sounds incredible. I'm so happy for you." He reaches across the table to grip my hand. "And you said you donned your elf gear again this season?"

"I did," I say with a laugh. "It's too much fun not to. I'm going to see if I can somehow manage it part-time next Christmas too."

"I might have to make a return trip to Bellevue Village if that's the case," he says, leaning closer.

My cheeks heat with pleasure from the combination of his proximity and the hint of promise in his tone. "What about you? Are you still working for *The Buzz*?"

Cole studies me, his lips twitching slightly at the corners. After a moment, he eases back in his seat and nods. "I am, yeah. At the beginning of the year, I put out feelers for something different, but nothing was coming up. I realized I was lucky to be doing something in my chosen field, even if it wasn't what I thought I'd be doing, so I really dove into the assignments they gave me. It paid off because this past summer they offered me a promotion. I get to choose a lot of my own assignments now, and I've been traveling all over the province."

“Congratulations! That’s so great, Cole.” I toast him with my glass and he inclines his head in my direction. “Does that mean you’re away from Toronto a lot?”

“Quite a bit, yeah. I don’t know if I’ll want to keep this up long term, but I figured now’s the time to do it while I’m unattached and don’t have someone waiting at home for me, you know?”

“Right, makes sense.”

Silence descends as we both sip our drinks. I thought maybe us running into each other again was a sign we were meant to pursue our connection. But we still live in different cities, and Cole is away from home a lot, which would add an extra layer of complication to a budding relationship. Still, an undeniable thrill zipped through me when I heard he’s still single.

“I’ve thought about contacting you so many times,” he says. “I even found you on Facebook awhile back, but closed the app before I could send you a message.”

Now I’m the one who leans across the table, my voice low as I admit, “I did the same thing.” We both chuckle. I don’t add that I still pull up his page about once a month and contemplate messaging him.

“I talked myself out of it for a million reasons,” he says. “I told myself we only spent a few hours together last year and you probably forgot about me immediately and would think it was creepy I’d tracked you down. Then I told myself there was no way the connection I felt was one-sided, but it would be unfair to open the door and start something when I could only give you bits and pieces of myself.”

“I get that,” I say. “I hate it, but I get it.”

He sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly. “I can give you all of myself tonight, though.”

The words seem to hang in the air between us, thick with layers of meaning. Whether he means hanging out here in this bar for the rest of the evening or something more, I’ll take it. I

can deal with the inevitable heartache later. “I can give you all of myself tonight too.”

He smiles and drains the rest of his cocktail, shuddering slightly as he sets the glass on the table. “I think this calls for another round. Would you like the same thing or do you want to try something different?”

I tell him I’ll stick to my sugary Christmas cocktail, and watch him head for the bar. He chats with the bartender as he orders and pays for our drinks. He keeps talking even after the bartender places two glasses in front of him. The bartender glances over Cole’s shoulder at me and nods along to whatever he’s saying before accepting the cash Cole slides across the bar.

He returns to the table, setting another bright red cocktail in front of me, along with a beer for himself. I don’t have a chance to ask what the exchange with the bartender was about before he says, “Did you ever sort things out with your friend?” I must look taken aback by the sudden question because he adds, “Sorry, but we don’t have much time together and I have a million things I want to say and ask floating around in my head. That was the first thing that popped out.”

“It’s okay. I appreciate that you even remember.”

“I remember everything from that day, Sylvie. *Everything.*”

The earnestness of his words paired with the intensity of his gaze makes heat creep into my cheeks. It’s reassuring—and somewhat thrilling—to know that day last December meant as much to him as it did to me. “I do too,” I tell him before taking a big gulp of my drink. “As for my friend...we continued to drift apart until there was nothing left. Her new friends and her new life took priority, and I decided I wasn’t interested in settling for the crumbs of her attention and affection anymore.”

“So what happened?”

I blow out a breath, shaking my head. “Basically, our contact petered out until there was nothing. Part of me knew I



should confront her, tell her how I felt, see if we could salvage our friendship, but the other part of me figured if she didn't even notice or care we'd drifted apart, what was the point? I was sure if I tried to talk to her about it, she'd get defensive and probably even angry—she's never been one to take responsibility or accept the blame for anything—so I thought why bother? Let it end with a whimper instead of a bang. At least then I wouldn't have the memories of a huge blowout to add to all the other hurt.”

“I'm so sorry, Sylvie. I had something similar happen with a friend from college, and it sucked. We *did* have a big blowout, and there are times even all these years later when I wish I'd just let things fizzle out on their own.”

“Sometimes I feel like a coward for not confronting her,” I tell him. “Like our years of friendship deserved more than her walking away and me letting her.”

“You didn't *let* her, though, not really. You kept making an effort, right? Sometimes you get to a point where it's too exhausting and painful to be in a one-sided relationship, and it's easier—and healthier—to let go.”

“Exactly. I wasn't worth the time and effort for her to remain my friend, so why should I put myself through the emotional wringer of having a friendship breakup?”

Because that's what it was: a breakup. People talk about breakups in terms of romantic relationships, but rarely about friendship breakups. If that friend is a big part of your life, you have hopes and dreams and plans for the future, the same way you do in a romantic relationship. So even when the breakup is for the best—a person is toxic or you're growing apart or want different things from life—the end of that relationship and that era in your life causes heartache and grief.

Cole lays his hand over mine where it rests on the table. I turn my hand and intertwine our fingers, nearly melting at the understanding smile he gives me.

“I’m not a complete sad sack,” I tell him. “I made some new friends this year, including someone I met the same day you and I did.”

Cole lets out a laugh that’s a mixture of surprise and delight. “You’re kidding.”

“It was my lucky day, apparently.” I let the words hang between us for a moment. Cole’s fingers tighten around mine as his smile inches up. “Remember how I was going to the gallery down the street from the diner? Well, I met the manager and we struck up a conversation, then kept gravitating toward each other the rest of the evening. Before I left, we exchanged numbers, and she called me the next day to invite me to lunch with her friends, who are now also *my* friends.”

“That’s incredible. People rarely talk about how difficult it can be to make friends as an adult, especially if you’re not really one to put yourself out there.”

“Exactly! I love my work friends to bits, but we don’t hang out much outside of work. I never minded because I had Mindy, and she was all I felt I needed.” Saying the words leaves a sour taste in my mouth. Sometimes I’m completely fine and have myself convinced I’m over the hurt and anger and disappointment. Other times—now more fleeting than before, thankfully—sadness washes over me when I think of her. I never let myself dwell on it for long, though. And I’m *definitely* not going to dwell on it tonight.

“None of your new friends wanted to come to Niagara Falls?” Cole asks, drawing me from my thoughts and reminding me to live in this moment and savor my time with him.

“They actually did,” I say, laughing when his eyebrows wing up. “They thought it would make a fun girls’ trip, but I told them it was something I wanted to do on my own and we’d plan a few trips for next year. Even though I love my new friends and I’m grateful to have found them, I’ve also made it a point to learn to be by myself and enjoy my own

company. I depended too much on Mindy, and never learned to do things on my own. Now I take myself on solo dates regularly. Dinner, shopping, the movies...”

“Niagara Falls.”

I chuckle. “Yes, Niagara Falls. There have been a few moments when I’ve wished I’d let them come with me, but it’s been nice to decompress on my own and evaluate this past year while planning for next year.”

Cole leans in, covering our joined hands with his free one. “Is it weird to say I’m proud of you?”

I mirror his body language, inching closer to him. His cologne fills my senses and makes me want to close the small distance between us entirely to bury my face in his neck. “Not weird; I appreciate it. I’m proud of myself too.”

Cole shifts closer to me, his eyes dropping to my lips before meeting mine again. I hold my breath, expecting him to kiss me. He leans in, but his face veers to the side and his lips brush against my cheek, lingering for a moment before pulling back. He picks up his beer, watching me over the rim of his glass as he takes a drink. “Should we...” His words trail off as his gaze darts over my shoulder, his eyes widening comically. “Now *that’s* something you don’t see every day.”

The music that’s been playing at medium volume suddenly swells. As I turn to see what Cole is staring at, I recognize the tune as “Viva Las Vegas” by Elvis. I let out a little snort of surprise and amusement that’s mercifully drowned out by the music. Climbing onto a small stage across the room is a man wearing a spangled red jumpsuit with a Santa hat set at a jaunty angle atop his black pompadour.

“Is that...” I say.

“Santa? Or Elvis? Santa Elvis?”

When the man reaches the microphone and turns to the crowd, my eyes widen further. Santa Elvis bears a striking resemblance to a young Elvis Presley. A hush falls over the

room as he greets the small crowd, glancing around with a dazzling smile.

With my back still to Cole, I can feel the heat of his body as he leans in close and whispers, “I was going to suggest we leave, but I don’t think we can now. I’m too curious.”

“Agreed,” I whisper back, my eyes glued to the man on stage, who’s now flirting with a pair of young women who have moved closer to the stage.

Cole taps my shoulder and I swivel to look at him. “Why don’t you move your chair next to mine so you don’t have to sit at such an awkward angle?”

I stand and he slides my chair beside his, leaving a mere inch or two of space between our seats. He slings one arm over the back of the chair and motions for me to sit. His arm drops around my shoulders the minute my butt hits the chair, and I take that as my cue to snuggle against him.

Santa Elvis has apparently finished his flirtation because he saunters back to the center of the stage. He swings his hips and strikes a pose as the peppy opening notes of “Santa Bring My Baby Back to Me” ring out through the bar. When he grabs the microphone and starts singing, a delighted laugh spills from my lips; not only does he look like Elvis, he sounds like him too. The short song transitions into “Santa Claus is Back in Town”, during which Santa Elvis struts around the stage, swinging his Santa hat by its fluffy white bauble.

“This is so wonderfully, unexpectedly weird,” Cole says, and I laugh in agreement. He nuzzles my neck, his warm breath tickling my ear as he adds, “Kind of like us finding each other tonight.”

“That’s one of the reasons I love this time of year,” I say, my head tilted in his direction, but my eyes glued to the stage. “It feels like anything can happen. Run into the guy you spent a few hours with a year ago and have thought of a million times since? Sure, why not? Choose a random bar for a drink

and end up being serenaded by a guy who's the spitting image of Elvis Presley? No big deal, just a little Christmas magic."

Cole doesn't respond, so I peek at him from the corner of my eye. When I see he's watching me with a soft smile, I face him fully, loving how his smile grows as our eyes meet. Something unspoken passes between us. This time when he leans in, his lips land on mine. I barely have time to react before he straightens in his seat, the smile returning to his face as his arm tightens around my shoulders.

