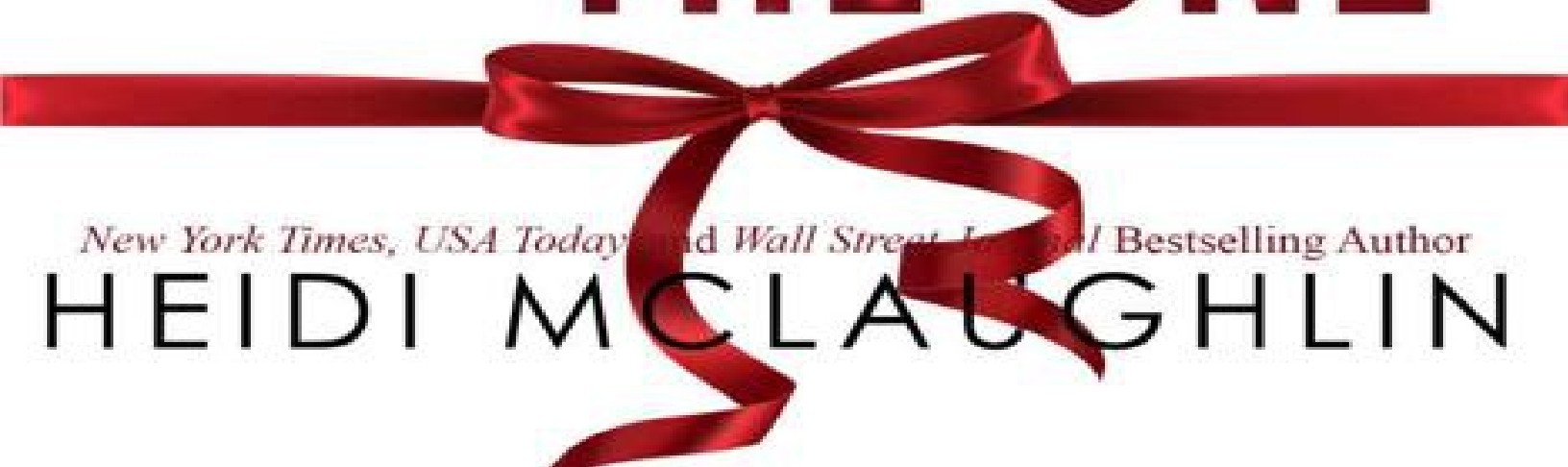




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HEIDI MCLAUGHLIN
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This novel was previously published under the pen name, Darby Blake. The content is the same.

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one

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Christian

CHRISTIAN LANE PAID for his cab fare and exited onto the busy sidewalk. He rushed into the airport without paying attention and ran smack into a cart loaded with luggage. The suitcases on top of the pile crashed to the floor. A lady screamed, waved her hands in the air, and said something about her Christmas gifts being broken, while Christian buckled over in excruciating pain as he felt his very essence leave his body. Getting hit in the nuts, even the slightest touch, was the most pain he had ever experienced, until now. What he felt was life-sucking, debilitating agony. Every part of his being wanted to cry and tell the woman who continued to rant about her precious gifts to shut the fuck up because he was dying a slow, painful death. He placed his hands on his knees and groaned. He practiced his breathing, inhaling, and exhaling calmly, but there wasn't anything he could do to assuage the deep throbbing he felt. It wasn't even the good kind of throbbing that promised some relief at the end. This was the seeing-stars-through-watery-eyes kind. The kind that made grown men cry out for their mothers, knowing even they couldn't help their sons. Christian had taken hits to his midsection before, but this took the cake. He was pretty sure that one of the suitcase handles had gripped his man parts and squeezed tightly before letting go.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that he was going to have trouble walking, never mind sitting on an airplane for a three-hour flight. He needed a bag of ice—anything frozen to ease the pain.

"Sorry," he squeaked and inhaled. He didn't usually make a habit of

knocking things over, but had been preoccupied when his ex-wife called and chastised him for something he had no control over. The condo they had shared in New York City didn't pass inspection, and since he hadn't lived there for over a year, he felt it wasn't his responsibility to take care of it. Skye—the ex—thought differently. Her early morning call threw him off his game, and now with this minor mishap, his return to his hometown for Christmas was starting to look like one of those bad holiday movies. Of course, those always turned out for the best, so he had a smidgen of hope.

Thankfully, the husband of the screaming wife told Christian not to worry about their pile of luggage. Not that he would've been much help since his berries and tree trunk—yes, he considered his manhood a tree trunk—were currently tucked into his stomach out of fear they were going to die.

Christian hobbled his way to the TSA line and fished his passport out of his pocket. He showed it to the agent, along with his boarding pass, and then made his way to the security screener, wondering if the X-ray machine could tell him whether he was still intact. He wanted kids, but after a stunt like that, he wasn't sure he'd be able to perform anytime soon. This had been a quick trip to Miami to meet with a client who “wintered” in a high-rise facing the ocean. It was odd seeing a flocked Christmas tree in the corner of the apartment, as his client's wife sat on the balcony in her swimsuit, tanning, while Christmas music played. As much as Christian hated winter, he'd never leave the north during the holidays. There was something magical about the cold, the snow, and the ambience that New York City and his hometown of North Pole, New York brought.

After a long and agonizing trip to the bathroom, he looked for a spot to buy coffee. Both lines for Starbucks and Dunkin' were long—longer than he wanted to stand in. He rested against the wall and placed a mobile order. It was the best he could do for himself because he was still in pain and the thought of standing there didn't appeal to him. When his name was called for his order, he ambled toward the counter, grabbed his coffee, and thanked the barista. Christian walked through the terminal as close to the middle of the wide aisle as possible, thinking this would be the better spot. He'd avoid any collisions from people leaving their gates, and he'd be able to dodge anyone coming toward him. He needed to get to his departure gate so he could sit down and not move until boarded his flight.

After what felt like the longest walk of his life, Christian finally made it to the gate. His flight would take him home to New York City and from

there, he'd drive north for his much-needed vacation. Never mind the fact he was going from one tourist spot to another. He'd be home, and no one would bother him with work or house repairs that weren't his—except for his father, and Christian could handle those requests. He read the reader board, saw that his flight was on time, and that the airline had him checked in for his first-class seat. Once he got on board, he would order the stiffest cocktail he could and hopefully fall asleep.

Christian eased into one of the chairs, set his coffee on top of his carry-on, and pulled his phone out. He needed something to occupy his thoughts and opened the news app to catch up on the day's events, but something nagged at him in his mind. He couldn't put his finger on what it was, but there was something trying to steal his focus, and it wasn't the numbness between his legs. Christian set his phone down and looked around. He had no clue what or who he was looking for, but he prayed it wasn't his ex-wife or any of her family members. He couldn't deal with them right now. But he wouldn't put it past Skye to be in Miami, although her being there wouldn't make much sense. They'd spoken earlier, and he was certain she was in the city, complaining about the roof leaking of their—well now hers—condo.

He went back to his phone when it beeped and groaned at the weather alert. New York was bracing for a massive storm—the “Winter Storm of the Century” the headline read. “Lovely,” he muttered. Christian glanced up, and it was in that moment when he saw her—or what looked like her. Her being his best friend from his childhood, Holly Saint. They'd gone to school together, from daycare until they graduated from high school, and then she disappeared. It was odd because Holly parents never spoke about her to his parents, and any time Christian asked about her, his mom would brush him off or she'd say something like Holly was just fine and change the subject. He never understood why she disappeared on him all those years ago. They'd been thick as thieves from day one, and then poof, she was gone.

The more he stared, the more unsure he became. What were the odds that she'd be in Miami right now, while he was there, and both of them were heading to New York? As far as he knew, Holly hadn't been back to their hometown in years, unless she was back living there, and he never knew. No, there was no way, he'd been to her parents store many times and he would've surely seen her.

The longer he stared, the more he convinced himself the woman sitting two rows over wasn't Holly. There was no way the world would reunite them

at a busy airport, where they wouldn't be able to have a happy reunion. There were too many onlookers and eavesdroppers. Christian had a ton of questions for Holly—if that was, in fact, Holly. He opened the Facebook app on his phone and typed in her brother's name. Elden Saint and Christian were a few years apart in age, and Elden had gone to boarding school to play hockey, which had panned out for him. He was now in the NHL with a thriving career.

Christian scrolled through Elden's pictures, stopping only when he saw one of Holly. They were sitting around a fire, in what looked like a lodge, and he wondered if Holly used to spend the holidays with Elden since their parents couldn't exactly close their store down, especially during Christmas time. It would make sense that Holly went wherever Elden played. They'd been very close, and Christian remembered how upset Holly had been when Elden left for school. She would get into a mood and sulk for days until Christian brightened her up. He continued to scroll and then stopped on another photo of Holly in a bikini. He double clicked, so it took up his entire screen and focused on her face: her crooked smile that always gave him pause, the smattering of freckles on her nose, and the twinkle in her eyes. She was as beautiful in the image as he had remembered her to be all those years ago.

Christian closed the app and looked across the row of seats again. The woman flipped through a magazine, looking as if she didn't have a care in the world. Maybe if he yelled her name, and she looked around, he'd be able to tell if it was her or not. But then again, he could yell her name and look like a complete fool to the people around him for blurting out a random name in the middle of the airport.

Nope, the only way to know if the woman was his Holly was to get up and go over there. The idea of walking or even moving sent a jolt to his groin. He should stay put and rest, but if he did that, he could very well miss an opportunity to talk to her. He had to take a chance and if it wasn't her, so be it.

Christian stood gingerly, pocketed his phone, picked up his coffee, and grabbed the handle to his carry-on. There was a seat available next to her and although it wasn't the correct airport etiquette to take it when there were others open, he didn't care. He had to know if this woman was the Holly Saint he had grown up with.

He sat down with a very audible sigh, which wasn't meant to catch her

attention but to ease the pain he expected to feel when the hard plastic hit his underside. Thankfully, it wasn't as bad as he'd expected, which caused him some relief. The flight wouldn't be entirely so bad, especially once he got some booze into his system.

It was now or never. Christian needed to say something to this woman. He cleared his throat, hoping she'd look at him. She continued to thumb through her magazine. The subtlety of him taking the seat next to her clearly didn't get her attention. Maybe she wasn't Holly Saint from North Pole, New York after all.

Except the way his skin zinged and the hairs on his arm stood told him otherwise. No one, not even his wife, could ever elicit that sort of response from him. Christian and Holly had a deeply rooted connection that his ex-wife had loathed. Skye was always jealous of Holly and made many mentions of this through high school. Christian never understood why. They had always been friends, nothing more.

Christian cleared his throat and leaned toward her, which was also very frowned upon. "I've always wondered where you ran off to, and now, after twelve, well, almost thirteen years, I've found you in an airport in Miami, at Christmas, no less. How are you, Holly?"

He held his breath and waited for the woman next to him to respond. She slowly closed her magazine and shifted in her chair to look at him. As soon as their eyes met, he knew deep within his bones that it was Holly Saint sitting next to him. He hadn't seen her since they posed for a picture in their cap and gown at their high school graduation, surprised when she left for the summer and hurt when he got to the college they agreed to go to, and she wasn't there.

She rested her hands on the magazine in her lap and studied the man next to her. He waited anxiously for her to say something—anything—yet all she could do was stare at him. Had he gotten it so terribly wrong that this woman couldn't find the words to tell him to take a hike?

Slowly, her lips turned upward, and she smiled. "Hello, Christian."

two

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Holly

THERE HE WAS—THE love of her life—or the life she had before she left her hometown and vowed to never return as long as he lived. It was dramatic, but it was the only way to keep her heart from breaking into a million pieces each time she saw him. She swore she'd seen him earlier when she waited in line for coffee but wasn't about to walk up to him and ask. It had been almost thirteen years since she had last seen him in person, because seeing him in her dreams didn't count. Holly didn't believe in happenstance or fate, and it made little sense for him to be in Miami when he should've been back in their hometown for vacation. Thanks to her mother, she knew when he returned every year, and Holly was sure to avoid visiting—that was, until this year. Her mother needed help at their family store, and Holly couldn't say no to her mom. Besides, she'd been there before when Christian was in town and successfully managed to avoid him. That's what she was going to do again, except she never expected to run into him at the airport.

Scratch that—they hadn't run into each other yet, and there was no way she was going to go out of her way to speak to him. Besides, it was unlikely that he even remembered her, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Except, she remembered him and how she longed for him to look at her the way he had looked at Skye Reynolds when she arrived at their school, interrupting everything Holly and Christian had. She would also never forget how nasty Skye was to her when Christian wasn't around. Skye was a bully, a mean girl, who pushed Holly so far out of Christian's path, she had no choice but to remove herself from the equation.

At first, she was the third wheel, the one who tagged along on Christian and Skye's dates. The one who sat in the car under the streetlight, while the two of them made out behind the bushes at their end of their dates when Christian dropped Skye off home. Skye, of course, would throw a fit when Christian wouldn't drop Holly off first. It didn't make sense when Holly only lived a block away from him. Christian was practical. Skye, not so much. Of course, it was Skye who told Holly that she and Christian had done the deed. Holly cried for two straight weeks. Every chance Skye had, she reminded Holly that Christian had chosen her.

Day after day, Holly waited for Christian to see what Skye was doing, but he was in love. By the time their senior year rolled around, Holly and Christian were friendly, but the relationship they had was gone. They no longer talked on the phone, rode to school together, teamed up for class projects, and he didn't come over to watch movies with her anymore. In a way, they'd broken up, and Christian had left Holly with a shattered heart. Sure, he was around and would talk to her when he saw her, but their relationship was different.

When it came time for Holly to apply to college, she applied everywhere, except for the one place she and Christian had decided they wanted to go to—Penn State. She went south and forgot all about Christian Lane.

At least she had until she saw him in the airport earlier. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that the man standing against the wall was Christian. She'd know him anywhere. While he looked at his phone, she watched him. He wore his dark hair shorter than he had in high school, and he seemed slightly taller than she remembered. The sporty guy she once knew was a preppy-looking man with trousers, a button down, and loafers. He looked stylish and well put together. Holly knew from her mother that he was a lawyer in the city, but that was it. Christian Lane was a topic that Holly refused to discuss. There wasn't a single thing she wanted to know about his life.

Holly sat down at her gate and opened her magazine while she sipped her latte, determined to forget who she saw. Until now, she'd been excited about going home, but the idea of being on a plane with Christian sent her thoughts into a tailspin. She hoped he would be on a different flight, maybe one that left later than hers. There wasn't a doubt in her mind she'd run into him at home, but at least there, she could escape or blame the crowds for not wanting to chat. And she would do everything she could to avoid his wife. Christian and Skye had married a month after graduating from college and

right before he went to law school. *To Holly Lane and Guest*, someone had scrawled on the front of the envelope. It went right into the garbage when her mother sent her mail to her in Miami. Holly hadn't even bothered to open it.

Deep down, going home for Christmas was what she wanted. This time, she'd be home for a week instead of a day or two. She looked forward to working in the family store and watching her dad play Santa for the kids in town and to those who come to see him. The men in her family had a long-standing tradition of being the town Santa, and this year, Holly was going to take pictures for everyone.