We give Santa Elvis our full attention after that. He sings a few more songs, including a personal favorite of mine, "Blue Christmas". I take a few pictures on my phone because this is a moment that needs to be shared, especially with my mom, who's a lifelong Elvis fan. After a moment's hesitation, I turn the camera to selfie mode. Cole ducks down so we're cheek to cheek, and I snap a few pictures of us with our matching grins. I regretted not getting a picture of him last year, and I have a feeling I'll look at these photos often as a reminder of this magical night.

Santa Elvis's set lasts no more than thirty minutes, and he leaves the stage to a rousing round of applause and cheers. I was so wrapped up in the man on stage, along with the one beside me, I hadn't noticed how the bar had filled with people. Every table is now occupied, plus all the seats at the bar are full, and people are milling around in clusters. It feels like someone suddenly turned up the volume in the bar as music resumes playing from hidden speakers and voices rise to be heard.

"Ready to go?" Cole asks.

"Definitely."

We stand and gather our coats. "I just need to do something real quick," he says. "Do you want to wait here or make your way to the exit?"

"I'll detour to the bathroom and then meet you at the door?"

Cole nods once, kisses my cheek, and disappears into the crowd.

When I exit the bathroom a few minutes later, I pause, tucking my purse between my knees so I can put my coat on. The Christmas Punch must be messing with my balance because my purse slips from between my legs at the same moment my coat slips from my fingers. I spin around in time to see someone dart forward and catch my coat before it hits the floor.

“Thank you so much,” I say breathlessly, reaching for my coat. As my gaze meets a pair of inky dark eyes, my outstretched arm freezes.

Santa Elvis chuckles at my reaction. “Here, let me help.” He makes a twirling motion with his finger and holds up my coat with the arm holes facing me. After he assists me, I scoop my purse from the floor and sling it across my body.

“Thanks,” I say. “Your set tonight was great. I feel like I was transported back in time and got to see Elvis live and in person.”

He smiles broadly, the dim overhead lights reflecting off his pearly whites. “That’s quite the compliment. I’m glad you enjoyed the show.”

“Loved it.” I’m gushing, but I can’t seem to help it. This guy bears an uncanny resemblance to Elvis, and I feel star struck. “This night has been full of Christmas magic, and getting to see you perform was part of it.”

“Well, I’m all about Christmas magic,” he says, tweaking the bauble on his Santa hat, which is still perched on his head. “Whenever I do the Santa Elvis gig, people run up to me afterward to tell me what they want for Christmas.”

“Is that all they run up to you for?” I ask, tilting my head and giving him a wry smile.

He tosses his head back and releases a burst of laughter. “There are certainly other reasons.” His tone and expression are flirty, but as he gives me an appraising look, the flirtation

is replaced by something akin to kindness. “Want to make a wish to Santa Elvis? I’ve heard I’m good luck.” He winks at me, but it’s friendly with a hint of mischief rather than flirtatious.

I laugh at the surrealness of this situation: standing in a cramped, dimly-lit hallway in a bar in Niagara Falls with Elvis Presley’s doppelganger, who’s just asked me to make a wish as if he’s truly Santa Claus. “You know, I think I’m good. I have everything I want this year.”

“There’s nothing your heart desires?” He leans one shoulder against the wall, waving a hand in the air. “Put it out there into the universe, darlin’. If Santa can’t handle it, the universe will.”

Yep. Surreal. But really, why not? While I wouldn’t usually blurt out my heart’s desire to a stranger, it’s not like I’m ever going to see this guy again. And considering my upturn of luck this last year, I’d say it’s worth putting it out there.

I’ve always taken wishes seriously. Birthday candles, stars, dandelion fluff. The wishes don’t necessarily come true, but that doesn’t stop me. I’ve discovered over the years that when it comes time to make a wish, it’s like having a moment of clarity. What’s important to me? *Who* is important to me? What do I want for the year ahead?

Do I wish to see Cole again? Wish that my friendship with Mindy can somehow be repaired? Wish to excel in my new job? My mind strays back to Cole and what feels like our fateful encounters the last two Decembers. It *has* to mean something, doesn’t it? After another moment’s contemplation, I say, “It’s unlikely it’ll ever happen, but—”

“Bup bup bup,” Elvis says, straightening and crossing his arms over his sparkly red jumpsuit-clad chest. “Positive thinking. That’s the key to getting shit done.”

I sputter out a laugh. “Okay, positive thinking. I wish for... my own happily ever after. Whatever that looks like.”

Elvis's slow nod makes the bauble on his hat bounce back and forth. "A happily ever after. I like it." His gaze shifts past me and his dark eyes sparkle as his smile kicks up a notch. I peer over my shoulder to see one of the women he was flirting with before his show earlier. He pats me on the shoulder as he moves around me, leaning in close to say, "I wish you all the luck in the world, pretty lady. As for me, I'm off to go get my own happy ending, if you catch my drift."

I'm still laughing to myself a minute later as I wade through the crowd to get to the exit. Cole is waiting there, his eyes sweeping the room. The second he sees me, the concerned crinkle of his brow disappears, and the grin he gives me has my stomach swooping and fluttering.

"All set?" he asks when I join him. At my nod, he crooks his arm and lifts it toward me. In his other hand, he's holding a small white takeout box that's stamped with a logo from one of the restaurants we passed on our way here.

"What's that?" I ask as I loop my arm through his.

Eyes twinkling, he cups his free hand around his ear and shakes his head. "Sorry, can't hear you."

Outside the bar, we walk a few feet down the sidewalk and then he gently pulls me to a stop. "You said earlier there were a few times you wished your friends were here to do things with you. What were they?"

"Oh..." I'm suddenly embarrassed to admit I love doing cheesy tourist things. As a photojournalist, I'm sure Cole has been forced into doing all kinds of touristy things for the sake of his job—last year's trip to Bellevue Village is proof of that—but I don't know if he'd do any of them by choice. "Well, I, um, wanted to do Dinosaur Adventure Golf." He laughs, but I'm not sure if it's the admission or the way I scrunch my nose when I say it. "And the SkyWheel."

"Huh, okay." He glances up and down the street. "I think it's a bit too cold for golfing with dinosaurs, but we could do SkyWheel if you want. The gondolas are heated." He must



sense my hesitation because he holds up the white container and wiggles his eyebrows. “We can have this on the ride.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind doing something so touristy?”

“Not at all. The views are great, and it’ll give me an excuse to snuggle up close to you again like we did in the bar.”

“Snuggling is good,” I say. “Except the next time you kiss me, I hope it lasts longer than a few seconds.”

We’ve started walking again and Cole nearly stumbles. He chuckles under his breath, slinging his arm around my shoulders, and giving me a crooked smile that warms me from head to toe. “Your wish is my command.”

The words remind me of Santa Elvis telling me to make a wish. I thought it was better to keep it broad because there are a million possibilities and a million different versions of happily ever after. And right now, as Cole tucks me against his side, I can’t help wishing one of those versions somehow includes him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

For the entire first revolution of the SkyWheel, I'm plastered to the window of our gondola, watching in awe as the view of the city and the Falls becomes more and more spectacular. As we begin our second slow ascent into the sky, Cole nudges me with his knee and holds out the white box he's been carrying since we left the bar.

"Can we wait?" I ask. My mind swirls with ways to tell him I want to prolong our time together as much as possible, draw out every second we have since the clock is ticking toward the unknown. Despite my inability to articulate what I'm feeling, Cole seems to understand. He sets the box on the other side of the bench and inches closer to me, pulling me into his arms and angling me so I can see out the window again.

Ten minutes later, we're back on solid ground, and I'm once again wondering how to draw out our time together. Without a word, Cole takes my hand and we start walking. I'm not sure if he has a destination in mind, but his slow pace tells me we're putting in time until one of us makes a decision about what comes next.

"Where do you think serendipity will lead us next year?" he asks. "I, for one, wouldn't mind if it was somewhere warm."

I laugh, and it hangs in the air between us in the form of a white puff. "Somewhere warm would be nice. I was trying to think of what to do for my birthday next year since I'll be thirty-five. Maybe I'll plan a tropical vacation and we'll *really* put the universe to the test and see if we're thrown together again."

Cole grips the sleeve of my coat and pulls me to a stop under a streetlamp. The white light illuminates his beautiful blue-gray eyes and the silver strands in his dark hair. Without a word, he holds out the white takeout box to me.

This time, I take it. I lift the lid to reveal a small cupcake; the top is slathered in thick chocolate frosting, with a dusting of rainbow star sprinkles. Nestled into the box beside it is a purple candle and a Niagara Falls novelty lighter.

Cole plucks the candle and lighter from the box. “Do you want me to sing the birthday song?” he asks as he sticks the candle in the cupcake.

“I mean, we *did* just spend half an hour being serenaded by Elvis himself. How confident are you in your singing ability?”

With his eyes on the candle, he peers up through his lashes, giving me that crooked smile. He flicks the lighter, touching the flame to the candle. He clears his throat, opens his mouth, and then closes it again as a trio of teenagers pass us. “Nope, can’t do it. Sorry.”

My laughter makes the flame dance. “You could hum the tune,” I suggest.

His grin, paired with a sardonic brow lift, makes my heart stutter. “Make a wish, Silver Bells.”

*Make a wish.* There’s something about this night and making wishes. Should I wish for the same thing as before or something different? Keep it general like my wish to Santa Elvis or get more specific?

I meet Cole’s eyes—kind and patient, with a hint of curiosity—and then close mine. *I wish this next year will be even better than the one I’ve just had.* Pretty general, sure, but it feels right. I’ve found my happy this year, and I want to carry that into next year and expand on it. I open my eyes and blow out the flame.

Cole frees the candle from the frosting and pockets the lighter before plucking the cupcake from the box and handing it to me. He tosses the box in a nearby trash can as I unwrap

the cupcake and take a bite. My eyes close and a moan slips from my throat as the rich chocolate hits my tongue. When I open my eyes again, Cole is watching me intently. I hold the cupcake out and he takes a bite, his eyes only leaving mine briefly to dip to my mouth when I unconsciously lick my lips.

As I take the final bite of the cupcake, Cole opens his mouth to say something, but a loud cackle, followed by a chorus of cheers, draws our attention down the street. A group of women are staggering up the hill, half of them bent over at the waist as hysterical giggles spill from their mouths. The woman in the center has a tiara with a veil perched askew on her head, and a bright pink sash with the word BRIDE slung over her open jacket.

“Look at these two cuties!” she screeches, tottering toward us on her sky-high stilettos. The heel of one catches in a crack on the sidewalk and she pitches forward, her arms pinwheeling frantically. Cole darts toward her, catching her before she becomes a sidewalk pancake. He helps her straighten and holds onto her while she gets her bearings. She continues to wobble, but if the boozy smell wafting off her is any indication, I’m guessing her unsteadiness is as much from copious amounts of alcohol as her shoes.

“My hero!” she cries, leaning heavily on Cole as she dissolves into giggles. “I might have looked like a squashy-faced pug on my wedding day if you hadn’t saved me!”

Cole shoots me a helpless look over the woman’s shoulder that makes me stifle my own giggles.

“Happy to help,” he says. “Think you can stand on your own?”

“We got her.” One of her friends—this one wearing a pink sash with Maid of Honor written on it—steps forward and hooks her arm around the bride-to-be. She doesn’t look much steadier than her friend.

“Here, have this,” the bride says, fishing in her jacket pocket and pulling out what looks like a sprig of plastic

mistletoe. “I’ve been handing these out all night. I’m getting married on Christmas Eve, so I’m spreading a little love and Christmas kissy magic. Now go plant one on your pretty girlfriend over there.”

The bridal party move past us in a tittering, chattering mass. I watch them go before turning back to Cole, who’s standing in the same spot, eyeing the mistletoe in his hand. His faraway expression makes me wonder if he’s thinking about his almost-wedding last Christmas. When he didn’t mention anything about his ex tonight, I purposely didn’t bring her up because I didn’t want to open a can of worms.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Hmm?” He spins to look at me. “Oh, yeah. Fine. I was just wondering...are we sure this is mistletoe? Kind of looks like holly to me.”

Relief washes over me. I step closer to him and peer at the greenery in his hand. “Nope, definitely mistletoe. See the white berries? Holly has thicker leaves and red berries.”

“Good thing I have you around to set me straight on these things.” He moves the plant from one hand to the other before gripping it by the ribbon tied at the top and dangling it between us. “I wanted to kiss you on the SkyWheel, but lost my nerve. Guess I need some mistletoe for courage. How would you feel about a goodnight kiss before I hit the road?”

My stomach sinks. I knew there was no avoiding this moment, but I wish we didn’t have to part ways so soon. What if this is it? What if we never see each other again? What if our birthday/Christmas/whatever kind of magic this is runs out after tonight and there’s no third time’s the charm serendipity scenario for us?

“We don’t have to,” he says at the same time I say, “Spend the night with me, Cole.”

His eyes go wide. “Come again?”

“Spend the night with me,” I repeat. “I know you have to get back to Toronto, but...I’m not ready to say goodbye yet. I

know spending the night together would complicate things, but \_\_\_”

The rest of my words are cut off as Cole covers my mouth with his. My body melts against him, and he takes that as a cue to wrap his arms around me and pull me closer. I grip his shoulders and push up on my tiptoes, wanting to be as close to him as possible. He tastes like beer and chocolate and he smells like heaven. His warm body against mine in the cold night makes me shiver.

He wrenches his lips from mine, his hands moving to my hips to steady me. “Where’s your hotel?”

I stammer out a few nonsense words as I attempt to get my bearings. I find the tall hotel on the skyline and point. “Right there.”

“Let’s go.” He grabs my hand and we break into a fast walk. Giddy laughter rolls out of me as lights and people pass in a blur of color and motion. We pause a few times to kiss in the middle of the sidewalk before carrying on, our steps faster each time until we’re practically running. I haven’t felt this way—excited, nervous, bubbly, light as air—in far too long. Maybe ever.

We burst through the front door of the hotel and rush through the lobby to the elevators. We’re both practically bouncing on our toes as I stab the button and we wait. And wait.

“Screw this,” Cole says, tugging my hand. “The stairs are right there. What floor are you on?”

“The twentieth.”

We’re halfway to the stairwell when Cole freezes and turns back. “Elevator is it.”

I laugh breathlessly. The elevator finally arrives and Cole waits all of two seconds to make sure no one is exiting before he dashes inside, pulling me along with him, and jabbing the button for my floor. His mouth is on mine in the next second, his fingers working the zipper of my coat and yanking it down.

He reaches inside and grips my waist, fingers digging into my skin over my shirt as if he's trying hard not to let his hands wander.

His lips leave mine to trail along my jaw. He pauses at my ear, his hot breath sending a zing of lust straight to my center as he tugs at my earlobe with his teeth. His thigh is between my legs, and it takes all my effort not to grind against him.

"Since this is a fancy hotel, I'm guessing there are cameras in this elevator?" he whispers.

"I'd assume so."

He places a chaste kiss on my cheek before squeezing my waist and releasing me. At this point, I'm so turned on I wouldn't mind giving some random security guard or night manager a little show, but I suppose it's a good thing for at least one of us to be thinking straight.

The elevator arrives on the twentieth floor with a muted *ding*. We step into the plushly-carpeted hallway, and Cole asks which room I'm in. The number is barely out of my mouth before we're flying down the hall. We've reached the door before I can even fish out the key card in my purse. By the time I find it, my hands are shaking so much, it takes three tries to get the light to flash green.

When the door finally opens, we stumble into the room, a tangle of limbs. Cole pushes me against the closed door, cradling the back of my head so I don't hit it. That small, thoughtful gesture warms my heart, as does the way he smiles at me before leaning in. I expect him to kiss me again, but he rests his forehead on my shoulder. The sound of his labored breath makes me realize how hard I'm breathing too.

I slide my hands inside his open coat and put my arms around him, running my hands up and down his back as we both catch our breath. After a moment, I free my arms and slide his coat off, catching it before it hits the floor. He lifts his head from my shoulder and I step around him, tossing his coat on the desk chair before removing mine and doing the same.

He joins me at the desk, gripping my hips from behind. He slowly unwinds the scarf from around my neck, pressing kisses against the skin he reveals. I tilt my head, enjoying the mixed sensations of his soft lips and rough stubble against the sensitive skin of my neck. His teeth catch my earlobe again, eliciting a gasp from me. He releases me and shuffles around behind me; a quick glance shows him removing his boots, so I do the same before spinning around and covering his mouth with mine again. My hands fist in the front of his shirt as I push him toward the bed.

We stop abruptly when his knees hit the edge of the mattress.

“Are you sure about this?” he asks.

Yes. No. *Yes*. The aftermath is probably going to hurt like hell, but that’s a problem for Future Sylvie to deal with. Instead of answering with words, I push him onto the bed and follow immediately, straddling his hips and bringing my mouth back to his. His lips against mine and his warm hands sliding under my shirt push every thought and worry from my mind. All that matters is right here and now.

Cole pulls away with a quiet gasp. “Wait, Sylvie, wait. Let’s slow down.”

I attempt to straighten, to put some distance between us, but he grips my arms and holds me in place as his eyes search my face. “I’m not having second thoughts, if that’s what you’re thinking. Not at all.” With a smile bordering on a smirk, he arches against me so there’s no way I can miss his erection. His face softens, the smile slipping to something almost bittersweet. “We might only have this one night together, you know? I want to savor it. Savor *you*.”

Oh. Well. On one hand his words have a sobering effect, while on the other hand I’m even more turned on. And, if I’m honest, Cole’s words make me fall for him a little bit more. It would have been easy for us to come in here, rip each other’s clothes off, give in to blind passion, and then go our separate ways. In some ways, that might be easier since my body would



be so busy, my mind wouldn't have a chance to overthink things. Like it is now.

Cole eases me back and sits up with me. With his eyes on mine, he kisses me lightly and reaches for the hem of my top, giving me a questioning look. At my nod, he lifts the shirt over my head and tosses it toward the edge of the bed. His gaze sweeps over me, lingering on my chest. His fingers trace the lacy red cups of my bra. "Very festive," he says, leaning in to kiss the swell of my breasts.

"I like to keep things on brand," I tell him. He chuckles, his warm breath making goosebumps race across my skin. "Just FYI, my panties match."

Cole goes still, groaning softly. In a move that has me squealing in surprise, he flips us over so I'm lying on my back and he's kneeling between my legs. He undoes my jeans, but before he can remove them, I say, "Take off your shirt first."

One side of his mouth curves. God, I love that crooked smile, especially now when it's paired with the heat in his eyes. He pulls off his shirt and casts it aside. I admire his broad chest with its light dusting of dark hair as he takes off my jeans. At the sight of my lacy red panties, he quickly removes his own jeans and tosses them onto the growing pile of our clothes.

I pull at his shoulders with greedy hands, wanting to feel his skin against mine. The moment he's settled on top of me, I arch against him, letting out a satisfied hum as some of the ache between my legs is eased. Cole's hot, wet mouth goes to work on my neck and chest, finding every single one of my pleasure points. One hand roams over my bra-clad breasts and down my stomach. My muscles quiver under his touch, anticipating the moment his hand slides into my panties. I suck in a breath, waiting, but his hand moves to grip my hip at the same time his kisses stop, and he drops his head against my shoulder.

"What?" I gasp.

He lifts his head, his expression pained. “I don’t have a condom.”

*Shit.* “Neither do I.” My frantic, lust-fueled brain wonders how long it would take for one of us to run to a store and get some. I dismiss the thought, knowing it would be a waste of precious time. I’m not on the pill, though, and as much as I like Cole, I’m not willing to take the risk of sex without a condom.

Cole shifts, his grip loosening on my hip and returning to my lower stomach. “Can I touch you, Sylvie?”

“God, yes.”

His lips twitch at the breathy desperation in my voice. “Can I taste you?”

I’m about to answer yes automatically, but the word dies on my lips. I’ve never had anyone go down on me before. Never *wanted* anyone to, no matter how many times I’ve heard people extol the virtues of oral sex. My cheeks flame as Cole and I stare at each other. The heat in his steady, patient gaze has me biting my lip and giving a jerky nod.

He places a surprisingly gentle kiss on my lips before lifting me so he can remove my bra. His mouth goes directly to one breast while his hand goes to the other. I barely notice when his fingers leave my nipple until I feel them trailing down my stomach. He doesn’t stop this time, and I nearly weep with relief when his hand slides between my legs. My hips buck off the bed as his fingers circle and explore. I’m just thinking I could easily come from this alone when his hand disappears and I cry out in dismay.

Cole meets my eyes as he slides down my body, leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses on my stomach. He hooks his fingers in the waistband of my underwear and peels them off slowly. He glances at the scrap of red lace in his hands before casting it aside and settling between my legs.

He doesn’t touch me right away, but his gaze is like a physical weight. With a whimper, I close my eyes and cover

them with one hand. I assume the hot breath I feel against my wet skin is Cole chuckling soundlessly. I jump when his fingers grip my wrist and pull my hand away from my face.