Holly spotted Christian standing near the gate desk, reading the boards. He had gone from boyishly handsome to ruggedly gorgeous, and Holly's heart, as well as her libido, approved. She used to dream of being with Christian in all the ways that counted. There was a time when she thought he would kiss her—one of the many nights they'd spent watching movies together—sharing the same blanket. His hand always knew how to find hers and they'd wrestle for who was in charge of the remote. The times when they'd fallen asleep together were too many to count. Her parents never cared much because they trusted Holly and Christian, and like Holly, they thought they'd end up together.

Holly waited to see if Christian would look around the room and spot her. When he finished reading the monitor, he went and sat down. She had seen enough and went back to reading her magazine and sipping her latte. They'd be on the same plane, but still miles away from each other, and she was okay with that because seeing him now brought back every feeling she had for him. Holly thought she had buried them all, but they were still front and center. Her heart beat wildly as she thought about what it would be like to say hi to him, to hug him, and she knew she couldn't take the pain that came with knowing he'd be in the arms of his wife later.

Nope, she'd sit where she was and pretend Christian Lane wasn't at her gate, and he still wasn't the most gorgeous man she had ever seen. She'd pretend that the love of her life wasn't two rows away because she needed to save herself. She had mastered the art of pretending earlier on in her life when it came to him—what would another three hours be to her?

The seat next to her jostled. Holly could smell his cologne—woody and clean—before he even spoke. He cleared his throat, and if he expected her to acknowledge him, he was sadly mistaken. This Holly was not the Holly he grew up with. Except when he started talking, every part of her body came

alive. Everything from the ends of her hair to her toes tingled, in a way she hadn't felt since the day she walked out of his life all those years ago. Her body quivered at the sound of his voice. The deep timber of his words washed over her.

He cleared his throat and leaned toward her, which Holly thought was very brazen of him, considering they hadn't seen each other in over a decade. "I've always wondered where you ran off to, and now, after twelve, well, almost thirteen years, I've found you in an airport in Miami, at Christmas, no less. How are you, Holly?"

Holly waited. She contemplated whether she wanted to acknowledge him. He'd broken her heart many moons ago, but she still felt the pain that came with the decision he made. He never saw her as more than a friend, and he wouldn't now. Holly thought nothing had changed because he was married to that wretched girl from high school. Mean girls don't suddenly turn nice. For a moment, Holly thought maybe Christian would see her in a new light. She had grown up. She was no longer the awkward girl from down the street—her words, not his.

Holly closed her magazine and shifted in her seat to look at him.

My God, he's more beautiful up close.

Their eyes met, both seeking recognition of their familiar past. She set her hands on top of her magazine, the one that featured the photographs she had taken, and bit her lower lip. Slowly, a smile she wanted desperately to go away formed, as if her inner self was excited to see the man she'd been in love with since she was a little girl.

"Hello, Christian." Her voice was soft, elegant. Nothing like the squeaky, high-pitched voice she had in her teen years. Long gone was the valley-girl dialect she had picked up when she was thirteen.

"Holly," her name fell from his lips in a sigh.

God, how she wanted to kiss him. To feel his lips pressed against hers. Back in high school, before Skye moved to town, Holly had dreams of going to prom with Christian, where he would kiss her under the disco ball, and they'd dance to their favorite song and forget about the world around them. After, they would go to college and fall madly in love and laugh about how it took them years to realize what was right in front of them. Then, they'd show up at their ten-year reunion, and show everyone how happy they were.

Holly skipped her ten-year reunion. She had no desire to see Christian and Skye together. She'd seen enough to last her a lifetime. Holly looked past

his shoulder, wondering where his wife was. Should she ask him? No, she wouldn't. She'd soak up every minute she got with him now and then go on with her life.

"Wow," he said. "I can't believe it's really you."

Holly chuckled. "It's really me. What's it been—"

"Twelve and a half years, but who's counting?"

Me, and apparently you.

"Really?" Holly played it off, acting as if she didn't realize how many years had passed when she knew *exactly* how long it had been. She left the day after graduation and never looked back. She'd been homesick, missed her family and friends, but the alternative would've killed her. Holly had already died a little on the inside when Christian started dating Skye.

"I thought I'd see you at the reunion."

I thought I'd marry you and have your babies.

"I think I had to work. I don't really remember."

Christian nodded. "I can't believe you're sitting next to me. In the airport in Miami, of all places. Are you heading to your parents' place for Christmas?"

There was no point in lying to him since they were at the same gate. Before she could answer, the desk agent came over the loudspeaker to announce they would start boarding momentarily. Christian glanced at the gate and then back at Holly.

"I am," she finally said.

"It's been a while, right?"

Had he looked for her in town? At the store? As far as she knew, he hadn't asked her parents about her, unless they didn't tell her, which was also an option. They knew how she felt about him.

"Yeah, it has." Only she hadn't meant about going home.

three

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Christian

THE DESK AGENT began the boarding process and panic set in. They would call for first-class passengers soon, and he was certain he hadn't seen Holly's name on the monitor earlier. He also wasn't looking, but H. Saint would've stood out to him. Unless she was married. Was she? Christian hadn't seen a ring on her finger, but then again, he wasn't really paying much attention. He only saw *her*—the face of a woman he hadn't seen in years.

Christian waited for Holly to say more, or for all the things he thought he'd say to her once he saw her again to come out of his mouth, but there was nothing between them except for an awkward silence. It seemed that whatever they had in the earlier years of their life had passed them by. Talking to her used to be the easiest thing in the world, and now, for the life of him, he couldn't think of what to say. Telling her he had missed her didn't seem right.

"This is me," he said when the desk agent called for first class. He gave Holly a hug, and from the second his arms tightened around her, he felt like he was home. Everything that he once felt came rushing back. She released him and gathered her things.

"I should probably get in line." Holly motioned to the lengthy line forming.

"It was great seeing you," he said. "I'll stop by the store and say hi."

"Merry Christmas, Christian."

"Merry Christmas, Holly."

He watched as she went to the end of the line. She didn't look back or meet his gaze. It was like he was out of her life, and she seemed to be okay

with that. He wasn't. Now that he'd seen her, spoken to her, he wanted more. Reluctantly, he boarded the plane and took his seat. Unfortunately, the plane was larger than he'd expected, and Holly wouldn't walk by him on her way to her seat. Christian wouldn't be able to see her again. He couldn't live with knowing she was on the plane with him, and they weren't together.

As soon as everyone was on board and the doors closed, Christian got up from his seat and walked down the aisle way until he spotted her. Holly sat next to the window and was again looking at her magazine.

"Excuse me," he said to the man next to her. Holly looked up when she heard Christian's voice. He smiled at her and then said to the man, "I'm in first class and I'd like to switch seats with you."

The man didn't hesitate. He stood, grabbed his things, and then followed Christian to his seat. "Thank you," he said.

"Old girlfriend or someone you just met?" the man asked.

"A little bit of both," Christian told him. He made his way back to his new seat and sat down next to Holly. She closed her magazine and looked at him.

"Gave up first class, huh?" she asked.

"To sit with you, yes."

She gave him a slight nod and then slipped her magazine into her bag. He wanted her to talk, to tell him about her life, but he sensed something held her back and he had a good idea what that was.

"I'm divorced," he blurted out, and her eyes widened. Yes, this was it. Skye and Holly hadn't gotten along in high school, and he knew it was because of Skye. Her insecurities had been a cause of disagreement for them until they got to college and Holly wasn't there. For the longest time, Christian had to hide his feelings about Holly from Skye. It took him a long time to get over Holly and the friendship he had lost, but after the hundredth unreturned call, he set his feelings for her aside and made a go of things with Skye.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Holly said.

"Are you?"

She said nothing. The flight attendant began the safety spiel and, as much as he wanted to continue talking to Holly about things, he figured he could wait until they taxied or were in the air. Holly would be stuck next to him for five hours and he didn't think she could ignore him for that long. He'd give her a few minutes and then they were going to have the heart-to-heart they

should've had years ago.

Once the announcements were over, Christian leaned over Holly to look out her window. He inhaled her perfume and instantly closed his eyes. The flowery scent was the same one she wore in high school. He lost count of the times he'd get a whiff while walking to class. He'd stop and look around for Holly, wondering where she was.

"Why didn't you come to my wedding?"

Holly glanced at him, and he saw trepidation in her eyes. He smiled, hoping to convey he'd understand whatever she told him.

"I think I had a shoot or something. I don't really remember."

"Don't lie to me, Holly Saint. I know you better than anyone else."

"Knew," she corrected him. "You haven't known me for quite some time."

"So, tell me, what have I missed? Who is the Holly Saint of today?"

Holly looked at him like she wanted to punch him. He was pushy and intruding on her life—the life she shut him out of. She adjusted in her seat to face him. "I didn't come to your wedding because of who you married. Skye was horrible to me in high school: a bully and a mean girl. She and her friends would gang up on me when you weren't around, and honestly, I couldn't take watching you marry her."

"I'm sorry she was like that to you."

Holly gave him a dismissive wave. "Water under the bridge," she told him. "I've grown up a lot since then."

"I can see that. What do you do?"

"I'm a freelance photographer, but I have contracts with most of the sports teams in Miami."

"So, you live here?"

She nodded.

"When did you move here?"

Holly looked down at her hands. "The day after graduation."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She glanced up at him and rolled her eyes. "Would it have changed anything?"

He thought for a moment and then shook his head. "Probably not."

"A clean break was the way to go," she said with a sigh. Holly looked back out the window and then frowned. "We aren't moving. We haven't even pulled away from the gate yet."

Christian leaned over her to verify. “Odd.” He sat back in his seat and thought about what to say next. He was about to spill his guts when the flight attendant came on over the intercom to let everyone know their flight was a bit late because of some bad weather. There was a collective groan from everyone on the aircraft.

“Great,” Holly muttered.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” He turned his phone on and then went to the weather app. “Fuck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It looks like the snow flurries in New York have turned into a full-blown blizzard.”

“Are you serious? Holly looked at his phone and watched the video of the weather report. “Crap. I wonder how long they’re going to keep us on the plane. I bet you’re wishing you were in first class now.”

Christian closed the app and set his phone down. “Actually, I’m right where I want to be.”

It was clear his words caught her off guard. She opened her mouth to say something, but quickly closed it. He held her gaze and wished like hell she had never left his life.

“I’ve missed the hell out of you, Holly.”

She smiled softly and shook her head.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” she told him. “So, not married anymore?” Holly changed the subject on him.

“Nope. About two years in, I decided she wasn’t the one for me. We tried counseling, but my heart wasn’t in it. I didn’t love her like I should. The divorce was finalized during my third year of law school.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ve already said that, but something tells me you’re not.”

She shrugged. “The teenager in me is extremely happy. The adult in me . . .” Holly trailed off. “What kind of law do you practice?”

Ah, finally, she wanted to know something about him. “White-collar crime,” he told her.

“So, you get rich criminals off?”

“Nonviolent, and yes. I try to, at least.”

“Where do you live?”

“New York City.”

“What were you doing in Miami?”

“I had to visit a client. He lives here for the winter, and we needed to prepare for his trial.”

“What’s he charged with?”

Christian knew he shouldn’t divulge the details of the case, but he wanted to keep the conversation with Holly going. With a quick glance around, he lowered his voice before answering. “Tax evasion,” he said. “And before you ask, yes, he absolutely did it, and he’ll face jail time for it.”

“So, you’re not that good at your job?”

Christian shrugged and then laughed. “Sometimes even the best can’t get the guilty off. His wife—well, now ex-wife—is on audio, telling her friends on how he cheated the system.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah,” Christian sighed. “You’d think that would scare him off from marriage, but it didn’t. He married his mistress hours after his divorce was final.”

“His former wife totally played him.”

“I agree.” He laughed.

The intercom crackled, and they paid attention. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’re going to deplane due to time constraints. Please make sure you have all of your belongings, as you’ll board another plane when it’s safe to travel.”

“Well, shit,” Christian said. He stood and grabbed his things and then offered to carry Holly’s as well. She gave him her hand, and he helped her slide out of her seat and into the aisle. She stood in front of him, with her back almost pressed to his chest. He couldn’t tell if the energy moving through his body was because they held hands for a few seconds or if it was because she was right in front of him. It took everything Christian had within him not to place his hand on her hip. He desperately wanted to touch her, but he held back.

They moved forward and exited the plane. The carry ons that had been stowed by the door were slowly being brought out. “Do you have luggage here?” he asked, not remembering if he saw her with a suitcase earlier.

“No, it’s in checked baggage, which means they’ll unload it and forget to put it on the correct flight, which then means I won’t have it when I get off the plane later.”

She wasn’t wrong.

They made their way back through the gate and he went right to the

monitor to see where their new gate would be. When it didn't change right away, he looked for Holly. He thought she would stand next to him, but she went and sat back down. Didn't she care about her flight? Christian walked over and sat down next to her.

"Don't you care about the gate change?"

She shook her head and held her phone up. "The airline will text me when it changes. There's really no point in stressing about it."

"You're not upset?"

"I am, but there isn't much I can do." She nodded toward the desk. "They're up there yelling at that woman like it's her fault it's snowing. If something happened to the plane, their family would sue. What good will it do me to freak out? I'll leave that for my mom."

"And mine," Christian said. "I wish we knew how long we'll be delayed. I'd like for us to go get a drink. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"Do we?" she questioned.

He nodded. "Are you married?" he blurted out suddenly.

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Boyfriend?"

Another shake.

"Well, that's good."

She cackled. "Is it? My mom doesn't think so."

"Yeah, mine neither. Don't you think it's strange that neither of us knew the important stuff about each other? It's like our parents don't talk anymore."

"It's not that," she told him. "I gave mine specific instructions not to talk about me to your family or to tell me anything about your life."

"Why would you do that?"

Holly met Christian's gaze. Her eyes were full of life, but he could see torment in them. "Because I was in love with you, and you broke my heart."

four

. . .

Holly

HOLLY'S EYES widened as the words tumbled out of her mouth. She couldn't take them back now. She could only own up to what she'd said. Holly watched Christian's face morph from a smile to shock. Or maybe it was confusion. She couldn't be sure. He held a blank stare. No blinking. Nothing. Holly thought about waving her hand in front of his face, but then figured once he ran out of air, he'd come back to reality.

"Wait, what?" he said as he blinked rapidly at her. "What did you say?"

"I think you heard me, otherwise you wouldn't have gone all catatonic on me."

"I'm just . . . shocked."

Holly reached for her magazine, but he stopped her. "I want to talk about this."

"Here?" She looked around the crowded terminal. Everyone seemed frustrated about the flight, which was understandable, but there was literally nothing anyone, especially the desk agent, could do. It was winter. It snowed in the north. This shouldn't surprise people.

"I don't want to push this aside for some other time." Christian reached for her hand and rubbed his thumb over the top of hers. "Those feelings meant something to you, to the point you asked your parents not to speak to mine about you. That's not something I want to brush under the rug for later."

Holly had to give Christian credit. She'd dropped a bomb on him, and he was unwilling to let it be a dud. Might as well make it explode. She resigned herself to drudging up the past, even though it hurt. She removed her hand

from his and clasped it with her other one. Touching him was on the list of things she didn't want to do. He made her feel things she'd never experienced with another man. Holly only had butterflies for Christian. At the same time, she loved and hated the way he made her feel.