I expect his eyes to be lit with humor, but they're dark, serious. "I want you to watch me, Sylvie, and I want to watch you."

I swallow the gasp that tries to escape. Pressing my lips together, I give another jerky nod. My eyes stay glued to him as he moves slowly back down my body. It takes everything in me not to squirm and slam my legs shut as he gets into position once more. He looks up at me as he lowers his head and gives one long, slow lick that nearly has me rocketing off the bed.

I swear I black out as his tongue and lips and teeth work a kind of magic I never knew existed before. I'm lost to sensation, barely aware of the way my body convulses or the breathy, high-pitched noises I make. I've never been overly vocal in bed and would usually be embarrassed by the sounds spilling from my lips, but Cole seems to feed off them, so I don't hold back. When he slides a finger inside me, followed shortly by another, I'm already so close it doesn't take long for the intense pleasure to reach its peak.

My orgasm seems to last forever, and Cole apparently knows the trick to drawing it out. Pleasure ripples through me in waves, radiating from my center to the tips of my fingers and the soles of my feet. As I finally come down, I'm vaguely aware of Cole kissing my thighs and stomach, and then he's behind me, turning me on my side so he can spoon me.

His arms feel wonderful around me, but I can't quite relax because of what feels like a steel rod poking my lower back through the material of Cole's boxer briefs.

"What about you?" I almost laugh at how slurred my words sound.

"How would you feel about getting in the shower together?" he asks.

“I can’t feel my legs right now, but okay.”

Cole chuckles into my hair, nuzzling my ear with his nose. “I’ll go turn the water on and you come in when you’re ready.” He caresses my hip as he speaks and, when I make an affirmative sound, he gives my ass a light slap before darting from the bed.

When I enter the bathroom a few minutes later on wobbly legs, the room is steamy and Cole is naked. I stop in the doorway, taking in the gorgeous man before me. Thoughts nudge at the corners of my mind about how I wish he were mine to keep, but I dismiss them. We’re both here now, and I’m going to enjoy this for however long we have.

I step forward and he takes my hand, guiding me inside the huge glass-encased shower. My already loose limbs feel positively boneless under the hot spray of water. Cole joins me and gathers me close, simply holding me for a long moment before kissing me. As the kiss deepens and his hard length bumps against my belly, I experience a moment of weakness where I’m tempted to throw caution to the wind and ask him to take me right here and now. Thankfully, it passes quickly and I reach for him instead, wrapping my fingers around him and sliding them down his thick length.

As I stroke him, Cole drops his forehead to my shoulder, letting out a low growl that has heat pooling between my legs once more. He stops my hand after only a few minutes and turns me around so my back is pressed to his front. His fingers snake between my legs, making me gasp.

“But I already—”

“Shh.” His breath in my ear makes me shiver. As his skilful fingers go to work once more, he grinds against me from behind. His free hand moves over my slick skin, caressing and squeezing my breasts. He removes his hand and I feel it against my lower back, his knuckles brushing me as he grips himself and starts pumping.

Knowing he's taking care of both of us at the same time is the hottest thing ever. His movements quickly become erratic, the pressure of his fingers between my legs alternating between rough and barely there. He groans when I cover his hand with mine to guide it and give steady pressure. Between that and the way he sucks and bites my neck and shoulders, I come faster than I ever have before. Cole follows almost immediately, his hips jerking against me as the hot spurt of his release mixes with the water from the shower.

He gathers me close again, his arms wrapping around me under my breasts. I turn in his arms, loving the way our wet skin slips and slides. We stay in the shower for a long time, kissing and touching before finally washing each other with the hotel's luxurious tropical-scented body wash.

When we get out, Cole secures a towel around his waist and uses another to dry me off. I have to hold my breath a couple of times to prevent myself from crying over how gentle and sweet he is. The man just gave me two earth-shattering orgasms and now he's kneeling in front of me and touching me like I'm the world's most precious object.

"Will you spend the night?" I ask.

He hesitates. The tightness around his eyes tells me it's not that he doesn't want to, but rather that he doesn't know if it's a good idea. He's probably right. That doesn't stop the wave of relief that rushes through me when he says, "Of course. I'll have to leave really early, though."

I don't respond. Instead, I grab the two fluffy white hotel robes from the closet and we put them on before crawling into bed. Time passes in a blissful blur of cuddles, kisses, and conversation. The way we only share stories from the last few years of our lives makes it feel as if there's an unspoken agreement between us to stick to the past rather than put any focus on the present or future.

The night stretches on. I occasionally glance at the clock, noting the passage of time and then dismissing it, even as my eyelids and limbs grow heavy. It's been a long day; I was up

early to take advantage of the hotel's indoor pool, and then I spent the rest of the day wandering around playing tourist before running into Cole.

At Cole's quiet laugh, my eyes fly open. I'm still sitting cross-legged on the bed, but I must have fallen asleep for a second.

"You're about to keel over," he says.

"No, I'm fine," I say quickly. "It's still..." I was about to say 'early', but my eyes land on the bedside clock and the red numbers that read 2:47. "Hmm."

"Let's get some sleep, Sylvie." Cole climbs off the bed and begins turning down the sheets.

I open my mouth to protest, but a body-wracking yawn escapes instead. I give him a sheepish smile. "Okay. I guess you're right."

I crawl under the sheets and Cole turns off the lights before joining me. The room is lit faintly from the lights outside; I've been sleeping with the curtains open every night because I find the soft, colorful glow comforting. Cole pulls me into his arms, spooning me like he did briefly earlier.

Stubbornness has me struggling to keep my eyes open for as long as possible. I expect Cole to say something, but he just holds me close and kisses my shoulder through the thick material of my robe. Between the warmth and scent of his body and the quiet sound of his breathing, I soon fade away into a deep sleep.

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I wake up the next morning with a smile on my face. The sun is shining, the sheets are ridiculously soft, and my body is sore in the best possible way. I close my eyes and stretch slowly before rolling to my side and reaching for Cole. My eyes pop open when my fingers meet cool sheets.

I sit up quickly and look around the room. My clothes, which were strewn all over the place, have been left in a neat pile on the armchair by the window. My coat is hanging on the rack near the door, with my boots lined up underneath. All traces of Cole are gone. It's like he was never here.

Disappointment washes over me, making my skin feel alternately overheated and shivery. I pull the sheets up around me and take a few deep breaths, willing this feeling away. I'm about to flop back onto the pillows and pull the blankets over my head when a piece of the hotel's stationery catches my eye on the nightstand. I snatch it up and run my gaze over it before reading it properly, realizing this is the first time I'm seeing the small, precise letters of Cole's handwriting.

*Dear Sylvie,*

*I'm sorry for leaving without waking you up. There was no easy way to say goodbye, and I thought prolonging it would make it worse for both of us. I was afraid I'd see your beautiful brown eyes and blurt out all kinds of promises I'm not sure I'd be able to keep. You deserve better than that.*

*I hope you don't hate me and that you'll remember me and our time together fondly. I know I will. I also hope this isn't it for us. We found each other twice, and if we're lucky, the universe will see fit to bring us together again. It has to, don't you think?*

*Love,*

*Cole*

The words waver in front of my eyes. I move the paper away a second before the first tear falls. I'm not even sure why I'm crying. I'm sad, but oddly happy too, and...hopeful? I'd like to believe Cole is right and we'll see each other again.

My eyes return to the page, lingering on the word 'love'. This *can't* be it for us. I wonder if it's too late to change my birthday wishes from last night.

## **PART III ~ DECEMBER 2022**

### **CHAPTER FIVE**

The sidewalks of downtown Bellevue are bustling with holiday shoppers. Christmas Eve is tomorrow and, despite the occasional frazzled face or person shoving their way through the crowds, there's a definite feeling of joy lingering in the air.

I stop outside a boutique to admire a display of jewelry in the window. Today is my thirty-fifth birthday, and I already have a stash of cash and gift cards from various friends and family members burning a hole in my wallet.

It's safe to say the birthday wish I made last year with Cole came true. This past year has, without a doubt, been one of the best of my life. I love my job, I've found interesting new hobbies, I've grown closer with my friends, and I've made new friends too.

Last week, the friends who wanted to come to Niagara Falls with me took me to Toronto for the weekend to celebrate my birthday a few days early. We went to a show, followed by dinner at a fancy restaurant, and then we danced the night away in a trendy bar before staggering back to our hotel and falling into bed. Slightly hungover but still riding the high from the night before, we played tourists the next day.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't look for Cole everywhere we went. I didn't let it affect my enjoyment of the wonderful trip my friends planned, but I couldn't help keeping an eye out for him. A part of me was so sure that was how serendipity would intervene and put us on each other's paths once more. I imagined running into him at dinner or seeing him across the



packed dance floor. I pictured us literally bumping into each other on the crowded sidewalk outside the Eaton's Centre and falling into each other's arms. Before we left the city, my friends convinced me to contact *The Buzz*, which I did, only to be told Cole was no longer working there and they weren't allowed to give out his personal information.

Today is my second birthday celebration, this time with my new friends. Last month, a mini high school reunion put me back in touch with an old friend, Stella. Neither of us even wanted to attend the reunion, so it felt like another case of serendipity at work. She and her three best friends have welcomed me into their group over the last month, and we're planning a big get-together of both my friend groups in the new year. It may sound cheesy, but my heart is so full.

My phone beeps with a reminder about lunch with Stella and the others at B&H Diner. It turns out the diner has always been a favorite spot of theirs, so when they found out it was one of my favorites too, they suggested it for my birthday lunch. With a few exceptions, I've avoided the place over the last two years because it reminds me of Mindy and Cole, and being there stirs up an abundance of bittersweet feelings. I'm ready to make some new memories there, though.

I glance up at the boutique's sign, making a mental note to return after Christmas. My gaze snags on the reflection in the window and I blink, wondering if my thoughts have conjured up the image of the person standing behind me.

But no. When I turn, Mindy is standing a few feet away, frozen like an animal in the headlights of a car. She blinks a few times and gives herself a little shake as a smile creeps onto her face.

"I was just thinking about you," she says.

I'm not sure what to say to that. There was a time when I would have mentioned our brain-twin connection, but now I just say, "Hi."

It's been ages since we last saw each other, and even then it was a brief fly-by in a grocery store where we paused to exchange pleasantries. *Pleasantries*. As if we hadn't once been the best of friends who shared everything and planned to be in each other's lives forever.

"You look really good, Sylvie."