"You're in every memory of my childhood, from family vacations, to walking to school, to the sleepovers we used to have in the living room. I don't know when it happened exactly, but by the time we reached high school, I was head over heels for you. I thought our relationship would progress naturally, but then Skye moved to town, and well, we all know how that turned out." Holly shrugged.

"Why not just tell me?" he asked.

"Believe me, I've asked myself that question a million times."

"Wow."

Holly's phone chimed, and she glanced at the screen. "They've canceled our flight."

"What?" Christian stood and went to the monitor. When he came back, he confirmed what Holly had said, not that she expected any different. "I'll be right back."

She used this time to call home. Her mother answered on the first ring. "Shouldn't you be in the air?"

"Hi to you too," Holly said. "The flight had been delayed, but now it's canceled. It looks like I won't be home until tomorrow at the earliest."

"Oh, honey. I'm sorry. At least you can sleep in your own bed tonight."

"True."

"I really hope you're home tomorrow, though. I really need your help. The news has been reporting nonstop about us being the Christmas town of the north and tourism is off the charts right now. Your poor dad—he hasn't had a break in weeks, and I could really use your help. Plus, you have to be our photographer."

Holly rolled her eyes at her mother's complaining. It was her mother's fault that their little hometown was front-page news. If she hadn't written into a national magazine, none of this would've happened.

"Mom, I'll be there when I get there. I can't control the weather, and I definitely can't make a pilot fly when it's not safe."

"I know . . ." her voice trailed off.

"Guess who I ran into in the airport and happens to be on my flight?"

"Holly, don't play games. Just tell me."

“Christian Lane,” she said as she watched him approach.

“Oh, well, isn’t that a delightful surprise?” Holly imagined her mother standing there with her hand over her heart. Her entire family was fond of the Lanes. It was hard not to be. Christian’s parents were very much a part of the community, and always the first to volunteer for anything.

“Yeah. Listen, I gotta run and find out when the next available flight is. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Holly hung up just as Christian sat down. “I think I’m going to take off,” she told him. “It was great seeing you.”

“Wait, what? Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“They canceled our flight, remember?”

She shook her head slowly. “I live here, remember? When the airline rebooks me on the next available flight, I’ll come back.”

“Or,” Christian started, “what if I can get us booked on a flight to DC? There’s one leaving later tonight. The only problem is that it’s a red-eye. That gives us enough time to get your luggage moved to the other airline, go through security again, and have something to eat.”

“And then what?” she asked, laughing at his rambling. “What happens in the morning when we’re in DC and not New York?”

“Then we figure it out from there. At least we’re closer. We can rent a car.”

“And drive through a storm?”

He shrugged. “I’ll figure it out. Regardless, we’ll be closer to home.”

“All right,” she said without hesitation. The flight to DC took about two and a half hours, and hopefully the storm would have cleared up by then and they could get another flight. She hoped for a direct flight to Plattsburgh. She was over this traveling thing already.

Christian told her to follow him. They walked speedily through the airport until they were in line with another airline. “We need to secure the seats, then go get your luggage, and then check it in here.”

Holly thought about going to start the luggage process because that normally took some time, but then she wouldn’t be able to pay for her flight. The last thing she needed was to be indebted to Christian. She doubted she’d see him again after this trip unless they ran into each other back home.

“Why don’t you go start the luggage retrieval, and I’ll get us booked on the flight.”

It was like he could read her mind. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. The quicker we can get things done, the better. Plus, I’m starving and want to stop at Hudson to grab some food.”

“Okay. You’ll let me know what I owe for my ticket?”

Christian nodded, and Holly made her way to baggage claim. She hoped the carousel would have her luggage going round and round, but the amount of people standing there told her otherwise. As soon as the warning bell sounded, everyone around her sighed with relief. By the time she had her bag, she’d been gone for forty minutes and was certain Christian was long gone. They hadn’t exchanged numbers, not that she couldn’t call her mom and get it, and hadn’t agreed to meet anywhere.

Holly rolled her suitcase beside her and when she saw Christian walking toward her, a smile broke out. She was happy to see him. It was like their first day of whatever grade when he would show up at her door, ready to either walk with her to school or drive her. Her first day of school was always her best day until Skye came along.

“We’re all set,” he told her. “Now, we go through security again.”

“I need to check my suitcase,” she told him.

“Right, let’s go do that.”

After an elevator ride up one floor, they strode to an open kiosk. Christian typed in their flight information, followed the prompts, and pulled the luggage tag from the printer. Airlines made it easy to check baggage and avoid lines. He secured the tag, handed Holly her portion, and then carried her suitcase to the drop location.

“There, now security,” he said. They followed the signs to security and Holly groaned as they approached.

“Look at that line.”

He held up their tickets. “First class, no line.”

“What? Are you serious?” She made good money from her job, but not first-class money. She was torn. Should she tell him she couldn’t afford the ticket, even though she could, or just chose not to and let it go? Holly opted for the latter. There was no point in discussing finances with him right now.

Christian led them to security and then handed her ticket to her. “I see the wheels spinning in your head about the ticket,” he said. “It didn’t cost me anything. I used my points.”

“I can pay you,” she told him.

“For points? I’m not sure how that equates.”

Christian was right. “Fine then. Dinner is on me tonight.”

“Deal.”

They made their way through security and found a nice Italian place in their terminal. Holly hated eating at the airport because the cost of everything was through the roof. Still, she didn't hesitate to order a bottle of wine for them to share, as well as an order of bread. This meal would cost her a small fortune, but as she looked across the table at the man she still loved, she realized he hadn't taken his eyes off her since she blurted out her love for him. It didn't matter that he hadn't said it back because she wasn't expecting him to. To her, saying those words had been freeing. She no longer carried the burden of her secret, and Christian knew how she felt.

Their wine came, and Holly raised her glass toward Christian. “To old friends,” she said in a toast.

“To old friends,” he repeated. They drank, shared bread, and when their meals came, gorged themselves on pasta. By the time they finished, Holly was tipsy and thankful for the overnight flight, even if it was short. She'd happily curl up in her first-class seat and fall asleep.

One reward of being in first class was the perks that came with it. Christian took Holly into the lounge, which the airline had decorated with garlands, white lights, and some of those extra-large ornaments. They sat down at the bar and ordered more wine. She'd never been in a first-class lounge before and could easily grasp why people splurged to upgrade their seats. It was everything she thought it would be and more.

“Why didn't we eat here?” she asked Christian.

“Honestly, I'm not sure. Are you still hungry?”

“No, definitely not. That pasta was filling.”

“But they have cookies.”

Holly loved a good cookie, especially during the holiday season. The bartender must've heard them because he brought a tray of cookies over. Holly chose a snowflake with white and blue icing, and Christian chose the gingerbread man.

She took a bite and then set it down, while Christian devoured his. “What did that cookie ever do to you?” she asked him.

“It was so good.” He wiped the crumbs from his face. “Are you going to finish yours?” He eyed her cookie with hunger. Holly slid the napkin her cookie was on over to him and watched as he ate it in one bite.

“You're going to make yourself sick,” she told him. “Wine, pasta and cookies don't mix well.”

Christian laughed. "You're probably right." He pushed the plate of cookies away and then turned in his seat. "I want you to know that I heard you earlier, when you said you were in love with me and that I'd broken your heart. Had I known, I would've never . . ." he paused and shook his head. "You were my best friend, Holly. Hurting you was the last thing I would've ever done. I wish you had told me."

"Would anything have changed between us?"

Holly and Christian stared into each other's eyes. Her question was heavy and had been on her mind since she blurted out her confession. She felt like she was waiting an eternity for Christian to answer.

"Yes," he finally said. "Everything would've changed because I was in love with you too, but never knew how to tell you. There were so many times when we'd lie together and watch a movie, and I'd hold your hand. I thought about kissing you but was afraid you'd reject me. The friendzone was so easy because I could love you from afar and be there when you needed me."

"And then Skye came to school."

"Yeah," he said with a sigh. "She was a mistake, Holly. I don't admit that to many people other than my divorce lawyer, but she was. She wasn't nice to my parents, always putting them down because they stayed in North Pole. Skye was as pretentious as they came."

"Where is she now?"

"Living in the condo we shared in New York. I didn't fight her for it in the divorce. It's close to her office and honestly, I didn't want it."

"Well, for what's it worth, I'm sorry you had to go through a divorce."

Christian nodded. "I'm sorry I ever brought her into our lives."

five

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Christian

AFTER CHRISTIAN'S TRUTH TELLING, they headed toward their gate. He prayed their flight would depart and they wouldn't be stuck. But then again, Holly lived in Miami, and they could easily go to her house, which at this late hour seemed like a better idea than taking the red-eye. He knew how busy her parents were during the holidays and imagined they needed her help. Still, it bothered him that she'd been back to their hometown, and they hadn't run into each other. He was going to have to have a long talk with his mom about keeping secrets. More so, he was going to have to talk to Santa about being the secret keeper in town.

They were called to board with the rest of the first-class passengers, and Holly took the window seat. Christian put his carry-on and Holly's bag in the overhead locker while she got comfortable with the small pillow and blanket offered in first class. He chuckled when he saw how excited she was to sit in the oversized seats. He chose first class because the extra space afforded him the ability to work while in the air, and it didn't matter if the person in front of him reclined, he could still type without feeling constrained.

Christian sat down next to her and sighed. He glanced in her direction and caught her staring at him. "Thanks for the upgrade."

"Thanks for not ditching me and going back to your place. Although, I am interested in knowing where you live."

"Nothing fancy, and nothing near the water," she told him. "I live on the third floor of a walk-up, which is a bitch when I have to carry my equipment somewhere, but I like my neighborhood and have access to the roof, so I stay there."

“Do you own or rent?”

“Rent,” she said. “It’s expensive in Miami and I’d rather invest in equipment. Besides, I travel a lot and I’d have to hire someone to look after a house.”

The flight attendant came by and asked if they wanted something to drink. “Do you have Baileys?” Christian asked, and she nodded. “We’ll take two Baileys and coffee, please.”

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

Christian laughed. “Not at all. I am trying to keep you awake for the flight, though, because I want to keep talking.” Holly smiled and ducked her head. If the lighting had been better, he might have been able to tell whether or not she blushed. He hoped she had. It had been a long time since he had seen her and all those feelings he had harbored as a teenager were making their presence known.

Their coffees came along with a tray of snacks. Christian picked a few for them, even though neither of them were hungry. Well, he was, but not for food. Holly took her coffee and sipped. She closed her eyes as the Baileys hit her tongue.

“It’s been years since I’ve had one of these,” she said. “Do you remember that year your parents had a Christmas party? My parents couldn’t come because of Santa duties or maybe they arrived late.” She shook her head. “We snuck liquor outside to your tire swing.”

“I remember. It was freezing.”

“God, how old were we?”

Christian thought for a moment. “Must’ve been fourteen or fifteen. I remember how I wanted to sit with you, like we’d always done, but puberty . . .” He trailed off and then thought better of it. “Each time I thought about you or saw you, instant boner. I was so embarrassed half the time. I almost stopped talking to you because I thought you’d freak out if you saw the tent in my pants.” He saw her blush this time and ran his finger over her pinked cheek.

“She told me, ya know,” Holly paused. “The night you guys had sex for the first time. Skye told me.”

“I’m sorry she did that. It goes without saying she was incredibly jealous of you.”

“I don’t know why,” Holly said to him. “She had you. I didn’t.”

“Maybe it was because deep down she knew how I felt. You were a bone

of contention toward the end.”

“How so?”

Christian adjusted as much as he could in his seat so he could face Holly. “I have a client with a similar name to yours. She called and left me a message one night, confirming our appointment at the restaurant where she worked. Skye heard it and instantly thought it was you and accused me of having an affair. From that point forward, you were a daily mention until I moved out. But then, she thought we moved in together. It’s been a battle.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through all of that.”

He chuckled. “No, you’re not. I knew what she was like when I asked her to marry me.”

“Why did you?”

Christian shrugged. “Felt like the next step. High school sweethearts and then college.” He finished his coffee and handed his empty cup to the flight attendant. Holly passed hers over as well. They fastened their seatbelts and prepared for takeoff. When the plane lifted into the air, they both let out a sigh of relief.

The flight attendant came by and offered them another drink. Holly and Christian agreed and were grateful when she came back with two for each of them. Holly drank and looked out the window. Christian did so as well and wondered what went through her mind. After she finished her third cup, she set her empty cups on the ground, rested against the seat and angled her body toward Christian. He mirrored her position. He had so many questions to ask her but didn’t want to overwhelm her. One, in particular, plagued his mind.

“You know, I looked for you when I got to college. I kept asking if you had checked in yet. The answer was the same. I called your parents that night, asking where you were.”

“What did they tell you?”

“That you’d chosen a different school and you would call me later. Deep down, I knew you wouldn’t call, but I still waited. I hoped. Where did you end up?”

“The University of Miami,” she told him. “It was far away, tropical, and my parents loved coming down after the season to rest. During college, I took a photography class and never looked back. I have a small studio that I do a lot of custom work in, but I primarily work for the Marlins, Heat, and the Panthers.”

“Isn’t it hockey and basketball season now?”

“Yes,” she laughed. “But I took vacation.”

“I must confess. When I saw you sitting there, I tried looking you up on Facebook, but couldn’t find you. So, I looked up your brother and saw some pictures of the two of you. How’s he doing?”

“I do have Facebook. It’s just not under my name. Elden’s doing really well. He’s engaged to a woman from Sweden, and he really loves his team.”

“You really wanted to hide from me, huh?”

She shrugged. “It was easier than seeing you with her.”

They stared at each other and fell quiet. Holly shivered and reached up to turn the fan off above her while Christian tore open the plastic wrap for the blanket. He spread it across her legs and lightly grazed her breast when he went to pull the blanket to her shoulder. They froze, and he met her gaze.

“I’d tell you I’m sorry, but I’m not.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry.” Her words were barely above a whisper, but Christian heard her loud and clear. He desperately wanted to kiss Holly. He’d been wanting this moment since before he hit puberty, but never took the chance. When you’re young, you fear rejection. Christian was certain that if he leaned closer, if he trailed his fingers down the side of Holly’s face, if he touched his lips to hers, she would reciprocate.

He didn’t have to question Holly. She closed the gap between them and kissed him.

She kissed him.

At first, her lips touched his slowly, and he was unsure if she would pull away or not. Christian cupped the nape of Holly’s neck and held her there, hoping to convey he wanted this to happen between them. When he felt her tongue trace his lips, that was the sign he needed from her. His mouth covered her hungrily, drinking in the remnants of the Baileys Holly drank. Christian brought his other hand to her cheek and held her between his hands as their tongues danced together. Holly let out a little moan and Christian took this as encouragement. He pushed his fingers into her hair. Christian tilted her head slightly and increased the intensity of the kiss. His instant erection shocked him after his earlier incident, and while he should check on himself, he couldn’t stop making out with Holly. Christian’s hand moved from her hair, down her back, and he mentally cursed the damn console between them. In that moment, he’d give anything to be in coach, where they could lift the armrest and have nothing between them.

Christian trailed kisses from her mouth to ear. He sucked on her earlobe

and pressed his lips to her exposed skin. He didn't give a flying fuck that they were on an airplane. The flight attendants were likely asleep and not monitoring their passengers' behavior. No one was going to stop him from kissing Holly.