It rankles me that she sounds almost surprised. How does she expect me to look? Did she think I'd fall apart like our friendship did? God, I hate these bitter musings. I thought I was past them, but seeing her, especially on a joyful day when my defences are down, stirs up all kinds of old feelings I'd rather dismiss.

"Thanks. Well..." I force a smile and move to step around her. I make it a few feet before she calls my name. Her tone is one I've never heard from her before, and it makes me pause.

"Wait. Please? Can we talk for a minute?"

I turn around slowly, remaining where I am to keep the distance between us. I can barely meet her eyes. In the last two years, we've texted a couple of times and have had other brief run-ins like the one in the grocery store a few months ago. Bellevue is a relatively small city, so it's bound to happen. In fact, I'm surprised it hasn't happened more often.

Every time we've seen each other, she's suggested we get together soon, but I think we both know it's one of those empty invitations you issue to acquaintances and have little to no intention of following through on. And she's proven me right every single time; she has my number, she has me on social media, she knows where I live, but I haven't heard a peep from her. After all the time I spent being the only one making any effort, I was simply done. It broke my heart and made me angry for a while, but I made peace with it a long time ago.

Silence stretches between us, making me twitchy. I bite my tongue to keep from snapping at her and reminding her *she* was the one who wanted to talk.

“I have a birthday gift for you,” she blurts. “I’ve been carrying it around in case I happened to see you.”

Her expression tells me I haven’t done a good job of schooling my shock and confusion. Among the many Facebook notifications I’ve received so far today was one of a post from her saying ‘Happy birthday!’ with a bunch of emojis. That was it. I hadn’t expected more. In fact, I didn’t really expect even that much. And I certainly didn’t expect to run into her and have her offer me a small, wrapped gift.

“Thank you?” It comes out sounding like a question rather than a statement. I hold it in my fingertips, unsure whether to open it or slide it into my coat pocket. She used to bounce on her toes whenever she gave me a gift, impatient for me to see whatever was inside, knowing without question I’d love it because she knew me better than anyone.

“What happened to us?” she asks suddenly.

I huff out a laugh. “That’s a really good question. What *did* happen to us?”

She studies my face for a long moment. A *really* long moment; so long, in fact, it makes me want to squirm. Finally, she nods her head once and drops her gaze. “I know it was my fault. I realize that now. I didn’t see it as it was happening because I was so wrapped up in myself and my new life, and...”

“And our friendship fell by the wayside.”

She winces. “Yeah. It did.” She straightens her shoulders and breathes in deeply. “I’m sorry for that, Syl. *So* sorry. You deserved better than that. *We*—our friendship, our history—deserved better than that.”

I echo her sentiment from a moment before: “Yeah. It did.”

She waits, as if she expects me to say more. What is there to say, though? If she wants me to tell her it’s okay, she’ll be waiting a long time because it’s *not* okay. I pull my coat around me tighter against the damp chill. The air smells like

snow; it's not supposed to be a white Christmas, but I'm ever hopeful.

"I should let you go," Mindy says, watching me adjust my scarf. "Maybe...maybe we could get together in the new year. For real this time. I know I've said it before, and that's on me too for not following through. But I miss you, Sylvie. I'd like to catch up and see if we can repair what I broke."

Do I want to let Mindy back into my life after all the work I've done to heal? To move on? The remorse written all over her face is something I've never seen before. The other times we've run into each other, she's treated me like a virtual stranger instead of the person who used to be like an extension of her.

"Open the gift," she says. She inclines her head toward the glittery package in my hand. "Open it. Please?"

I slide my thumbnail under the tape and pull the paper free. Mindy takes it from me and stuffs it in her pocket. I glance at her briefly before I lift the lid. Nestled in a bed of navy tissue paper is a silver chain and two small charms: a crystal snowflake, and a tiny silver bell.

"I couldn't decide between the snowflake and the bell, so I got both," she says. "You could wear them separately or stick them on the chain together. Or...or not wear them at all if you don't want to, of course."

Mindy is one of the most confident, self-assured people I know, so it's strange to hear the uncertain tremor in her voice and see the sad, almost pleading look in her eyes. I want to believe she's telling the truth about missing me. I have to think it's true or why would she have bought me such a beautiful, thoughtful gift and carried it around with her when she had no idea if she'd even see me or not?

"I love them, Mindy. Thank you." I admire them for a moment before gently closing the box. "I don't know if we can repair what's broken. You disappearing from my life really

hurt, and it took me a long time to get past it. But I *did* get past it. I'm a different person now, and you likely are too."

She deflates before my eyes as I speak, her shoulders slumping and her eyebrows drawing in.

"*But*...while I'm not sure we can go back or repair what's broken, maybe we can start fresh. Meet each other where we are and go from there."

Her eyes widen. "Really?"

"Yeah. Do you think we can do that?"

"Definitely. I've always loved you, Sylvie. I've never stopped. I never could, even when I was being a shitty friend and letting everything slide. I can tell just from these last few minutes that you *have* changed, and I'd like to get to know who you are now."

I bob my head slowly, unsure of what to say. Then an idea pops into my head. "Hey, do you have plans for New Year's Eve? Some friends invited me to a house party."

"And they wouldn't mind a stranger showing up?" she asks. "Or, well...two strangers?"

"Two?"

"I'm seeing someone. Actually, it's more than that, it's pretty serious. We met this past summer and things got intense quickly. We were still trying to decide what to do for New Year's, but hadn't figured it out yet. She knows all about you, so she'll be thrilled we ran into each other today. When I tell her we've been invited out, I'm sure she'll go for it."

*She*. Mindy is in a relationship with a woman. It takes me a minute to process this; we've been friends for nearly two decades and I had no idea she was interested in women. I collect myself as quickly as possible when I see the glint of challenge in her eye. Does she expect me to react negatively? Rescind my invitation to the New Year's party and my offer to start fresh? I don't care who she loves, I'm just surprised she never told me.

“Great,” I say. “I know you’d both be welcome.”

“It’s new,” she says, and I assume she means the relationship until she adds, “Me figuring this stuff out. I don’t want you to think I was hiding this huge part of myself from you all these years. I didn’t even know until I met Padma.”

I nod slowly. “Looks like we really do have a lot to catch up on. I hope I get a chance to meet her.”

“You will,” she says firmly. “Are you...seeing anyone?”

“Nope.” I say it casually, even though it brings up as many feelings as seeing her has. I’ve gone on a few dates this year, but my head and heart weren’t in it. Even though I knew it wasn’t fair, I compared every guy to Cole. This whole year, I’ve felt like I’ve been keeping an eye out for him. Waiting for him to appear at the Village or the diner. Waiting to get a message from him on social media or have him turn up when and where I least expect him. It hasn’t happened, and I need to accept it’s not going to. It’s time to move on.

Mindy cocks her head, studying me again. She looks like she wants to say something, but she jumps and pulls her buzzing phone from her pocket. “Sorry, I need to get going.”

“Oh, yeah, me too.”

Mindy rushes forward and throws her arms around me. I stagger back from the impact, and we both laugh. My throat tightens and my eyes sting with tears as her hold tightens. We stand there for several minutes in the middle of the sidewalk, clinging to each other.

She sniffles in my ear a second before she releases me. “Okay. I promise to be in touch soon and let you know about New Year’s. Maybe we can get together sometime next week to catch up a bit, and you can tell me about your friends and the party?”

Without waiting for a response, she blows me a kiss and bounds away. I remain where I am, watching her go. My head is spinning from our random encounter and everything we both said. After the last couple of years, I’m almost afraid to

feel hope when it comes to Mindy, and yet I'm cautiously optimistic. I'll either hear from her or I won't, but I know now I'll be okay either way. And if I'm being completely honest, I'd like to have her back in my life. I have a feeling it would look a lot different than it did before, but I've missed her. I've missed *us*.

Smiling to myself, I check my watch and see I'd better hurry or I'm going to be late for my own birthday celebration. I turn and take a step, colliding with someone.

I wobble and the person grips my upper arms to steady me. "I'm so sorry," I blurt. "I wasn't watching where I was going." When my head lifts and my gaze locks on a familiar pair of smiling blue-gray eyes, all the air rushes from my lungs.

"There you are," he says, as if he's been expecting me, waiting for me.

"Cole." I say his name on a breathless laugh. As if sensing what I'm about to do, he releases his grip on me and throws his arms out to catch me as I dive at him.

## CHAPTER SIX

“What are you doing here?” I ask. I hope he can’t feel me trembling through the layers of our clothes and coats.

“It’s kind of a long story.” He releases me slowly, keeping hold of my shoulders. His eyes scan my face, drinking me in. He looks as stunned as I feel.

“How long are you staying?” I ask.

There’s that crooked smile of his. It still makes my heart do funny things. “That’s part of the long story.”

Another breathless laugh escapes me. “Okay, well...” My phone pings from my purse. It’s likely one of my friends wondering where I am. “Are you free right now? I’m on my way to meet some friends at the diner we ate at that first night we met, remember?”

“Of course I remember. But...” Remorse flits across his expression, making my heart drop. “I really wish I could, but I can’t. I promise to find you again and explain everything.”

“*Find* me? Couldn’t we just exchange numbers?”

Cole shakes his head, already backing away. The expression of regret intensifies until it looks like he’s in agony. “I’m so sorry, I really have to go. I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you, Sylvie. I promise this’ll all make sense eventually. Oh, and...happy birthday.” With a pained smile, he spins around and disappears into the crowd.

I remain where I am, shocked into immobility until someone bumps into me. The jolt sends me moving again, eyes scanning every dark-haired man I pass. Outside the diner, I stop to collect myself. I’m about to face a group of eight



people who have taken time out of their day right before Christmas to honor me. I have plenty of time later to ponder Cole's reasons for being in Bellevue and what he meant about finding me.

Upon entering the diner, I'm greeted by a cheer from the far corner where my friends are waiting. My cheeks heat with pleasure and maybe a touch of embarrassment since everyone in the diner is now looking at me and likely wondering why I'm worthy of such a greeting.

I'm once again frozen to the spot, so my friends surge forward, enveloping me in hugs and well wishes. Their enthusiastic greetings make emotion swell in my chest; I've only been hanging out with this group for the last month or so, but they've welcomed me in with open arms and made me one of them.

After being hugged and kissed by eight people—Stella and her boyfriend Leland, Evie and her boyfriend Wesley, Hollie and her boyfriend Spencer, and Louisa and the group's mutual friend (and Louisa's not-so-secret crush) Fergus—Louisa takes my hand and leads me across the diner.

"I'm so glad I talked you all into inviting Fergus," I whisper, squeezing her hand.

Louisa's cheeks pinken adorably. "I am too."