His Holly.

They had waited for this moment for a lifetime. They should've done this a long time ago, back when they were teens. They should've been each other's first everything.

The lights were off, and the roar of the engines would drown out any noises Christian and Holly made, and if they didn't, he didn't care. He was kissing the woman of his teenaged wet dreams.

Christian had never thought about joining the Mile High Club, but as his hand moved from her cheek to her breasts, his thoughts went immediately to the bathroom. He had visions of her bouncing on his lap, and that excited him. Why did they have to be stuck on a plane, heading to a city where neither of them lived?

Holly took Christian's hand and slipped it under her shirt. Her warm, smooth skin sent him into overdrive. God, he wanted to see her naked. He wanted to kiss every inch of her skin. All the fantasies he had about her when he was a teenager flooded his thoughts as his hand crept up her side. Holly's lacy bra teased him, and if that wasn't enough, her taut nipple tempted him. Holly shivered as Christian's thumb swept back and forth over her tight pebble.

Christian startled when Holly's hand touched his growing hard-on. She massaged him through his slacks, rubbing and cupping his manhood. He wanted to clap and rejoice that the pain he experienced earlier had been replaced by pleasure. When he felt the zipper give way, he turned more onto his hip and tugged the blanket a little to give himself some coverage. If she wanted to give him a hand job at thirty-five thousand feet, who was he to argue?

The moment her fingertips grazed the silky skin of his cock, Christian groaned into Holly's mouth. She smiled and pulled away. They locked eyes. He watched her, watching him, as she stroked his dick. Holly brought him pleasure that he had only dreamed about. With each caress, his eyes wanted to roll back, but he refused. Looking at her while she did this for him was the most erotic thing he had ever experienced. He saw elation and mischievousness swirling in her eyes.

Holly's thumb spread the pre-cum over the head of his cock and she licked her lips. She was going to be the death of him on this plane, and something told him she knew it. Holly leaned closer and kissed him again as her hand tightened around his shaft. She pumped faster and with more urgency. Christian pulled the blanket over him, creating a better barrier from any prying eyes. Anyone who was awake and could hear them knew what they were doing in seats 3a and b. He fought to keep the sounds coming from his mouth to a minimum, but he failed.

“Jesus Christ, Holly. I’m so fucking close.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

He shook his head as the lights in the galley went on and the captain came over the loudspeaker announcing their impending arrival. Soon, the overhead lights for the aircraft would come on, exposing their secret.

“Don’t stop,” he whispered into her ear. “Please don’t stop.”

Holly heeded his words and continued her ministrations. Instead of kissing him, she licked his neck and nibbled on his ear. Christian did his best to block any onlookers from seeing what they were doing. He hoped that if the flight attendant came down the aisle, he would see them in what looked like a hug or maybe some awkward sleeping position.

Christian felt his balls tighten, and he ducked his head into the crook of Holly’s neck. He pressed his lips to her skin and groaned. “Fuck, I’m coming, Holly. God, baby, don’t stop.”

Holly didn’t slow down until he released his load into the blanket. Christian’s body sighed and relaxed into Holly’s just as the lights came on and the flight attendant began telling people to put their seats in the upright position.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered. Holly did, and they pretended to be asleep when the attendant passed by. When the coast was clear, Christian tucked himself back into his pants and balled the blanket up. He’d toss it in the nearest trash can when they got off the plane.

Holly put her seatbelt on, and, once Christian settled in his seat, he leaned over to her and cupped her face. “That was the hottest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Me too,” she told him as he kissed her.

“I can’t believe that after twelve years, you’re sitting next to me.”

“And giving you a hand job,” she mused.

“A long overdue hand job at that.” Christian winked and then kissed her again. He did not know what time it was, but finding a hotel was the first

thing on their list once they landed. He wanted Holly in a bed, naked, and ready for him.

Christian was finally going to give them both what they've wanted all their lives.

six

. . .

Holly

HOLLY AND CHRISTIAN exited the plane and made their way through the empty terminal until they were in baggage claim. While they waited for her suitcase, Christian held her hand. Every few seconds, Holly would look down, wiggle her fingers to make sure she wasn't dreaming, and then avoid all eye contact with Christian because she couldn't bear to look at him at the moment. What they had just done . . . what she had done to him was so out of character for her, she was embarrassed. Yet, her heart was giddy. Not only had she and Christian kissed, which was a dream come true for her, but he had wanted her. There was no way he could deny his attraction to her.

Christian bent down and whispered in her ear, "We should get a hotel."

Yes!

While her inner teen screamed in glee, Holly couldn't. If she hopped into bed with Christian, she feared she wouldn't want to leave and she needed to get home to her parents. They needed her, and while her lady bits wanted him, now was not the right time.

"I can't," she sadly said.

"Oh, I thought—" his voice broke, and Holly realized her mistake.

"You thought right." She placed her hand on his chest after she interrupted him and looked into his eyes. She hoped the longing she saw was for her and not just for sex. As much as she wanted to be with him, to let all her dreams and fantasies come true, she wasn't sure they should spend the night together. Although, twelve years of pent-up sexual tension and energy flowed through her and if they were anywhere but an airport, she might have

given into her needs. Every one of her teenager-turned-adult wet dreams had Christian in a starring role. She'd be a fool not to let herself take advantage. It was a good thing they'd in their hometown at the same time.

"I'm going to see about renting a car," she told him. "With how stressed my mother is, I want to get home to her so I can help."

"I understand. Let me make some calls. I know a few rental agencies that should be open."

"Thank you." Holly rose onto her tippy toes and gave Christian a kiss. Something that should've been a peck turned into something more. Moments after their tongues touched, Christian pulled away.

"Are you sure you don't want a hotel?"

She shook her head. "I need to get home."

Christian nodded, kissed her again, and then told her he was going to look up some car rental options. Holly watched him as he sat down and began scrolling through his phone. The carousel started and her suitcase came down second, thanks to the first-class ticket Christian bought for her. She set her oversized purse on top of her suitcase and made her way toward the man who haunted her dreams.

"What's wrong?" Holly asked when she saw frustration etched across his face.

"No rentals," he said. "I've called those that are open and looked online. Zero rentals available because of the storm and the holiday."

"Crap. When's the next flight to New York?"

Christian stood. "The next one with seats available isn't until this evening, but there's a train heading to New York City that leaves in two hours. I can book us on that."

Holly nodded even though flying would be faster but she didn't want to lose another day. "It's better than hanging out here all day." She expected Christian to come back with the idea of the hotel again, but he only nodded.

"Let's get a cab and head to the station."

It was blistering cold outside with the wind chill. Holly shivered and thought about going back inside to dig through her suitcase for her coat. Thankfully, there was a taxi waiting. Christian told her to get in while he dealt with their luggage. In the backseat, Holly blew into her hands and then held them to the heater once the driver put the car into drive.

"Amtrak station," Christian said through the holes in the plexiglass. He put his arm around Holly and pulled her to his side. "Where's your jacket?"

“In my suitcase. I didn’t think I’d need it until I landed in Plattsburgh. I would’ve dug it out before I went outside.”

Christian laughed. “Miami’s sure changed you.”

“You have no idea. I freeze when I’m at my parents’ and am always sitting by the fireplace.”

He put his finger under her chin and lifted her head until they looked at each other. “I’ll keep you warm.” His words were full of innuendos, and she loved every single one of the thoughts rushing through her mind. He wanted to be with her, and she relished in the moment.

The taxi pulled up to the curb at the station. Christian paid and told Holly to go inside. She did and waited in the lobby for him.

“Holy crap,” Holly said as they entered the station.

“Impressive.”

They’d walked right into a winter wonderland, but without the snow and cold. A massive tree sat in the center of the wide-open space, with wreaths bigger than Holly had ever seen hung from the columns. On the garland-wrapped stage, a man played Christmas music on the piano. People milled around and listened while some swayed to the music.

“I have never seen a tree so big.”

“What about the one at Rockefeller Center?”

Holly shook her head. “I’ve only seen it in pictures.”

“We’ll have to change that,” he told her. Holly glanced at Christian tentatively. Had he already promised her a next year? She didn’t want to think that far ahead. Her heart wouldn’t be able to take it.

“Come on, let’s see if we can find where we need to board our train.”

Before they made their way into the Amtrak part of the station, they stopped and bought breakfast, and then sat down. It was a madhouse and Holly wondered how they’d get seats together if half these people were headed in the same direction as them. She was a little angry at herself for not paying attention to the weather. She knew better. Holly may live in the tropics, but she still understood that snow flurries could easily turn into freak snowstorms and often blizzards. They weren’t as uncommon as the media liked to let people think. It wasn’t normal for a place to get thirty inches of snow and not shut down, except in the north.

The PA system announced boarding for their train. Holly followed Christian and the line of people in front of them until they reached the platform. “We’re not going to get seats together,” she said to Christian.

“We will. I made sure of it.”

“What? How?” She wondered what he had up his sleeve. She wouldn’t put it past him to pay someone to give up their seats so they could sit together. Unfortunately for the both of them, there would be no hanky-panky on the train. There’d be too many people walking around, plus it was daylight.

When they came to the sleeper car, Holly froze. “Seriously?”

Christian shrugged. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve been up for over twenty-four hours. I need some sleep, especially if I’m going to drive later.” He stepped closer to her. “Besides, it gives us privacy.” His lips pressed to hers. She couldn’t deny that she was tired and would like some privacy.

Christian took her suitcase and set it off to the side, and then sat down near the window. She sat across from him and opened the bottled water that had been left for there. “Is there food on this train?”

Christian nodded. “I figured after we’ve slept, we can get some lunch.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

It didn’t take long for the train to move. Holly looked out the window and pointed out some sights to Christian until the scenery gave way to homes and more businesses. Nothing as exciting as the monument.

“Do you want to talk about what happened on the plane?” Christian asked her.

“Are you going to tell me it was wrong and that we shouldn’t have done it?”

He shook his head slowly. “If I thought it was wrong, I wouldn’t be wanting to kiss you every chance I could right now. I just . . . it’s been twelve years since we’ve seen each other. I don’t want you to think I’m using you or that I don’t feel the same right now, because I do. I hate that we’ve denied ourselves these moments because we were afraid of how the other might feel.”

“Ah, to go back in time would be nice.”

“What would you say to me if we could do that?”

Holly shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“Don’t lie,” he teased, and Holly smiled coyly.

“I would’ve begged you not to date Skye. I would’ve told you I was madly in love with you and had been for years.”

“I wish we could go back,” he said quietly. “I hate knowing I hurt you.”

There was a knock on their door, and the conductor asked for their

tickets. Christian stood and went to the door, waited for the man to scan his phone, and then shut the door. Holly heard the lock slide into place and waited for Christian to turn around.

When he did, he worked the buttons on his shirt. He pulled it from his slacks and took it off, letting her see the man he had become. His chest was broad and dark hair lightly covered his pecs. His abdominal muscles stood out and led to a smattering of dark hair that disappeared into his pants. Holly's gaze moved from his torso to his hands and she swallowed as his fingers worked the button on his slacks. In her fantasies, Christian had grown up, but not like this. He was always an older version of the eighteen year old she remembered, just older. Christian was anything but that eighteen-year-old version. He was a man. He had filled out in all the right places. Holly licked her lips at the thought of tasting him.

Holly had a decision to make. She could tell him no, that sex right now would complicate everything, or she could give in to her dream of being with him. Holly went with the latter. When she first realized her feelings for Christian, all she ever wanted was to be with him. She'd be foolish to deny herself.

She closed the curtain, blocking the outside from seeing in. The last thing either of them needed was to pull into the next station and give passersby an eyeful. Besides, if she had her way, no one except her would ever see Christian like this from this point forward.

Holly stood. She shrugged off her blazer and then took her shirt off. She never took her eyes off Christian as she reached behind her back and removed the lace bra she wore and let it slide down her arms. Her nipples turned to pebbles at the blast of cold air, but she didn't care. Christian gulped and he seemed to have trouble maintaining eye contact as his eyes kept dropping to her breasts.

“God, you're beautiful.”

“So are you,” she told him.

Christian pushed his pants and boxers down, kicking them to the side along with his shoes and socks before standing upright for Holly to see him. Holly swallowed when she took in his naked form. Every dream she had about being with Christian was about to come to fruition. He was the boy, turned man, who haunted her at night. The same one she compared any of her past romances too. In her mind, Christian had everything she wanted. It didn't matter to her that the version she had in her mind didn't match—the

real life Christian was ten times better, and he was there, with her, waiting for her. Nothing and no one would come between them now.

The cock she had stroked earlier beckoned her forward. It bobbed, as if begging her to wrap her lips around its head. Her mouth watered as she undid her pants and pushed them and her panties to the floor, where she too kicked her shoes aside.

Holly and Christian stood there, in the small sleeper car, naked as the day they were born. The sexual tension in the room was so thick, Holly felt like Christian was a mile away from her.

“The bed is a pull-out,” he said, and then laughed.

Holly shook her head. “Sit down.”

He did as she suggested. Holly walked toward him, and he placed his hands around the back of her thighs, pulling her closer. Christian kissed her stomach and then looked up at her. “Stand on the cushions.”

Christian helped Holly place one foot on each side of his legs. She held onto the top bunk; thankful it was closed, otherwise it would have seriously hampered what she imagined was about to happen. When he kissed the apex of her thighs, her legs quivered. Christian parted her lips and nuzzled her. He swiped his tongue from her center to her bud and then flicked his tongue. Holly’s legs shook as a feeling of ecstasy started to slowly build between her legs.

Christian chuckled lightly.

“Hold still.”

He licked her again, up and down and then once more, before his mouth settled on her clit and his finger entered her pussy.

“Oh, fuck.”

“We’re going to, babe. Give me a second to taste you.”

Tasting her was what he did. Christian sucked, nibbled, and told her to put her pussy on his face so he could soak up as much of her as possible. Her fingers hurt from hanging onto the bed above, but nothing compared to the ache between her legs.

Holly wanted Christian. She’d wanted him for years, but right now, in this moment, she realized just how much she’d yearned for his touch where it mattered the most.

She let go and dropped to her knees. His cocked jumped when it rubbed against her wetness. Christian wiped his mouth and looked into her eyes. “There’s so much that needs to be said.”

Holly shook her head and gripped his dick. It didn't go unnoticed that her fingertips couldn't touch her thumb. Christian was thick and long, and she think about was how she wanted to milk him dry. Her hand stroked him, spreading his pre-cum around the head of his cock. "Do you have a condom?"

He held his hand up and showed her the square packet. Before she could take it from him, he ripped it open with his teeth and slid the rubber over his throbbing cock. Christian leaned back and beckoned Holly.

Holly rose and guided Christian to where she needed him. She sank down slowly, letting him go deeper and deeper until he filled her. She was instantly overcome, not only by the size of him, but also by the feeling that this was something she'd long for since high school. It felt like she'd finally come home.

"Oh, fuck," they both said at the same time. Christian gripped Holly's hips, and then she moved. She started slowly and rose until his cock was almost completely out of her and then down she went, taking him in, inch by inch. He let her work him, while he lavished her breasts with attention. He lapped, nipped, and sucked on her nipples as her hips rocked forward. Christian held her head in his hands and kissed the fuck out of her. He caught every moan, mewl, and curse word that tumbled from her mouth.

seven

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Christian

CHRISTIAN ONLY HAD ONE CONDOM, and he wanted to make sure he put it to good use. He picked Holly up and then set her gently down on her back. The so-called couch wasn't exactly wide, but it would do. He set one knee on the padded seat and lifted her leg, placed it on his shoulder. She never took her eyes off him and when he moved closer to enter her again, she surprised the hell out of him when she reached between her legs and spread her lips for him. Holly looked at where his cock toyed with her and watched as Christian slid in and out of her. Her head fell back, and she let out an "Oh, God." Each sound that came from her spurred him on. If it wasn't a sigh, it was a gasp or a whimper followed by a demanding "more" or "harder". He gave her everything he had, right there in that sleeper car, and didn't hold back out of fear he may not see her again.

He held onto her leg as he thrust into her. Christian groaned and threw his head back when she said, "I'm coming". His impending orgasm was there, on the brink of dumping his hot seed into the rubber, but he fought it. Christian was far from done, far from showing them what they've missed. When he felt his balls tighten, he cursed and looked away from Holly. Maybe if he didn't see her perfectly round tits moving up and down each time he pounded into her, he'd be able to starve off the eruption building in his balls.

Christian looked back at Holly. She was his undoing. She was who he saw when he masturbated for the first time. Each time he'd close his eyes at night, Holly was there. They would laugh, play, and caress each other. For too many summers to count, he'd vowed to kiss her, to ask her to be his girlfriend. His friends had all told him what sex was like, and he wanted to

experience that with Holly. Only Holly. And then Skye came along.

He shook his head and focused on the gorgeous dream come true who rode his cock. From the moment she sank down on his dick, he knew she was made for him. They fit together. Her pussy welcomed him with glee, and he swore she sighed when she wrapped her tight lips around his shaft. Christian was right where he wanted to be, and where he intended to stay. He would do whatever he had to do, to be the man Holly deserved.

The faster his hips moved, the more she encouraged him. The “oh yesses”, “oh my Gods”, and “fuck, I’m coming” goaded him to the finish line faster than he wanted to be. He pumped once, twice, and then a third time before everything left his body. He sighed heavily and then leaned forward to cover her body with his as best he could. They kissed while their hot, sweaty bodies pressed together. Christian trailed kisses down her neck, over her breasts, and toward her stomach until he slipped out of her. He sat on the ground, spent.

Holly stood and went to the private bathroom in their sleeper car. He watched her naked form brush past him and surmised that she had a great ass. Christian needed some time with her, in an actual bed, where he could memorize every inch of her tanned skin. She wasn’t winter pale like the rest of them who lived in the north. Holly had taken advantage of everything Miami offered, and the glow of her skin was clear. It also didn’t go unnoticed by Christian that Holly lacked tan lines. He wondered where she sunbathed because he wanted to be right next to her when she did.

The toilet flushed, and the faucet came on. Christian carefully removed the condom from his dick and wrapped it in a wad of tissues before tossing it into the trash can. He then took another handful of tissues and cleaned himself.

It took Holly a little longer to return than he thought it would, and instead of dressing, he pulled the sleeper sofa out and crawled into the bed. He was tired. Exhausted even. He needed a nap, and there was nothing better than taking one after you’ve just had sex. Christian laid on his side and waited for Holly. When she emerged from the bathroom, she smiled.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re sleeping.” He held the covers up and looked at the empty spot next to him.

“Shouldn’t we get dressed?”

“For what?”

She shrugged and reached for the bunk above them to steady herself. “What if something happens and we need to escape? We won’t have time to get dressed.”

Holly had a point.

“Tell you what, give me a few minutes like this, and then we’ll get dressed.”

Holly relented and crawled into bed next to him. Christian covered her body with his as she laid her head on the shared pillow. He did the same and fought the urge to kiss her. He needed to be good, otherwise they were going to find themselves in a predicament, and he was certain they didn’t sell condoms on the train.

She put one arm under her head and the other between them. Christian did the same and covered her hand with his. His fingers played with hers, and he brought her hand to his mouth and kissed each finger.

“Not too bad for our first time,” he said with a smile.

“Definitely not.” She gave him a little chuckle. “Although, in all my fantasies, we were never on a train, and I definitely never gave you a hand job on an airplane.”

“You know that was single-handedly the hottest thing to ever happened to me. The entire time, I wondered if I could get you to the bathroom or not because I wanted to be inside of you.”

“So, if the plane is the Mile High Club, what do we call this?”

Christian laughed. “I have no freaking idea. Getting railed on the rails club?”

“Oh, God.”

“Never say that statement again unless I’m buried inside you or fucking you with my tongue,” he told her. “Those two words coming from your mouth mean something entirely different to me than they do to you and my dick can’t take it.”

“Is that so?”

Holly reached between them and ran her palm down his shaft. It came to life at her touch and Christian groaned. “Holly.” His tone warned her she would be playing with fire if she continued. “I only had one condom.”

“Don’t worry, I swallow.” With those words, Holly went under the blanket and took his already erect cock into her mouth. Christian’s eyes rolled back into his head and he let her pleasure him, the feeling of her tongue wrapping around his balls elicited a sigh he could no longer hold in.

He had a feeling Holly did whatever she wanted, and if this was it, who in the hell was he to argue.

He moved the blankets away so he could watch her. Holly looked at him with hunger in her eyes before taking him deeper. Christian couldn't just lie there and told Holly to swing her legs over him and back that pussy of hers up to his face.

She was wet and ready for him. He cursed his lack of preparedness and then plunged his tongue deep into her pussy and teased the hell out of her clit. He pinched, sucked, flicked and lapped like it was his fucking job and when she begged for more, Christian drove three fingers to her soaking core, hitting her G-spot. Holly cried out and pumped him harder. She gave him the most intense blow job he had ever felt. His balls tightened, and he warned her it was now or never. Holly took him deeper and gagged on his thick manhood. That was enough to cause his undoing. His hips thrust toward her, pumping his hot seed into her mouth, while his arm held her to his face. She came, and he soaked up every bit of the juices she offered him.

They lay there, spent and panting. It was a long time before either of them moved. Christian staggered to the bathroom. He cleaned up and brought a warm bundle of napkins back for Holly. He wanted to help, but she shied away.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head, sat up, and reached for the towels. “No, just sensitive. I didn’t want to scare you by twitching if you touched me.”

“I appreciate you worrying about me.”

They slowly dressed and then laid on top of the blankets. There wasn’t much either of them could do about the wet spots, and neither cared to lie in them.

“We’ll be in the city soon. We can go to my apartment.” Christian offered. “I can drive us to North Pole from there.”

“That’s what, five and a half hours without traffic?”

Christian nodded. “Not including stopping.”

Holly ran her fingers through his hair. “I’m partial to staying on until Albany. It’s only a two-hour drive from there. I can rent a car.”

“I’m not letting you out of my sight,” he told her.

“Do you even have clothes to go north?”

He shrugged. “It’s not like there isn’t a mall in Albany or outlets in Lake George. I have a few things at my parents as well. I don’t want you to drive

alone, especially if there's a storm."

Holly laughed and nuzzled his nose. "You just want road head."

Christian bellowed. The thought hadn't even crossed his mind. "You're making this feel very one-sided. While I wouldn't say no to a little blow job in the car, that's not why."

"Then why?" she asked.

"Because when I saw you sitting at the gate, I thought my second chance at happiness was right there. If either of us had half a mind back then, we'd be married with kids and heading home to our parents for Christmas instead of being single—"

"And fucking on a train."

Christian grimaced. "Everyone fucks the first time," he told her. "When we're alone and have a bed, I'll make love to you."

"Does anyone say 'make love' anymore?"

"I do," he said as he kissed the tip of her nose. "And I very much want to make love to you. I want to spend the day or night, whichever works, learning what turns you on, where your sweet spot is—you know, the one that will turn you into a puddle. I want to kiss every inch of your body and be inside of you until the sun comes up. And then, I want to do it all over again, but then I'd fuck you in the shower, in the kitchen, while we're watching TV." Christian brushed her hair off her shoulder. "I want to enter you from behind while you look out over Central Park. You'll see my reflection through the glass and know that once I'm done, I'm taking you to bed, where I'll ravish you all over again."

"You're talking an awful lot about a future that may or may not exist for us."

"Why wouldn't it?" he asked. "Are you worried about the distance?"

"There's that and the fact we've just reconnected. Maybe we should take things slow."

Christian nodded. "We'll take it slow, but now that I've had you, I want you forever." He took her hand and led it to the bulge in his pants. "I've never responded to anyone the way I have with you. It's like our bodies knew from the beginning that we were meant to be together, but our minds made us stubborn teens who didn't know how to communicate."

Holly squeezed his package and then removed her hand. He felt the loss instantly but respected her decision. "This is a lot to take in."

"So is finding out that the person who you've missed for the last twelve

years is in love with you.”

“Fair enough,” she said and paused, as if she was trying to work something out in her mind. “I travel a lot for work.”

“How often are you in New York?”

“Often,” she told him. “For baseball, hockey and basketball.”

“I meant to ask, why don’t you work for the Dolphins?”

“The short season isn’t worth it,” she told him. “Plus, between hockey and basketball, my winter is busy.”

The PA system alerted them that the Albany stop would come up soon. Holly and Christian left the bed the way it was, per the instructions on the wall, and gathered their things. Christian got busy reserving a car at the airport and ordered an Uber to pick them up from the train station. He opted for a Tahoe because it would get through the snow and any storm they might come across.

When they arrived at the station in Albany, Christian kissed her before they left the sleeper car. They made their way outside and found their Uber. In the backseat, they held hands, and Christian chatted with the driver about the Mets and how they missed the postseason, and the driver wondered if the Knicks would have a good year. Christian said it was unlikely. At the airport, they found the rental agency and once he had the keys to a car, he sighed heavily, realizing that their time together would soon be over.

Christian helped Holly into the car and then climbed into the passenger seat. He started the engine and waited. He glanced at Holly, leaned over, and kissed her again.

“What was that for?”

“In two hours, we’ll be with our families, and I don’t want to pass up an opportunity to kiss you.”

Holly all but launched herself over the console and kissed Christian with reckless abandon. His dick rose to attention as she climbed into his lap. When they broke free, he noticed they had fogged up the windows.

“We’re still in the parking garage,” he told her.

“The car's not shaking.”

“It will be if you don’t move to your seat and behave yourself.”

She rubbed her core over his fabric-clad erection. “Maybe there’s a place we can stop. We have to finish the trifecta.”

“The what?” he asked her.

“Well, we did something on the plane. We did a lot on the train, and now

we're in the car.”

“Christ,” he muttered. “Are you always this insatiable?”

She nodded. “It’s been a problem in the past.”

He cupped her face and kissed her hard. “I can guarantee you. It’ll never be a problem with me.”

eight

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Holly

HOLLY TEXTED her mom to let her know she was on her way home and would be there in about three hours. She gave Christian and herself a little leeway in case the mood struck. In all her relationships, she had always been the one with the impressive sex drive. Always ready to go and willing to get down and dirty. It didn't matter where they were. If the mood was right, why wait? Her partners didn't always match her free-spirited zeal. It wasn't like Holly could turn off her sex drive. It was part of her, and it was a take it or leave it sort of thing.

Christian took her hand and kissed it, and then he started nibbling on it which caused her lady bits to wake up. "Should we stop at the mall?"

"Do you need to?" she asked him.

"Yeah, I think so. We'll be quick. Macy's should have enough of what I need."

Christian exited the freeway and made his way toward the mall. It was one of the better ones and Holly remembered from the times she came here when she was younger that there were a lot of stores. However, it had been years since she'd been and she wasn't sure if that was still the case. Christian parked and Holly met him at the front of the rental. As much as she wanted to be home and taking a shower, she didn't want her time with Christian to end.

He reached for her hand and clasped theirs together. Holly would never get over holding his hand. Christian held the door open for her and waited for her to pass by. Inside the store, they went straight to the men's department and Christian started handing items to Holly for her to hold.

"Do you have to try any of this on?"

Christian looked at Holly with her raised eyebrow and shook his head. “Are you serious?”

She shrugged.

“There’s no way. Someone would hear us, and then we’d be in jail for lewd and lascivious conduct.”

“I know a lawyer,” Holly quipped and shrugged playfully.

Christian bent down slightly so he could whisper his words to her. “Babe, I don’t have a condom, and the next time we do anything, I want to be sheathed in that sweet pussy of yours. I want to hear you scream my name as you come all over my cock.” Holly bit her lip. Christian saw and used his thumb to pull it from her teeth. “Believe me when I tell you this—now that I’ve had it—I want more. I want it all.” He kissed her cheek and chuckled.

After Christian paid for his items, they worked their way through the mall. They stopped in the food court and grabbed a quick bite to eat before getting back to their journey. As soon as they were on the road, Christian’s phone rang. He groaned when he saw his ex’s name on the screen.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?”

“Nope,” he said. “She’s mad because I won’t pay to have the roof fixed at her condo.”

“Doesn’t she have insurance?”

He nodded and sighed when the ringing stopped. “According to her, it’s not her responsibility.”

“But it’s yours?”

He nodded. “She’s delusional.”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“Six months ago. We live and work on opposite sides of town and I cut off her friends when I left. I didn’t care for any of the husbands.”

“Do you really live near Central Park?”

“Yeah,” he told her. “I wasn’t joking about what I want to do to you there. There’s a view of the park from my living room window. Just imagine your tits pressed against the glass and me taking you from behind.” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

“You might be worse than me,” she said to him. After a short pause she decided to tackle the subject that’s been at the forefront of her mind. “Can I ask you something that’s been nagging at me?”

“You can ask me anything,” he told her.

“How come you had a condom with you?”

She waited to see if some kind of regret or avoidance crossed his face, but there was none. “I’ve seen a couple of women since my divorce.”

“When was the last time you were with someone?”

“Last week,” he told her. “I was supposed to see her last night, but I texted when we got on our first flight and told her I couldn’t see her anymore.”

“Right before Christmas, that’s harsh.”

Christian frowned. “I’m not a liar and I have no intentions of seeing her after the holidays. I’m hoping I’ll be busy romancing someone else.” He glanced at her hopefully.

“Anyone I know?” he laughed.

“Meh.” She shrugged and then giggled. “I’m glad you didn’t lie to her.”

“That’s not who I am, babe.”

Holly leaned across the console and kissed his cheek. She settled back in her seat and surmised that everything had happened for a reason. They were meant to be in the airport at the same time, and they were meant to be stranded. She was sure if they had flown to New York City without any of the delays, they would’ve gone their separate ways, and maybe he’d come into the store to see her, or maybe not. Now, she was sure he would spend as much time as possible with her until they had to go back to their respective jobs and homes.

The idea of a long-distance relationship didn’t excite her, but she would do what she could to make it work. She often had Wednesdays off and if that meant she took the red-eye from Miami to New York and spent Wednesday with Christian, she could be back in Miami by game time on Thursday. She also hoped she’d be able to make the overnight trip even when she had to travel to games the next day. And if Christian came to see her, they’d be able to work things out. Although she also feared someone would have to give up their job, and she wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

When they were an hour away from North Pole, she texted her mom to let her know their ETA. Christian handed Holly his phone and asked her to text his mom as well. She did, and she thought about putting her number in Christian’s phone, but then decided not to. If he wanted her number, he’d ask her for it. It wasn’t like he didn’t know where to find her. Plus, her parents still had their landline, he could call her the old-fashioned way. Or he could sneak over like he used to. Either way, if he wanted to talk to her, he knew where she’d be.