Stella had originally suggested a girls' lunch, but I've enjoyed our big group meetings over the last month, so I suggested everyone should come if they could. They weren't sure about inviting Fergus since I've only met him a couple of times and it would make for uneven numbers, but I insisted. I know how much Louisa likes the hot Scot, plus I've appreciated how kind he's been to me and how he's asked genuine, insightful questions the few times we've hung out.

As we approach the far side of the diner, I see two large tables have been pushed together and are decked out in small vases of flowers and colorful confetti. The seat of honor in the middle has balloons tied to it, and a Birthday Girl tiara sitting

on the table in front of it. Leland pulls the chair out for me and takes my coat, and Stella places the tiara on my head as soon as my butt hits the chair.

There's a commotion as everyone else gets settled around the table. I have a brief moment to notice the empty seat across from me—and to pray my friends aren't trying to set me up today of all days—before movement catches my eye and a pair of servers bearing food-laden trays come into view. Bea is behind them, carrying a tray of drinks. After she sets it down, she rushes around to my seat and envelopes me in a tight hug.

“Happy birthday, honey,” she says, patting my cheek. “Can't tell you how happy I am that you chose this place for your birthday celebration. Does my old ticker good to see all my kiddies together like this.” I could swear her eyes are glistening as she kisses my cheek, winks at someone behind me, and scurries off toward the kitchen.

I turn back in my seat, preparing to make a joke to the table at large about how Bea is getting sentimental in her old age. Instead, a sound somewhere between a hysterical giggle and sob spills out of my mouth when I see the chair across from me is now occupied.

“Surprise,” Cole says. His eyes are bright and his lips are twisted in an almost rueful smile. His eyebrows dip in concern when tears start streaming down my face.

Beside me, Stella takes my hand under the table. I can't pry my eyes from Cole, afraid he'll disappear if I look away, but I have a feeling this was somehow Stella's doing. On my other side, Louisa says something I don't compute and, in the next moment, she and Cole are switching seats so he can be beside me.

“How are you here?” I ask, grabbing a napkin and trying to staunch the flow of tears.

He takes my free hand, raising it to his mouth and letting it linger there before pressing his lips to it. “I'll explain everything later, okay? Right now is about celebrating *you*.”

It's not the answer I want, but it doesn't matter how or why Cole is here, just that he *is* here. My friends start passing around the food, and we load up our plates. I expect them to have their own questions for Cole, but they keep the conversation light.

Despite occasionally chiming in, I'm content to listen, observe, and laugh along with the others. Cole's hand is still in mine, which must make it awkward for him to eat since he's right handed, but he seems as eager to maintain our physical connection as I am.

Partway through lunch, I catch Louisa's eye across the table. With Fergus sitting beside her, her cheeks are that adorable shade of pink again, and I'm sure the somewhat goofy grin on her face matches the one I've felt on my own face since the moment Cole sat down next to me.

Fergus says something and Louisa turns her attention to him. Stella leans in close to me and whispers, "I'm calling it now. We'll all be officially paired off by the end of this year."

"You think?" I say. "That's only about a week away. Seems like a pretty bold statement."

She follows my gaze to where Louisa and Fergus have their heads bent close as they talk quietly. Louisa is adamant that Fergus only thinks of her as a friend, but I've never had a friend look at me the way Fergus is looking at Louisa now.

Stella's wearing a soft, secret smile when our eyes meet again. The smile grows as her gaze flicks over my shoulder. I follow the direction of her eyes to the gorgeous man beside me, who's watching me with a fondness that nearly takes my breath away.

On Cole's other side, Wesley says something to him and he nods, his eyes remaining on mine for another moment before he turns his attention to Wes. I watch them, sensing Stella still hovering near my shoulder.

"You think it's a bold statement, but I think it's pretty bold for him to show up in Bellevue and agree to surprise you by

having lunch with a big group of strangers,” she says. “Just saying.”

She’s not wrong.

After the empty platters and lunch plates are cleared, a clapping sound comes from the direction of the kitchen a second before one of the waitresses steps into view holding a giant cake. Bea is beside her holding a cupcake with a candle in it. Cole catches my eye and grins when everyone starts singing the birthday song. I wonder if he’s thinking about the conversation from our first night together when I told him I hated having everyone sing to me.

I don’t hate this, though, and I can’t help but laugh as I look around again at my clapping, singing friends. I catch sight of Bea’s husband Horatio standing to the side, recording the scene on what looks like Stella’s phone. I have a feeling this whole afternoon will turn into one big, happy blur later, so I’ll be glad to have the pictures and videos everyone has been taking over the last hour.

The waitress places the cake in the center of the table while Bea sets the cupcake in front of me. “Blow out that candle before your tears douse it out,” she says with a laugh. “And don’t forget to make a wish, honey.”

I didn’t realize I was crying until Bea pointed it out. Cole squeezes my hand again as I close my eyes and inhale, ready to blow out the candle. This year I don’t need to overthink it; I wish to always feel this happy and loved.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

An hour later, Cole and I are standing outside the diner, hand in hand. I'm buzzing from cake, coffee, and the flurry of hugs and kisses from my friends as they ushered us out the door. The temperature seems to have dropped several degrees in the two or so hours we were in the diner, and tiny snowflakes float in the air around us.

Now that Cole and I are finally alone, I have no idea what to say, so I'm relieved when he speaks first: "I *really* like your friends."

"They're great, aren't they? I was terrified the first time I hung out with all of them. The four girls have been friends practically since birth, and a lot of times a group like that is impenetrable, you know? I technically knew all of them in high school, but I wasn't friends with any of them except for Stella. Throw in the four guys, and it's a pretty intimidating group to come into."

He gives a knowing chuckle. "No kidding."

"I love them all so much already," I tell him. "And they loved *you*."

His warm smile makes me forget about the chill in the air. "I'm so glad I got to meet them all today."

Something about his words makes my stomach sink. Was this another one-time thing? Another glorious, perfect, too-short span of time together before we go our separate ways again? A desperate sense of longing bubbles in my stomach, working its way up my chest and into my throat. I can't let Cole go again. I *won't*.

Before I have a chance to blurt out what I'm thinking, he says, "I'm relieved they welcomed me so easily. I never imagined being part of a huge group of friends, but I think it's going to be fun."

It takes a few seconds for my brain to process his words. As my mind catches up, my heart surges, lodging in my throat with all the unspoken words from a minute ago.

Cole laughs lightly and shakes his head. "I just realized how presumptuous that sounded. I'm caught up in the magic of this day and seeing you again."

"Will you tell me how this all happened?" I ask. "How you're here in Bellevue? How it came to be that you were at my birthday lunch?"

"Of course." He blinks rapidly as a snowflake catches in his eyelashes. Dark clouds have gathered above Front Street, and the tiny, sporadic flakes are now coming faster. "Is there somewhere we can go?"

I immediately know where I want us to go, so I don't allow myself to overthink it. "My place?"

He nods, reaching for my hand. "Lead the way."

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A mix of nerves and excitement has butterflies dancing a jig in my stomach as Cole and I approach my apartment door. When I pull my keys from my purse, there's a loud thump on the other side of the door that makes Cole raise his eyebrows in question.

"*This* is the *real* test," I tell him, my tone as earnest as I can manage. "My friends were easy. They loved you and welcomed you with open arms, but there's someone inside you're going to have to impress."

“Oof, okay.” Cole hooks his fingers into his scarf and gives an exaggerated tug. “I think I’m ready. Slightly terrified, but ready.”

I’m joking, of course, and yet...not? They say dogs and kids are the best judges of character, and how they respond to strangers says a lot. Cats don’t usually factor in since they’re notoriously standoffish, sometimes even with their owners, but Milo is special and I trust his judgement.

And it goes both ways; I also judge people based on how they react to Milo. Earlier this year, one of my friends set me up on a date with her cousin. We went out for drinks after work and he asked me to join him for dinner. I was having a decent time, so I agreed, but I said I needed to stop at my place first to feed Milo since I had gone straight to the bar from work.

My date insisted on coming up with me—that alone was a bit of a red flag—and when he saw Milo, his eyes nearly bugged out of his head as he asked, “What the hell is *that?*” At Milo’s blood-curdling yowl of indignation, my date suddenly remembered something vitally important he had to do, and had practically fled from my apartment. After that, I instated a new policy: like me, like my cat.

I unlock the door and let it swing open. Milo rushes forward, pausing a few feet away when he sees I’m not alone. Cole’s eyes widen a fraction when they land on the cat, but he covers his surprise quickly and sends me a smile before crouching and holding out a hand.

“Cole, meet Milo,” I say. “Milo, Cole.”

Milo approaches Cole’s outstretched hand, and I hold my breath. With his eyes on Cole, the cat creeps forward and sniffs Cole’s fingers. He lets out a crackly meow and walks around Cole. After a full circle, during which Cole remains squatting on the floor, Milo bumps his giant body against Cole’s legs, toppling him over, and climbing into his lap.

The air rushes out of me on a loud laugh. “I’d say you passed with flying colors.” I scoop Milo up, holding him close to me with one hand while offering the other hand to Cole to help him up from the floor.

Milo squirms out of my arms and darts down the hall, likely to hide in the bathroom, which is, for some reason, his favorite room. Cole and I remove our boots and coats. When I turn back from hanging up the coats, Cole is standing just a couple of feet away. He closes the short distance and grips my shoulders, bringing his forehead to mine. I close my eyes and breathe in his familiar scent. God, I missed him.

“Can I kiss you now?” he whispers, easing back and pressing his lips to where his forehead was a second ago.

Instead of replying with words, I cup his face and guide his mouth down to mine. The kiss starts off slow and sweet, but as soon as our tongues touch, it’s like a spark igniting into a flame. Cole’s hands move restlessly over my body until they grip my ass, while mine yank his shirt up enough to get my hands inside so I can touch his bare skin.

I’m the first to pull away, not because I want to but because I need to ask the question niggling at the back of my mind. “We have so much to talk about, but for now just tell me this: is this going to be another one-night thing?”

When Cole’s eyes meet mine, the blue-gray color has darkened, reminding me of the snow clouds outside. His face softens at the same time his grip on me tightens. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“Then take me to bed?” It comes out sounding more like a question than I meant it to.

Cole’s eyebrows inch up. He looks like he wants to ask if I’m sure, but he must find the answer in my expression because he hauls me against him, gripping me by the backs of my thighs and lifting me so I’m straddling him.

I let out a breathless laugh. “Okay, that was really hot.”