Christian exited the Interstate and Holly's heart dropped. What if Christian got home and decided she wasn't worth the hassle because of her job or where she lived? She knew better than to think like that, and besides, Christian had already said he wanted to be with her. Holly needed to trust the process and let things fall into place.

"Do you remember where my parents live?" she asked with a laugh.

Christian pretended to think and then laughed right along with her. "I think I can find it."

Turn after turn, her heart sank into her stomach. She told herself to stop thinking the worst would happen. This time, there was no Skye to take him away from her. Christian was hers as long as she wanted him.

Christian pulled into the Saints' driveway and shut the Tahoe off. He glanced at Holly and smiled before leaning over the console. He cupped her cheek and pulled her in for a kiss. "Next year at this time, we'll have to decide where we're staying."

"Next year?" she questioned.

He nodded. "I don't know about you, but I'm planning on spending next Christmas with you."

"Wow, we're not together and you're already making plans for next year."

Christian chuckled. "Don't worry, babe. I'll make it official."

"Only if you send me a note, folded into some intricate square, and written in multiple colors. Oh, and there has to be check yes or no boxes or I won't know it's from you."

"Damn, dating you isn't going to be easy."

"No, it isn't." She kissed him and then opened her door. Christian met her at the back and took her luggage to the front door.

Her mother opened the door as they climbed the steps to the porch. "Christian Lane, you have saved my Christmas."

Christian stepped forward and kissed Holly's mom on her cheek. "Once I saw Holly at the airport, there was no way I could leave her there once our flight was canceled."

"Well, I appreciate it. Tell your parents we'll see them later."

"Bye, Christian." Holly waved as her mother shut the front door. Holly peered out the window and watched Christian go down the stairs. When he got to the bottom, he turned and waved at her.

"What changed?" her mother asked. She had her hands on her hips as she

waited for Holly to answer her.

“He’s not married anymore.”

“So, can we talk about you now?”

Holly shrugged. “Why do you want to talk about me when Elden is a professional hockey player? His life is far more exciting and glamorous. I’m a boring photographer.”

Her mom hit her with a towel and swore under her breath. “Child, you will send me to an early grave.”

“I doubt it,” Holly said. “You’re still here and annoying me.”

“Holly Marie Saint, don’t make me tell Santa that you need to be on the naughty list.”

I’ve definitely been naughty.

Holly took her things to her room and unpacked. She hung the clothes that needed to go into her closet and put the other stuff in her drawer, and then set her camera equipment aside. She’d need it for photos later of her dad and all the kids.

She went back to her closet and pulled a box down from the shelf and took it to her bed. Holly lifted the lid and sat there for a moment, staring at a picture of her and Christian from eighth grade. Holly wore a bikini, and Christian was shirtless. Their families had gone camping, and they had spent most of the day in the water. Holly went through the boxes, reading the notes they used to pass back and forth. She knew when they stopped. It was weeks after Skye showed up and stole Christian from her. Holly would write to him every day from homeroom, and give the note to him after first period. He rarely wrote her back. She never told him how it hurt her feelings, but it had, and at night she would cry.

On the morning of graduation, she packed the life she had with Christian into the box and put him in the closet with the rest of her stuff. When she left North Pole, she left Christian as well. It was the only way to heal.

Now, things were different. He was back, and they had done things both of them had only dreamed about. Holly slid the box under her bed, grabbed her toiletries, and made her way to the bathroom. She turned on the water, undressed, and then happened to glance in the mirror.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Holly had a very questionable red mark on her neck that she would have to hide not only from her parents, but from the people in town. She was going to kill Christian. Holly thought back to when this could’ve happened and

deduced it must've been on the plane. She was focused on giving him pleasure and failed to notice that Christian suddenly became a vampire.

She got into the shower and stood under the hot spray. She moved her neck back and forth and realized she looked forward to bed. Holly was exhausted and needed a nap if she was going to go play Santa's Little Elf with a hickey on her neck later. She washed her hair, shaved, and scrubbed away the travel dirt. When she got out, she thought about calling Christian to chastise him, but remembered she had the dumb idea of not giving him her number, nor did she get his.

Now she had to wait.

nine

. . .

Christian

AS SOON AS Christian laid down, he fell asleep and didn't wake until the next day. When the sun shone through his window, he couldn't understand why it was so bright, and he looked at his clock and sprang out of bed. It was past nine in the morning. He had intended to take a nap, eat dinner with his parents, and then head over to Holly's. Christian thought it would be sort of cute to relive some of their earlier years with a movie and exploring hands under a blanket.

"Fuck," he said as he scrambled out of bed. He went to the bathroom and then downstairs, hoping to find his mother. There was a note on the table telling him that his parents were "downtown" enjoying the festivities and that he could help himself to breakfast. Christian felt horrible for not spending any time with his folks the day prior, but mostly, he felt terrible, because he hadn't called Holly. Under the circumstances of their reunion, the last thing he wanted was for Holly to suspect Christian had used her. That was so far from reality, it bothered him to even think that way.

Christian showered and dressed in a pair of slacks, a gray undershirt, and a sweater—one he'd bought at Macy's. He grabbed the keys to the Tahoe, pocketed his phone, and headed out the door. He drove less than a block and pulled into the Saints' driveway. Christian went to the door and knocked, but no one answered. Back in his rental, he pulled his phone from his pocket and scrolled. He hadn't asked Holly to give him her number, but he'd hoped she had put it in his contracts when she texted his mother the day before.

"No such luck," he said as he scrolled. Christian started the car and reversed out of the driveway. He drove until traffic became heavy and then

turned around to find a parking spot along the street.

The town of North Pole was a mecca of tourists from the middle of November to the end of December. They had a Santa's Workshop theme park for the little kids, that every teenager in town worked at one time or another. But like any small town, it had its perks and its drawbacks. Outside of the holiday season, everyone in town knew everyone. They weren't far from Lake Placid, where the winter Olympics were held in 1980, and they could go there for hockey, ice skating or to watch hopeful Olympians practice. In the summer, they played in the AuSable River. The White Face Mountains surrounded their quaint town, but it was the fact that people rarely used the given name for their town—Wilmington—that struck a chord with Christian. It was like Wilmington didn't exist except for a pin dot on a map, or when taxes needed to be collected. Everything in town was Christmas, Santa, and holiday cheer.

Christian walked along the sidewalk, nodding to people who smiled at him. He jaywalked, feeling confident no one would hit him as he crossed in front of some cars and went into the florists on Main Street.

"Christian," Cindy Howard said when he walked in. "I heard you were in town."

"Yes, got home yesterday. How are you? How's Lou?" Lou was Cindy's husband. He'd a heart attack last winter when he fell off the roof while hanging Christmas lights. The Howards like to have the most decorated house in North Pole and Lou would go to extremes to make that happen.

"He's doing well. He's back up on that damn ladder."

"Well, I hope he's careful."

"Now, you didn't come rushing in here for nothing. Does your mom need something?"

"No, actually, I'm looking for a bouquet of roses. Red and white, if you have any left."

"Of course, I do. Are they for someone special?"

"You could say that," he told her. Cindy walked to the back of the store and returned with a handful of roses. She got to work on the counter.

"Do you want a vase?"

"Yes, please, that would be great."

"Your mom told me about your divorce." He already knew this, but let her continue. "I just hate it when you young folks can't stay together. The world is crazy out there, especially in that big city you live in."

“Well, I think I’ve found the one this time.”

“Oh, are these for your someone special?”

“Yes, they are.”

“Well, I’ll jazz them up real nice for her. Is it someone I know?”

Christian hesitated. “Yes, but I’m not sure how she’d feel if I blurted her name out. I’m hoping that by tonight, everyone knows.”

“Are you taking her to the Christmas dance?”

“I’m hoping to. That’s what the flowers are for,” he told her.

Cindy finished the arrangement and put a beautiful red ribbon in the front. Christian paid and told Cindy he would see her later. The entire town would turn out for the annual Christmas dance, even if they didn’t have a date or had planned to meet someone there. Last year, he went alone, and left five minutes later. He didn’t want the pity party that came with being recently single and he didn’t want his mom to set him up with any of the eligible bachelorettes. Had he seen Holly there, he would’ve stayed.

With the flowers in hand, he walked to the end of the street and turned the corner. Santa had a workshop set up outside, and Holly was busy taking photos of the kids. Christian watched her for a moment, taking in the scene. Aside from Santa’s elaborate chair, there were lighting umbrellas set up, a fairly big camera on a tripod, a printer, and a computer. Holly took a photo, went to the computer, touched the screen a couple of times, and then the printer started spitting out the photos. Had all of this been in her suitcase? A young girl took money from the mom of the toddler, while Holly handed her the pictures. The process seemed seamless.

Christian decided he would get in line to sit on Santa’s lap, although he wouldn’t actually sit. Maybe just lean. Holly was so busy behind the lens and her computer that she didn’t notice him until she was about to tell him to smile.

“What are you doing sitting on my d . . . Santa’s lap?” she asked, remembering she needed to stay in character.

“I’ve come to give him my Christmas list.”

“Let me have it, son?” Holly’s dad, Noel, let out a big belly laugh.

Christian looked at the man he’s known his entire life, and while he was dressed as Santa, he was still Holly’s father. “You see, Santa. I really like this woman, and I’m hoping she’ll go to the Christmas dance with me tonight.

“Ho Ho Ho,” Santa chuckled. “Have you asked her?”

“I just did.” He looked at Holly with pleading eyes. “What do you think?”

He held the flowers out to her. “Would you like to go to the dance with me tonight?”

“If she doesn’t, I will,” someone in line said.

“I’m telling daddy!” a kid shouted out.

Christian tried not to laugh. But a smile definitely took over. “These are for you,” he told Holly. “An apology for not calling or coming over last night. I fell asleep and didn’t wake up until this morning.”

“It’s okay,” she told him as she took the vase from him. She smelled the roses and then sat them on the table near her computer. “The dance, huh?”

Christian nodded. “Maybe you’ll win Miss Poinsettia.” He winked.

“Oh, God.” As soon as the words tumbled out, she covered her mouth. He had told her to never say that statement again, unless he was balls deep in her—something he hoped to be later tonight. “I guess I can go to the dance with you.”

“You guess?” he asked as he stepped closer, fully aware that all eyes were on them. “I’ll pick you up at eight, Holly.” Christian leaned down and whispered, “Maybe you shouldn’t wear panties under your dress.” He chuckled when her breathing hitched and laughed all the way back to Main Street.

Christian pulled up to the Saints’ right on time. He held the corsage, he went back to Cindy’s shop to buy Holly in one hand and knocked with the other. Elden opened the door, and the two men shook hands and hugged. “It’s good to see you,” Christian said.

“You too. Come on in. You can meet my fiancée.” Christian followed Elden into the house and right into the kitchen, where his wife sat at the table. “Kerstin, this is Christian,” he said. “He grew up down the street from us.”

“Holly’s boyfriend?” she asked with a Swedish accent. “She tells me all about you.”

Christian blushed as they shook hands. “Hopefully, she told you good things.”

“All the things,” she said with a smile. *Great.* Christian didn’t want to imagine what Holly had said about him now or in the past.

Christian could smell Holly’s perfume before he could see her. He turned

in time to see her coming around the corner in a deep red, sixties style of dress. She had curled and pinned her hair and painted her lips a bright crimson to match. He hoped for his sake her lipstick didn't smear.

"Wow, you look stunning."

"Thank you," she said as she brushed her hands down his lapels.

"This is for you." He took the white orchid out of the clear plastic box and slipped it over her wrist. "Shall we go?"

Holly nodded and put the arm without a corsage through Christian's. When they got to the car, he held the door open for her and leaned in to kiss her. The brief, yet passionate kiss, yielded a ton of promise for what could come later.

Behind the steering wheel, he drove them to their old high school, where the dance was being held. Everyone would be there, even their parents. It was more of a social gathering than anything, and would be a nice fun night out. The committee had always done a stand-up job with decorations and entertainment. There would be food, adult beverages if you were of age, soft drinks, and a lot of dancing. And at the end of the night, someone would be crowned Miss Poinsettia and Mr. Chestnuts. Every man cursed whoever came up with the title of Mr. Chestnuts, and many have petitioned to have it changed, but it never does.

Christian pulled into the parking lot and Holly told him to drive around back. He smiled, knowing full well that only the teens went around back on dance night to make out and do other things. As quickly as he smiled, it went away, when he remembered this was where he lost his virginity to Skye in the backseat of his car. He shook his head at the thought and focused on the present. Holly was his here and now, and he couldn't change the past.

He parked away from the lights, dimmed his headlights, and unbuckled his seatbelt. Holly took her seatbelt off and turned in her seat.

"I'm not wearing panties." In an instant, the sexual tension took over their space.

"I wouldn't care if you were," he said. "They're removable or I can push them to the side." He reached over the console and lifted the hem of her dress, but not fully. He didn't want her to assume they parked to have sex, but he also couldn't help his thoughts.

"We can skip the dance and go back to my house," he told her. "My parents are inside, dancing the night away."

"We could, or we could get in the back."

“I don’t want to mess up your pretty hair,” he told her. “At least not until everyone gets to see you with me.”

“You want to be seen with me?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he told her. “I asked you to the dance because I want everyone to see that we’re together.”

“Are we?” she asked him. “Is that what you want?”

He nodded and cupped her cheek. “We owe it to ourselves to explore a relationship, Holly. I don’t care about the distance—we’ll make it work.”

“And what if, a year from now, we’re still living in two different cities?”

“Then I’ll move to Miami. I’m not sold on living in New York.”

“You’d really do that? Move to Miami?”

“In a heartbeat,” he told her.

Holly met him halfway and pressed her lips to his. As soon as their tongues met, Christian’s body zinged with electricity. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that he and Holly were meant to be together. He may have been foolish in high school, but he wasn’t now.

They parted, and all thoughts of getting her into the backseat flooded his mind. He pulled away from her and picked up her hand. Christian played with her ring finger. “I’ve done the long-term dating thing, Holly. I don’t want to do that now. Will you marry me?”

Holly took her hand from his and shook her head. “Absolutely not!”

“What? Why?”

“Because you boob, we haven’t dated, we haven’t fought, we haven’t even lived together. I will not marry you two days after seeing you again after twelve years. And let’s not mention that for most of those years you were with Skye.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding heartbroken. “I just . . . don’t want us to waste any more time. We’ve lost a lot of years from being apart.”

Holly thought about his words. It was true, just over a decade had passed with them not being in each other’s lives. But, that was even more reason for them to get to know each other first, before rushing into marriage. “If you’re serious, give us a year.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Let’s date and live together. We need to get to know each other, what we like, what we don’t like. What I’m like when I’m tired and hangry. It’s not just about the sex. You may not like my job or how I live.”

“I highly doubt that, but okay.” He leaned over and kissed her again. “In

one year, I'm going to ask you to marry me.”
“I look forward to it.”

If you liked what you read, and want more of Holly & Christian, click [here!](#)

enjoy this sample of before i'm gone

. . .

PALMER SINCLAIR SAT at her small table and looked out the grand picture window at the San Bruno mountainside. She saw a black-tailed doe and her fawn grazing on what little shrubbery the mountainside had to offer, and watched as the doe nudged her baby, guiding it to a food source. The sight of a mother caring for her child brought Palmer back to the DNA instructions and test that sat in front of her.

Today was the day, her self-imposed deadline to finally spit in the tube and send it off. Deep in her heart, she knew she had family out there, and desperately wanted to connect with someone. She hoped she had a sibling but would welcome an aunt or uncle or even a cousin, distant or closely related. Someone who could teach her and help her learn about her family, her heritage, and where she came from. Mostly, she wanted to know how or why she'd ended up in the orphanage so many years ago.

Palmer read the instructions aloud, picked up the vial, and began to fill it. Once she'd gone over the designated line, she added the stabilization buffer and secured the the cap. She pulled out the form and printed her name. Palmer Sinclair wasn't her birth name or the name she'd used at the orphanage. The second thing she'd done after turning eighteen was to change her name. The first was to ask for her records. She also didn't know her birth date. The date on her file was the date she arrived. Why the orphanage never asked for her birth certificate still confused Palmer to this day. It was as if no one wanted her to know she existed. She'd made up everything herself, which made her feel like a fake. She didn't care what her driver's license and social security card said her name was—it wasn't her.

With the package sealed, Palmer set it by her front door and made her way into her kitchen to brew a much-needed pot of coffee. She ran on caffeine. It was her lifeline. While the aroma of coffee beans began to fill the air around her, Palmer thought about the box that sat by the door and how she had put the test off for what felt like eons, and how well her life had turned out despite the odds being stacked against her.

All her life, Palmer had been alone. She'd never had someone in the corner rooting her on, or a mother at home to make sure her homework was done, to kiss her scraped knee or braid her hair. She didn't have a father to teach her about cars or sports or hold her when she experienced her first heartbreak. Growing up, any friendships she'd had never lasted long. It was an inevitable end. Either her friends went back to their homes or they went to another house. School friends were impossible. Telling the other kids she lived in a group home was never fun.

According to what little paperwork she had about herself, she was about three years old when she arrived at the orphanage. She was sure of that, at least in her mind, because of a reoccurring dream she had of a woman in a brown dress, holding her hand. The issue with the dream was she didn't know if what she remembered happened before or after she arrived. Back then, record keeping wasn't the best, and if someone had information about her, it had never made it into her file.

Not until Palmer was older and in elementary school did she realize she was different from the other kids. Her classmates teased her, ridiculed her. The teachers tried to make it stop, but they weren't around during recess or on the bus after school. She dreamed of being adopted or at least finding a foster family, someone to love her, and each day, she'd wait for someone to tell her she was going to finally have a mom and dad. Days turned into weeks, which turned into years.

On her eighteenth birthday, the state moved her into transitional housing until she was twenty-one. Palmer made the most of her situation, and by the time her twenty-first birthday rolled around, she had earned her associate's degree in accounting and secured a job as a teller at Bay Bank. At first, the pay wasn't great, but she managed. She rented a room in a house and then found roommates to share an apartment with, until she had saved enough for a down payment on an apartment.

Her apartment was a nice size, with two bedrooms and an open-concept layout; the kitchen had brand-new appliances and led into her living room.

Her favorite part of the apartment was the view she had from her living room —San Bruno Mountain.

Now, she was within walking distance to work, South San Francisco's historic downtown, and all the artisan-enriched cafés where she loved spending her weekend mornings, drinking coffee and eating a scone or cinnamon roll. She was often by herself, which was easier than forging friendships that might not last.

The coffeepot beeped, and Palmer contemplated her next step as she poured herself a cup. She could take her cup of coffee and go sit by the window and admire her view, or she could take the packaged test to the post office instead of waiting until she went to work. Thinking about the box sent her nerves into overdrive. Despite having nothing to lose, she had a long list of what-ifs that plagued her thoughts. She didn't have a family now, and if there wasn't one out there for her, things wouldn't change for her, but she had to know.

Palmer drank her coffee as she made her way into the bathroom. She showered, dried her hair, dressed in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, and made her way to the front door. She picked up the box, tucked it under her arm, and walked toward the elevator.

Outside, the sun shone brightly and warmed her skin. Spring was in the air. Flowers bloomed, trees flowered, and the birds sang louder than the city noise. As she walked toward her destination, she missed the blue mailboxes that used to be on every other street corner. Those were gone, right along with pay phones and the corner bodegas. The only nostalgic things left these days were fire hydrants. Those would never go away. Neither would her memories of the time the boys at the home figured out how to unscrew the bolt on the hydrant during one of the hottest days of the year. They all played in the water until the fire department showed up, and then still, the firemen let them play a little longer. Those moments were worth remembering.

“Good morning, Palmer,” the post office attendant said as Palmer approached the counter. “I didn't see a package in your box, but let me check.”

“Oh, no worries. I'm just dropping off today.” Slowly, Palmer extended her hand. She watched as the clerk took the box, scanned the prepaid barcode, and waited for the receipt to print.

“Anything else? Do you need stamps? We received some new ones in. Do you want me to show you?”

“Not today, but thank you.” Palmer took her receipt and stuffed it into her pocket as if it was going to bite her or held bad news. She knew once she was home, she’d read the tracking number, memorize it, and check the website every day. Once the company had it, Palmer would start the countdown. The time between the six- and eight-week marks would be torture for her.

Palmer stopped and bought the newspaper, and then went into one of the cafés near her apartment. She picked up a bottle of water and waited until it was her turn in line. She ordered a cinnamon roll and told the barista she would be outside. She sat in one of the metal chairs, took a sip of her water, and opened the paper. At times, she felt like she’d grown up in a different era, one where reading the paper was the norm, and not the one where everyone read on their phones or tablets. If she stared at the small screen on her phone too long, she’d get a migraine, and never mind working for more than an hour at her desk. Once a migraine kicked in, she was down for the count. Her worst one yet, which happened a few weeks back, had kept her out of work for almost a week. Thankfully, her boss didn’t have a problem filling in for her. She supposed that was because she’d been with the bank for fifteen years and until recently had never used a sick day. It seemed, as of late, she was using them more than anyone else.

Her cinnamon roll arrived, and her mouth watered. They were her favorite treat, and she only ate them on the weekends. The second bite was as delicious as the first, but by the last, she felt a headache coming and wanted to get home. She cleaned her space, tucked her newspaper under her arm, and headed back to her apartment. Her day was ruined, all because she couldn’t stop the migraines from coming. She’d done everything she could. She’d changed her diet, increased her caffeine intake, started drinking tea, and bought the most expensive head-and-neck compress on the market. At first, the migraines were manageable. Lately, they were becoming increasingly unbearable.

Palmer made it into her apartment in time to pull her light-blocking curtains over her window and heat up her compress. By the time she crawled into bed, her stomach felt queasy, and she was on the verge of tears. As the pain throbbed, she told herself when it stopped, she would make an appointment with her doctor and ask if there was something more she could do to curb the pain. She didn’t want to admit it might be time to seek treatment, and that home remedies and homeopathy weren’t working.

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Excerpt From
Before I'm Gone(Uncorrected Proof)
Heidi McLaughlin
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enjoy this sample of sangria

YOU'RE NEVER PREPARED for *that* moment. It could be anything from finding out you're pregnant or learning that your band, the one you've been in since you were seventeen, has just been nominated for a *Grammy*. I wish my moment were one of those, but unfortunately, mine comes in the form of finding out my husband of ten years, Van Phillips, has been having an affair.

And how does one find this out? Well, if you're me, you walk into your publicist's office to find your husband banging her assistant. I mean I'm happy that it's not my publicist bent over her desk with my husband pounding into her because that would really ruin my day.

There is no recovery for something like this. Even as I stand here with my mouth open with tears streaming down my face, *nothing* fixes this. Not the look of regret that he gives me as he pulls out of her and quickly stuffs himself back into his pants. Not the "oh shit" look she flashes as she hurries to fix her skirt, making me wonder where the fuck her panties are.

You're not prepared when your publicist actually walks into her office oblivious that two people were just fucking on her desk and she asks if you're ready to get to work on your next tour.

What the fuck does someone do in this situation? There isn't a handbook on how to handle your husband when he gets caught cheating, let alone when you find out he has been unfaithful, although there should be because it seems to happen more often than not in Los Angeles. It's clear that I should've taken some classes on how to handle my emotions by the death glare he's given me. It's as if I'm supposed to "man up" and pretend as if nothing has happened. Like I am somehow at fault here.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what I do because I'm moving on autopilot,

still trying to decipher if what I saw was real or an optical illusion because I can't fathom why my husband would cheat on me. It's not like we don't have a healthy sex life. In fact, he had no qualms taking care of my needs this morning. Apparently, I didn't take care of his, though.

I take one of the two seats in front of Laura's desk, cringing when she sets a pile of folders in the spot where my husband had her assistant bent over, the same one who is now scurrying away to fetch coffee. Not that I would drink anything she hands me because for all I know, she's trying to kill me so she can have my cheating-ass bastard of a spouse all to herself. Newsflash, Trina. . . Trisha. . . Tanya, whatever the fuck her name is. . . she can have him. As far as I'm concerned this is unforgivable, and the fact that he's sitting down next to me as if nothing has happened makes my skin crawl.

Oh God, he fucking smells like her cheap ass perfume too. I pretend to gag. Except I'm really gagging since my stomach is doing its own version of gymnastics and I have a feeling that I'm about to lose my breakfast all over Laura's desk any second now. I lean away and not so subtly move my chair farther from him. He reaches out to touch me, but I glare at him. I throw so many daggers that I'm imagining each one hitting him square in his chest. He must understand that I don't want to be fucked with right now because he pulls his hand away.

That is until the tart walks back in with two cups of coffee. Laura doesn't look up from the paper she's reading when her mug is set on her desk, but my husband, he fucking perks up like this bitch is his only means to feed his caffeine addiction. And because I am living in some alternative universe, she has no qualms about brushing up against his arm and making sure he can see her tits when she unnecessarily bends over to give him his coffee.

"That's it, I'm out of here," I say as I stand up.

Laura looks up quickly, she's confused, and rightly so.

"Sit down, Zara," Van has the nerve to say. I can't even be bothered to look at him so I look at Laura and smile as best I can because right now shit hurts inside and all I want to do is break down and cry.

"I walked in a few minutes early for our meeting and found Van and your assistant fucking on your desk. You might want to sterilize it and find a new assistant because if you don't, I'm walking."

I don't need Laura to say anything. The wide eyes and open mouth are enough for me to know that I've shocked her. Behind me, I can hear Van

yelling my name, but he's not following me. No, he chose to stay back with the bimbo instead of getting up and chasing after his wife to tell her how sorry he is and that what he did was a mistake. But I know better. I could tell by the look on his face that he was only sorry that he didn't get to finish before he got caught.

Outside the sun is shining, and it's hot. So hot that I'm sweating and my breathing is labored because I'm on the verge of a meltdown. I decide to walk, to get lost in the crowd even though that is nearly impossible because people are calling my name. They're grabbing at me, asking for a picture, an autograph and I can't stop and give them what they want.

I slip inside a tourist store where I can buy a fake Hollywood star and use the attached stickers to make my name. That would've been easier than paying the ridiculous fee that my band, Reverend Sister, paid in order to get a legit star on the Walk of Fame. I keep my head down and pick up a T-shirt that reads "I Almost Got Famous in Hollywood" which is something I would never be caught dead in and snag a hat off the rack. Anything I can do to hide my platinum blonde and purple hair from the people on the street. I'm not expecting it to help much, but a little would be nice.

Thankfully I have enough cash to pay for my items, and luckily the clerk doesn't recognize me, or if he does, he's not a fan and couldn't care less that Zara Phillips is in his store buying ridiculous Hollywood propaganda. Either way, I'm grateful that he's not asking for a selfie because there's no doubt in my mind that I look like utter shit. The last thing I need is my face on Instagram with comments leading to speculation that I'm stoned and on my way to rehab.

On my way to divorce court is more like it. I can't imagine what those headlines will be like. Of course, no one will believe that Van Phillips would do such a horrible thing to his precious Zara, his high school sweetheart, the love of his life and soul mate. Yet he did and did so without giving me a second thought.

Thinking about Van and whatever the hell her name is, sends my heart and stomach in opposite directions. I thank the clerk and don my newly purchased disguise before stepping back out and into the foot traffic. My name is called less, and it's more of people questioning whether or not they're getting lucky and seeing me walking down the street. Any other day I'd be happy to stop and chat with them, but not today. Today I want to get home and figure out what I'm supposed to do, and where I'm supposed to go

from here because any decision that I make, is not going to be an easy one.

Our lives, Van's and mine, are intertwined in so many ways. From the time he joined my silly little garage band to the day we took our friendship to the next level. Everything we did, we did as a team with people around us and now those people depend on us. Reverend Sister isn't Van's or mine, it's ours and only works together if we're in it together and right now I don't want to be anywhere near him.

By the time the tears start to fall, and I mean really fall, I'm halfway home, and my phone is ringing with Van calling. The alerts are going off like crazy because the paparazzi are relentless and insist on snapping pictures of people. And when they put them online they add the most ridiculous headlines, except these are spot on, and tell people about my impending breakdown. It's coming. I can feel the gut-wrenching ache, my heart being ripped out of my chest, and every muscle and bone in my body in pain. The takeover is slow and almost alien-like. I can feel it in my toes, moving its way up my legs. It'll take some time for my brain to really figure it out. For the light bulb to go off that my marriage is over.

And it is over. I can't forget what I saw and if I can't do that there is no way I could forgive him. There is no way that I'd let him touch me after what I witnessed. The thought has me doubled over, and someone is yelling from a passing car, asking if I'm okay. Mentally I flip them off because do I look okay? No, I don't. Nothing about my appearance screams that I am okay.

Van's car is in the driveway when I reach the gate to our house. I stand there, like a celebrity stalker, looking at the property. The half-circle driveway with its pristine concrete leads to two amazing French doors that I chose. Beyond those doors, the marble flooring that I had to have extends up the sweeping staircase and fills the hallway that leads to my bedroom with its balcony that overlooks my swimming pool. Everything about this house is what I wanted, complete with an empty room for a nursery because damn it, Van promised me we'd start trying for a baby.

What a liar he is. What a snake and a cheat. Why would he do this to me? The question is, do I even want to know? Do I want him to tell me that I nag him too much or that he doesn't love me anymore? Could I take those words from the man that I have given everything to? The one that I have been in love with since he walked into my garage and pulled a set of drumsticks out of his back pocket and went to town on the set of drums that were set up. Watching the muscles in his arms flex and the magic he created was an epic

turn on.

No, I don't think I could because knowing that my husband thought it was okay to stick his dick into another woman while still married to me. . . really there's no excuse. I punch the code for the gate and step through, and when I enter the house, it's quiet except for the sound of my heavy footsteps.

There are two choices in front of me: One—go find him and confront him. Two—start packing his shit so he can get the fuck out. Option two is what I choose because it's the most raging action I can think of right now. Kicking him out will give me the satisfaction of knowing I had the last word after what he did today.

Upstairs, I find him sitting on our bed, looking at our wedding photo. Does he feel guilty? I hope so. Without a word, I step into the closet and pull out one of the two suitcases I leave in there for quick travel.