He nips at my bottom lip with his teeth. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

In my bedroom, he sets me on my feet and nudges the door closed with his foot. I have a second to see Milo’s glowing eyes in the hallway before the door shuts. Like he did in Niagara Falls last year, Cole backs me up against the door, cushioning the back of my head with his hand. His fingers tangle in my hair as he tilts my head back and brings his mouth to mine. Gentle nips and brushes of lips quickly turn hungry, urgent.

I grip his belt loops and push us away from the door, moving us toward the bed. I slide my hands under his sweater again at the same time as his hands disappear under mine, caressing my sides and back. His feather light touch causes goosebumps to race across my skin. My own hands aren’t so gentle as they explore his stomach and chest.

“Too many clothes,” I murmur, shifting my lips to the stubble-roughened skin of his jaw.

“That’s easily fixed.” I expect him to remove his shirt, but he pulls mine off instead. Moments pass in a blur of flying material and roaming hands. Soon there’s a pile of clothes on my bedroom floor, and the only thing separating us is Cole’s black boxer briefs and my lacy purple panties.

The stormy color of Cole’s eyes has been swallowed by the black of his pupils. His gaze sweeps over me, lingering on my breasts, my hips, the scrap of material between my legs. “You’re so beautiful, Sylvie,” he whispers. His tone is borderline reverent and it makes the goosebumps reappear on my skin. “So beautiful.”

He gathers me in his arms, pulling me against him so our bodies are flush. The light dusting of hair on his chest tickles my breasts, but I only notice the sensation for a moment before I become aware of our racing hearts knocking against each other and Cole’s erection straining against my lower belly through his underwear.

The next thing I know, I'm lying on my back in the middle of the bed, and Cole is kneeling between my legs. No parts of our bodies are touching, but his gaze is like a physical weight as it sweeps over me.

"Touch me." This time it sounds like the command I was aiming for earlier, rather than a question.

One side of his mouth quirks. "Touch you where?"

"Anywhere," I gasp. "Everywhere."

He shifts so he's leaning over me. Excruciating seconds pass before he lifts his hand and lets the backs of his fingers trail between my breasts. His thumb moves to flick over one of my nipples before lazily circling it. My brain starts to short circuit just from that small contact. When I reach up to touch him, he grips my wrist and gently pins my hand to the bed. Curious where this is going to lead, I don't bother lifting my other hand.

Cole's fingers entwine with mine, although he keeps my hand pinned to the bed. He shifts around again so he's kneeling once more between my legs. I bite back an impatient whimper, wanting him closer, wanting his skin against my skin, his mouth on mine.

"I have condoms this time," I blurt. "They're in the drawer of the bedside table. I actually forgot they were there until I was housecleaning earlier this month. I was going to throw them away, but the expiry date isn't until next year, so..."

He gives me a flash of his crooked grin. "Good to know. I have...other things in mind first." I'm about to beg him to tell me or, better yet, *show* me, when his hand slides up my thigh. His thumb toys with the elastic at the side of my panties before slipping underneath.

I gasp and arch up when the pad of his thumb brushes against my clit. He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. His heated gaze meets mine and he watches my face as his thumb slides lower. A rough sound reverberates in the back of

his throat when he feels how wet I am, even though he's barely touched me.

"You're too far away," I tell him. He releases my hand and I reach for him, pulling him closer until he's lying on top of me with his weight supported on one arm.

"Better?" he asks, his eyes lit with amusement.

"Much." The word comes out on a sigh as my greedy hands finally get a chance to wander over his shoulders and back again. His fingers are working slowly and steadily between my legs, and I arch against him, urging him on.

He leans in, his breath hot on my neck. I wait for his mouth to land on my skin, but only feel the briefest brush of his lips. "Have you thought about me this past year, Sylvie?"

His fingers are distracting me with their magic, but I manage to breathe out, "Yes. Every day."

He goes completely still for a moment. I wish I could see his face. His lips brush my neck at the same moment his fingers resume, working a bit faster.

I do and don't want to ask him the same question. The words stick in my throat. Even though I've casually dated—emphasis on *casual*, since I couldn't get Cole out of my mind long enough to make a connection with anyone else—I hate the thought of him dating or sleeping with other women.

After scraping his teeth down the length of my neck, he raises his head and brushes his nose against mine. "Every day, huh?" he says, meeting my eyes. His hand shifts between my legs, one finger slipping inside me as his thumb circles my clit. "That's how often I thought about you too."

"Really?"

"Don't sound so surprised, Silver Bells." With his eyes on me, he lowers his head and presses his lips to mine. I grip the back of his head and try to deepen the kiss, but he pulls back. "What did you think about?"

“Us, together.” My voice is a shaky whisper. At this point, I’m amazed I can even form words. “Doing normal stuff without an impending deadline hanging over us. And...this.”

“This?” He slides another finger inside me, picking up the pace. My eyes snap closed, head pressing into the pillow as I lift my hips and ride his hand.

“*This*,” I repeat on a gasp. “You touching me. Kissing me. Us finishing what we started last year in Niagara Falls.”

His breath ghosts over my lips. “Open your eyes and look at me.” The low command in his voice nearly makes me spontaneously combust. “Did you touch yourself when you thought of me?”

I make an affirmative noise that sounds like a whine. I’m so close and, while I wanted to come *with* Cole this time, I decide to ride this wave of pleasure, remembering how he made me come twice in quick succession our only other time together.

Cole’s gaze darts lower as I slip my hand between us and caress one of my breasts. He watches my movements, biting his lip when I pinch and roll my nipple. With a low growl, he swoops down, and I move my hand a second before his mouth closes around my nipple.

Between his tongue and teeth on my breast and his fingers working me into a frenzy, I don’t last much longer. Cole lifts his head from my breast to kiss me, swallowing my noises of pleasure as I shudder against him.

His fingers continue to move gently as I come down from the high of my orgasm. He rests his forehead against mine, laughing under his breath when I release a gusty sigh of satisfaction. My senses snap back into sharp focus as Cole shifts and I feel his hard length press against me through his underwear.

I scrape my nails down his chest and stomach, loving the way his muscles contract under my fingers. When I reach his underwear, I grip the elastic band and shove them down,

watching as his erection springs free. Cole goes very still, sucking in a sharp breath as I wrap my fingers around him. I run my thumb over the tip in the same lazy way he ran his thumb over my clit when he first touched me.

He groans, closing his eyes and dropping his head to my shoulder. His breathing becomes erratic as I stroke him slowly, swirling my thumb over the head with each pass. When my grip tightens, his head jerks up, eyes flying open. If I thought his eyes were dark before, they're like bottomless pools now, and I want to dive right in and never leave.

I don't protest when his hand covers mine to stop my movements. It feels like all the light and sound and air have been sucked out of the room as I wait for what comes next. With a noise somewhere between a sigh and a growl, Cole removes my hand. I reach blindly for the night table, trying and failing to grasp the handle. The low, rough chuckle that rumbles through Cole is almost enough to make me come a second time.

Mercifully, he takes over condom duty, pulling the box from the drawer and freeing a foil packet. He pushes his underwear the rest of the way off before removing my panties and tossing them over his shoulder with a devilish grin. His eyes scan my naked body as he rolls the condom on and then settles once more between my legs.

I wrap myself around him, pulling him as close as I can. Our bodies rock together before Cole reaches between us to guide himself to my entrance. He watches me closely as he slides in inch by inch. I don't realize I'm holding my breath until our bodies meet again and Cole brushes his lips over my forehead, whispering, "Breathe, Sylvie."

The air rushes out of me on a soundless laugh, followed quickly by a moan as he pulls out and pushes back in. I lock my legs around his hips and grip his biceps as our bodies move together, finding a natural rhythm.

I wasn't lying when I said I thought about Cole every single day this past year. I tried not to, but I couldn't help it.

Sex isn't something I typically take lightly, so our night together last year meant something to me, even though I knew it was possible we'd only have that one night. Over the last twelve months, I've often imagined us randomly running into each other again, but I've also pictured us going on dates and doing normal couple things. More often than not, those fantasies led to X-rated visions that had me pressing my thighs together or touching myself to soothe the ache between my legs. Nothing really soothed the ache in my heart, though. *That* ache remained present until we ran into each other this afternoon and everything suddenly felt right with the world again.

But this—having Cole inside me after months of dreaming about it, having my senses filled with his touch and taste and scent—is better than anything my imagination ever conjured up.

Intense pressure builds deep in my core, causing darkness to creep in around the edges of my vision. I hold on to Cole like my life depends on it, clutching the rippling muscles of his back. With our bodies so close, he's angled just right to hit me exactly where I need him to with each powerful thrust. When I reach that peak of pleasure, it feels like fireworks: bright, hot, and explosive. The sensation ripples through my entire body, and I ride the wave for as long as I can.

Happy fucking birthday to me.

I continue to grind against Cole as he moves inside me. Through my post-orgasm haze and tunnel vision, all I see is his beautiful face above me. I pepper his cheeks and lips with kisses, and he lets out a grunt of surprised laughter. He's still smiling when he buries his face in my neck and his body shudders with his release.

My hands continue to roam over his back and hips, keeping him close for as long as possible. I have no idea how much time passes before he pulls out of me and flops bonelessly to the side. We both laugh. He tells me he'll be right back and gives me a peck on the lips, but swoops back in

a second later for a long, deep kiss that has me tingling all over again.

When he gets up to go to the bathroom, I scramble out of bed and grab my favorite snowflake patterned housecoat from the chair where I tossed it this morning. In my closet, I find a robe I know will fit Cole. I've slipped into mine by the time he returns, although I didn't get as far as securing the front. Cole's gaze trails appreciatively over my exposed skin as he accepts the second robe and puts it on.

"This is really nice," he says, running his fingers over the fluffy material. "And...familiar?" His fingers trace the emblem on the breast pocket. He lifts his head slowly, his eyes positively dancing with mirth as they meet mine. "Sylvie Bell, did you *steal* this from the hotel in Niagara Falls?"

His scandalized tone makes me cackle. "Steal it? No, no, no, absolutely not. I *accidentally* packed it in my suitcase the day I left Niagara Falls. I called the hotel when I got home and happened to speak to the same woman who had been at the front desk for most of my stay there. I explained how I'd been in a rush to get on the road before that big snowstorm hit, and the robe got mixed in with my stuff. She sounded highly amused as she told me to consider it a Christmas gift."

Cole laughs, shaking his head. "Well, that was lucky."

"Right? I was prepared to pay a small fortune for the thing, but I knew it would be worth it."

Cole slides his hands inside my open robe and yanks me against him. "These robes are nice and all, but what do you say we ditch them and get back into bed?"

I open my mouth to answer in the affirmative when my stomach gives an embarrassingly loud growl. I groan and drop my forehead to Cole's chest, feeling his laughter vibrate against me. I can't believe I'm hungry after all I ate at the diner, but I guess we *did* just work up an appetite.

"While going back to bed sounds nice, my stomach apparently has other ideas," I say. "Why don't we order an

early dinner, open a bottle of wine, and you can tell me why you're in Bellevue and how you ended up at B&H Diner this afternoon."

He grips my upper arms and gently pushes me back so he can meet my eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to go out somewhere nice since it's your birthday? I'd happily take you anywhere you want to go."

I shake my head, leaning in to press my lips to the hollow of his throat. "And *I'll* happily take a rain check. For tonight, I just want to be here with you."

"If you're sure," he says, and I nod. "Okay. I'd rather be alone with you too. And *since* we'll be alone, maybe we could ditch the robes anyway."

"Play your cards right and maybe we can make that happen."



## CHAPTER EIGHT

When the food arrives, we spread it out on the coffee table in the living room. Cole pours us each a glass of the prosecco he found in my fridge; Evie left a bottle when she and the girls came over last week.

He hands me a full glass and raises the other in my direction. “To you, Sylvie, on your thirty-fifth birthday. I’m so honored I get to spend it with you, and even more honored the universe saw fit to bring us together once again. I hope the year ahead is full of love and magic and serendipity.”

My eyes sting at his heartfelt words. We clink our glasses together and share a quick kiss before sipping the wine. The bubbles help loosen the thickness in my throat. “Please assure me this is real,” I say. “And that you’re going to be part of the love and magic in the year ahead.”

“I am. I absolutely am.” He sets his glass down and hands me one of the takeout containers, motioning for me to start filling my plate. “The short version and the most important part is that I have a job and an apartment in Bellevue.”

My eyes bug. “Wow, okay. Long version, please.”

He chuckles. “I was enjoying my job, but something about it felt...hollow. I knew I should be loving all the traveling and meeting new people since it was what I’d always wanted, but I was lonely. Every once in a while, I’d look at job listings online, mostly in Toronto, but occasionally in Bellevue too. Last month, there was a listing for a job at the Village. They were looking for someone with writing and photography experience to run their blog and social media accounts. My initial reaction was that I was overqualified, but when I checked out the site and their socials, I was blown away.

Whoever had the job before was clearly a professional. I used my connections to contact Hugh MacKinnon personally.”

“Impressive,” I say. Hugh MacKinnon is the owner of Bellevue Village, and he’s also a wealthy philanthropist. He’s the one who hand selected me last year for the job working in the Village’s new family support center.

“Hugh himself is an impressive man,” Cole says. “I was actually scared shitless when I got him on the phone, but he treated me like a long-lost friend. He invited me up to Bellevue to interview me personally. We spent an hour talking about travel and family, and then he told me I had the job and offered to help me find an apartment.”

Laughter spills out of me. I’m not quite sure why—shock, delight, disbelief. One corner of Cole’s mouth twitches and he nods his head as if he completely understands.

“I officially start work the first week of January,” he says. “I moved into my apartment last week, and get this: Stella and Evie live down the hall.”

I nearly choke on the bite of food I’ve just taken. “You’re kidding!”

“The day I moved in, I dropped something and it rolled down the hall. Stella was coming out of her apartment and she grabbed it. As she was handing it to me, she froze and called me by my name. She said she recognized me from photos you showed her of our time together last year.”

My cheeks burn, even though a voice in my head points out I shouldn’t be embarrassed because otherwise Stella never would have recognized Cole. “So were you hoping you’d run into me eventually or...?”

“I wanted to get settled before I tracked you down. Everything happened so fast, and I didn’t want to freak you out or make you feel pressured, especially if you happened to be dating someone. When I ran into Stella, she asked me a million questions and then I asked some of my own. She said you were still single and she knew you still cared about me,

then she invited me to your birthday lunch and said it would be, and I quote, ‘the best surprise ever’.”

Tears sting my eyes, and I let out a shaky laugh. “It *was* the best surprise ever. Won’t you miss traveling, though? And your family?”

“My brother and niece moved to Kingston earlier this year, so I’m actually a lot closer to them now than I was in Toronto. Them leaving added to my loneliness, especially not having my niece around. As for traveling, I can still do that, but now it’ll be for fun instead of for work. There were some assignments where I got to see an entire area without really enjoying it because I was taking pictures and jotting notes the whole time. Now I can travel when and where I want to, and hopefully I won’t have to do it alone.”

“You’ve got it all figured out.” My voice is quiet, but even I can hear the note of awe in it.

“Almost,” he says. “I just need one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Tell me you’ll be part of my fresh start,” he says. “Tell me we can figure out a life together without a countdown clock and impending goodbyes hanging over our heads. One where we *never* have to say goodbye to each other again.”

The tears that were stinging my eyes before slip down my cheeks now. Cole’s forehead creases as he reaches out to swipe them away with his thumb. I grab his hand and use it to pull myself closer to him, swinging one leg over his lap so I’m straddling him.

“I never told you this, but I ran into Santa Elvis that night in the bar when I went to the bathroom. He told me to make a wish and then I made another wish later when you presented me with that cupcake. Do you want to know what I wished for?”

He nods slowly.

“One wish was to have an amazing year, which I did. The other wish was for this.” I squeeze his shoulders. “I mean, not this exactly, but...*this*. I wished for a happily ever after, whatever it may look like, and I know in my heart this is it. *You’re* it.”

For a second I worry it’s too much pressure to put on him. We haven’t even exchanged I love yous yet, and here I am telling him with complete assurance I think he’s my happily ever after. But his face breaks into a slow smile that warms me from the inside out.

“Well...serendipity *did* work really hard to bring us together,” he says, his words slow and thoughtful. “Seems rude not to strive for a happily ever after now.”

“Glad we’re on the same page.” I was aiming for a breezy tone, but my voice comes out high and shaky before giddy laughter spills from my lips.

Cole covers my mouth with his, swallowing my giggles along with the moan that escapes when his hands slide up my thighs to cup my bare ass under my robe. “Should we start making up for lost time?”

“Probably a good idea,” I murmur, brushing my nose against his and slipping my hands inside his robe where it gapes open at the chest. “We both have the rest of the year off from work, right? I bet we could make a lot of great new memories together in that time.”

“I like the way you think, Sylvie Bell.”

## CHAPTER NINE

“Do you know how hard it is to track down mistletoe? Especially on Christmas Day?”

Cole climbs the porch steps of my parents’ house and stops in front of me, dangling a sprig of mistletoe above his head. We spent the rest of my birthday and all day yesterday holed up in my apartment, talking and making love and ordering more food. I wasn’t ready to be away from him yet—I think part of me is still afraid he’s going to disappear and we’ll have to rely on serendipity to bring us together again—so I called my mom this morning and asked if it was okay if I invited someone special to Christmas dinner. For anyone else, it might be considered too soon for meeting the family, but our whole relationship has been done out of order, so why not this too?

I drove Cole to his apartment so he could shower and change, and then went back home and got ready myself. I just arrived at my parents’ place a minute ago and had only made it to the porch when Cole pulled in.

“Isn’t everything closed?” I ask. “Did you steal that from someone on your drive here?”

“Drive-by mistletoe theft, there’s an image,” he says. “Or maybe it *accidentally* fell into my car the way that hotel robe *accidentally* got packed into your suitcase.”

We both laugh as I grab the front of his coat and haul him to me. With my lips a breath away from his, I pause. “Are you sure you’re ready for this? *All* of this? Dinner with my parents tonight, lunch with your family in Kingston tomorrow, then New Year’s Eve with my friends?”

“*Our* friends,” he corrects, his eyes twinkling. “They love me, remember? In fact, it was Stella who helped me with the mistletoe. I ran into her as I was leaving my apartment and asked if she knew where I could get some. She pulled this from the wreath on their front door and made me promise not to tell Evie.”

“Remind me to thank her.” I press a quick kiss to Cole’s lips. “And remind me to stock up on mistletoe next year.”

Cole brings his smiling lips to mine. Since we’re standing on my parents’ front porch, I’m sure we both intend for it to be a short kiss, but once Cole’s tongue touches mine, it’s hard to pull away. He must feel the same because he grips my hips and yanks me against him. I fist my hands in the front of his jacket, then move them to weave my fingers through his hair.

My parents are expecting us, but that thought, along with the chilly December air, fades away as I get lost in the man who’s the embodiment of the best birthday wish I ever made.

I’m dazed and overheated by the time we pull apart. Cole takes my hand and we head inside. I expect my parents to be hovering near the front door, but I can hear them laughing in the kitchen. My phone buzzes in my pocket as Cole and I remove our outerwear. I assume it’s one of my friends since we’ve been texting on and off all day with holiday wishes and questions from them about Cole. I check it quickly, knowing this will likely be my last free moment for the rest of the day.

I’m surprised and delighted to see Mindy’s name on my screen. I open the text and read it: *Merry Christmas, Sylvie! I talked to Padma about the New Year’s Eve party and we’d love to attend. Thanks again for the invite. Let’s grab coffee this week so we can catch up and you can give me party details, okay?* The message is followed by a series of emojis: a purple heart, a kissy face, a bottle of champagne, and two clinking glasses.

Smiling, I tuck my phone back in my pocket since I can hear my parents coming down the hall. I take Cole’s hand again and meet his eyes, about to ask him if he’s sure he’s

ready for this. The words die on my lips when I find him watching me with a sweet, affectionate smile. He lifts our joined hands and brushes his lips against my knuckles.

Call it serendipity, call it luck, call it magic, it all feels the same to me right now. And it feels pretty damn good.

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Dear reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read *Silver Bells & Serendipity*. If you enjoyed Sylvie and Cole's story, I'd love to hear from you. You can find all my contact information on my website: [www.marielandryauthor.com](http://www.marielandryauthor.com)

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Thank you for your support. Every time I hear from a reader who was touched by my work, it confirms that I made the right decision to follow my dreams and become an author.

With love and gratitude,

Marie

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Marie Landry lives and writes in a cozy apartment in Ontario, Canada, surrounded by books and Funko Pops. An avid reader from a young age, she loves getting lost in characters' worlds, whether they're of her own making or someone else's. She particularly loves stories with as much of an emphasis on self-discovery and friendship as on romance... but don't leave out the romance!

When not doing bookish things, you can often find her taking pictures, cooking, scrolling Instagram (find her at [@marielandry.author](#)), daydreaming about frolicking through the Scottish Highlands, or listening to the same music she's loved since the '90s. She's an unapologetic nerd and fangirl, and that, along with her mental health advocacy, is often woven into her books.