“What are you doing?” he asks because apparently, it's not fucking obvious.

“Packing.”

“Where are you going?”

I come out of the room with an arm full of his clothes and throw them at him. Most land on the floor, but there are a few hangers that hit him in the head. “I'm not going anywhere, you are. Get the fuck out, Van.”

“Zara,” he says, reaching for me but I step away, keeping myself an arm's length from him.

“Don't fucking Zara me you piece of shit. You fucking cheated on me,” I say. “ME! The one you took vows with. You don't get to say my name or tell me how sorry you are because you're not sorry, Van. If you were, you would've figured shit out before you stuck your dick in her.”

I head back into the closet and grab another armful of clothes. When I come back, he's still in the same spot, and when he looks at me, he's crying.

“Why are you crying, Van? Because you got caught?”

“Zara, if you would just listen.” He's able to grab my wrist and pull me toward him before my brain registers what's going on. The stench of her sugary sweet perfume hits me hard and smells, dare I say fresher than it did earlier. The only thing I can think is that he's been with her since I caught him hours ago.

I step away from him and shake my head. This time I won't be able to stop the tears from coming. “Get out,” I say, pointing to the door. “Get out of my house right now.”

Van doesn't say anything as he grabs his clothes and throws them into a suitcase. Everything goes quiet until the front door slams, and I jump. It's not until I hear his car start up and the gate screech shut do I fall onto my bed and let the ache take over.

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enjoy this sample of the love in sunset

Eloise stood at the bow and spread her arms out wide. This was her Titanic moment, and something she had always dreamed about doing since she watched the movie as a little girl with her aunt, Margaux. Growing up, they spent Friday nights with a bucket of fried chicken and a movie. Saturdays were for painting, along with every other day of the week.

The ferry jostled and Eloise caught herself laughing as she gripped the railing.

“Are you okay?” a woman behind her asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

Eloise picked up her backpack and moved aside as the questioning woman took her spot at the bow and posed for a photo. Eloise sighed and wished she had handed someone her cell phone for a photo. But then again, that would mean she would've had to charge it before she left London. Her last text, with one percent battery to her aunt, was that she was on her way. Her phone died before she even boarded the plane and the charger she needed wasn't in her bag.

Eloise considered going into the seating area but stayed where she was and took in the sights as the ferry sailed toward town. She hadn't been back to the picturesque town of Seaport in three years, not since her parents divorced and her mom moved to London and her father went to Iowa for work. They had given Eloise the choice to move with either parent. London it was because it seemed like a better fit for her. At least there, she had a plethora of landscapes to paint.

Only she hated it. She missed Seaport, her friends, and her aunt. They were exceptionally close and shared a love of art, especially in the painted

form.

She had flown into Logan International Airport, hopped the train to Providence, and then grabbed the ferry to Seaport. Eloise figured the crisp fresh air would help with her jetlag. In a couple of hours, she knew she would be dead on her feet from exhaustion.

The thirty-mile trek on the ferry was more beautiful than she had remembered, and she wished she could set her easel up on the deck and capture the majestic beauty before her. The sunset sat at the perfect angle, right above the tree line, but not too high in the sky that you couldn't escape it. Boats of all kinds cruised past, with some sailors waving at the massive ferry. Eloise waved back because why not? She used to do the same thing as a kid and loved getting the attention in return.

When the ferry entered the bay, Eloise smiled, tipped her head back, and sighed. She was finally home and had no intentions of leaving, even though she told her aunt she would be there for the summer. Shortly, the famous Seaport bridge came into view and the ferry captain's voice came over the public address system, notifying passengers they were almost at their destination. While most people rushed to stand at the entrance, Eloise waited. She had a mountain of luggage and had no desire to maneuver it around people. Finally, the bustling harbor came into view, with fishing and touring boats coming and going. The closer they came to port, Eloise saw just how busy her former town was. People walked the streets or rode scooters. Horns honked and traffic backed up for blocks from what Eloise could see.

Another jostle, this time with a bit more impact, had Eloise reaching for the railing. While everyone rushed around her, she gathered her things and slogged her way to the exit, grateful for the help provided by one of the crew members. He was kind of enough to carry her luggage to the cobblestone road for her before running back to the ship. She sighed at the uneven pavement. The lack of taxis. And her dead phone.

"Crap."

Eloise looked at her watch, which thankfully ran on batteries, and then the blue paint under her index finger. It was always some color, the aforementioned blue or red. Last week it was purple and the week before that yellow. If paint wasn't underneath her nails, it was in her hair. On her elbows. Or in the lines of her skin. After a couple of all-nighters, she'd find paint behind her ears or a smear on her stomach, even though she wouldn't remember how it got there.

“Eloise Harris, is that you?”

She turned at the sound of her name. Her eyes widen as she took in her former classmate and onetime boyfriend, Fraser Horne. Eloise took him in and mentally compared what she remembered of him from years ago to the way he looked down. Fraser was still tall and lanky but had filled out a bit in some places. His facial features were more defined, but nothing else had changed. Fraser’s brown eyes were still soft and caring, and he still had a sweet smile. She would’ve known him anywhere had they run into each other any other time.

Eloise hadn’t kept in contact with too many people from school when she left, mostly immersing herself in the art scene in London. Plus, the time difference made things difficult to keep in touch unless it was through social media, which she used mostly to show off her artwork.

“Fraser, hi.” They moved toward each other in the awkward should we hug or shake hands way, ultimately giving each other a half hug. “Wow, how are you?”

“I’m good. Good,” he said, repeating himself. When things ended between them, they did so because Eloise had no desire to maintain a long-distance relationship with him. When she would travel back to the US, it would be to visit her father in Iowa, and she didn’t want the pressure of being in a relationship. At seventeen, breaking up with your boyfriend was one the hardest things she thought she would ever do.

Eloise had been wrong.

Painting was.

It didn’t matter that she lived in Europe and could travel all over some of the most beautiful countryside known to man or take the train to Paris, the city of love and romance or lights or sit on the cliffs of Moher in Ireland. Finding inspiration during one of the most traumatic events in her life was hard. She missed the life she had in Seaport, her aunt, friends, and the way her parents used to be prior to their divorce. Eloise thought she’d return to the states when she turned eighteen, but then had been accepted into two of the finest art schools in Europe, one being the Royal College of Art and Beaux-Arts de Paris. She accepted Paris because why not paint in the city of love, romance, and lights, only to hate everything about school. She didn’t like the structure or being told how her art should be or what it should represent. Eloise wanted to paint. It wasn’t like she wanted to be the next Monet or da Vinci. She wanted to be the first and only Eloise Harris.

“That’s great.” An awkward pause followed. They stood there on the street corner, with people walking around them and cars driving by, staring at each other.

“Are you visiting?” he asked as he looked from her luggage to her.

“At least for the summer. I’m here to help my aunt with her Endless Summer Showcase.”

“We’ve had so many people come into town for it. I swear the harbor out by the mansions is some city scape walkway now. Artists set up and paint until the sun goes down.”

The Endless Summer Showcase was one of the most popular events in the world of painters. They’d flock to Seaport in hopes Margaux would choose their painting to put on display. The showcase was mostly for Margaux, but every year she selected one painting to showcase. Any other time during the year, artists could sell their art in her gallery. Getting chosen was a game changer for a lot of painters.

“And they’ll return next year if they don’t get in this year,” Eloise said. She knew painters who came back year after year, or at least they had until she moved away, in hopes her aunt would put them in her gallery.

“Something I don’t understand,” Fraser sighed and smiled. Eloise got it. No one really understood what artists went through, and each one had their own process. There were times when Eloise wouldn’t sleep for days. And then there were times when she’d stare at her canvas for days and paint nothing.

“It’s okay,” Eloise told him. “I don’t always understand why people chose the careers they do.”

Fraser laughed and stepped closer to her, which made her want to take a step back. She didn’t want him to get the wrong idea. While she was happy to see a familiar face, Eloise wasn’t interested in anything more than friendship. Especially with her obligations to her aunt taking up most of her time this summer.

“Are you staying with your aunt?”

“I am.”

“My car’s parked down the street. Do you want a ride?”

“Oh, thank you, but I’m meeting her at the gallery.”

“Do you mind if I walk with you?” he asked. And because he asked so nicely, Eloise agreed.

After nodding, Fraser took her backpack and suitcase and left her to carry

her portfolio case, which she appreciated. The black ratty case had belonged to her grandfather George, and she rarely let it out of her sight. He had given it to her when she was ten, right before he passed away. It was her most prized possession.

They walked in comfortable silence down the cobblestone road, slowing or stopping when they came upon a group of tourists. Growing up in Seaport and then moving to one of the busiest cities in the world, Eloise was used to dodging the crowds, except when her arms were full, and luggage was involved.

Fraser sighed, glanced her way, and rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. Eloise chuckled. Their exchange definitely had to do with how some people had very little spatial awareness more than irritation.

When her aunt's studio came into view, Eloise breathed in a sigh of relief. The studio had been her haven growing up. Her escape from reality. When she was barely three, her grandfather had put a paintbrush in her hand. He didn't care what she painted, including the walls of his house. Everything was a masterpiece. George Harris taught Eloise how to use her hands and mind to create the world around her with painting, sketching, or pottery. George was a master of the arts, and Eloise was his student.

Margaux's, the two-story white brick building with black accents, sat on the rounded bend on the most prominent street in Seaport. Fresh flowers in wooden flower boxes decorated the front and the black and white awning, with lights added to the ambiance. Upstairs, artists could rent rooms for whatever they needed. From the outside, no one could tell this was one of the most sought-after locations in the city. The real estate value alone had investors knocking on the door daily.

"You know," Fraser said, interrupting her thoughts. "The studio is on the tourism pamphlet now."

"Really?" Eloise wasn't surprised, but then again, she was wholly biased.

"Last year, the new Chamber of Commerce director revamped the website, the brochures, and had a couple different commercials produced to build up tourism."

Eloise thought that was odd. Seaport never had any trouble enticing visitors before. "How come?"

"Target new people. Younger crowds," he told her. "It worked."

They crossed the street, and Fraser held the door open for Eloise. She stepped in and inhaled the scent of vanilla—her aunt's favorite aroma for the

gallery. It was warm and inviting. As much as Eloise wanted to look around, the excitement of seeing her aunt had her dropping her bag and rushing toward the back.

Margaux came around the corner and grinned from ear-to-ear, holding her arms out for her niece. The two embraced, hugging each other tightly. “Oh, I have missed you my sweet girl.”

“Me, too,” Eloise whispered. For the first time in years, Eloise felt like she was truly home. Home wasn’t where you laid your head at night or where you hung your hat, it was where your heart was, and her heart was with her aunt.

The two women parted. Margaux cupped Eloise’s cheeks and beamed with delight. “You being here means everything to me.”

“I had no idea how much I needed this until now.”

“Welcome home, Eloise.” They hugged again until Margaux let Eloise go. “Where’s your stuff?”

“I left it by the door with Fraser.”

“Fraser? I didn’t know you were still in contact.”

“We’re not,” Eloise said. “He saw me right after I got off the ferry and offered to help me with my luggage.”

“Oh, well, he was always such a nice young man.” Margaux’s eyes widened.

“No,” Eloise said. “Just no.” She didn’t want her aunt getting any ideas. She was there to enjoy her summer and figure things out later.

Margaux laughed. They made their way to the front, where they found Fraser looking at one of the pieces on display. He turned at the sound of them approaching and ran his hand over his short hair.

“I should go,” he told them. “I’m technically on my lunch break.”

“Fraser!” Eloise shook her head. “Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

He shrugged. “You looked like you needed help.”

She had, but she would’ve managed on her own.

“Welcome back, Eloise,” he said as he reached for her hand, but then stopped. “I’ll see you around.”

“I’ll be here.” Here could’ve been anywhere in Seaport, but if he looked hard enough, he’d find her. Not that she wanted him to look. She didn’t mind being friends with him, but that would be it. Eloise wanted to focus on herself and her art and help make the Endless Summer series the best one yet.

Eloise and Margaux said goodbye to Fraser and then loaded her old truck with Eloise's luggage. Margaux lived on the other side of town, steps away from the beach. From her house, you could see the mansions, separated by the ocean. Eloise had spent many mornings and evenings at her aunts, watching the majestic beauty of the sun rising and setting every day or witnessing an osprey dive for food.

Every year, Margaux and Eloise would hold a tea party in backyard and invite everyone they knew. The one caveat—you had to dress from the gilded age. An ode to the mansions a mere one away, across the bay if you were to swim. Women and young ladies flocked to Margaux's, dressed to the nines and ready to hold their pinkies out while they sipped tea and ate biscuits with clotted cream and jam.

Eloise missed those days. She would have to suggest to her aunt that they revisit their tea party now that she was back.

Margaux pulled into the driveway of her baby soft pink, two-story from the front, three-story in the rear home. The large farmer's porch with white columns allowed for optimal viewing of the bay, while the upstairs balcony gave Margaux the best advantage point to point.

But it was the studio in the back where Eloise would spend most of her time. With a full apartment on the ground level, the upstairs loft had a partially covered roof, which afforded her the ability to paint or lay out in the sun without leaving the confines of her home. This had been one of her favorite places as a kid and she always said she would live there one day. Her one day was now.

They climbed the three wide planked stairs to the porch. Margaux stopped at the door with her key poised at the lock. "I've done a lot of redecorating since you left."

"You sent me pictures. Remember?"

Margaux nodded. "Personally, I don't think pictures do this place justice."

Eloise agreed as she looked behind her. Across the street, there was a wide section of lawn. It was private and cared for by a homeowner's association the residents of the street hired. Technically, each home on the road owned the section in front of their house. On Margaux's portion, two Adirondack chairs faced the water with a small table in between them.

"We'll have wine later," Margaux said as she went into her house.

"I'm not . . ." Eloise's words cut short when she stepped into the

entryway. The once dark floor was now a neutral hardwood. The space opened to the formal living room which had pale teal walls, and one of her grandfather's paintings sitting above the white mantled fireplace. And the kitchen, which Eloise remembered as cherry, was now in white with black marble countertops.

"Let me show you upstairs." Margaux motioned for Eloise to follow her up the stairs. Eloise set her bag down and climbed the eight stairs to the small landing and then turned for the next eight.

"Oh my," she said as she stepped into her aunt's studio, noting the mint green walls and French doors leading to a small terrace where she had an easel set up. From there, Margaux had an amazing view of the bay. She had redone her bedroom in a soft yellow and the room Eloise used to stay in when she was younger was now a vibrant view.

"One more floor," Margaux reminded her.

"Oh yes, the attic."

Margaux laughed and climbed a narrower staircase. She opened the door and grinned widely when Eloise gasped.

"Holy . . ." Eloise walked out onto wide planked flooring and turned in a circle. Gone was the attic she used to hate as a child. In its place was a wide-open terrace, three stories up, with the most spectacular view of the bay. "How come you don't have an easel up here?"

"I've been coming up here to get away from it all."

"This looks nothing like the house I remember."

"I know. It's a labor of love, and believe me, I'm definitely in love with my house."

"Are you going to sell it?"

She shook her head slowly. "Not in a million years."

"Good," Eloise said. "I can feel the inspiration here."

Margaux smiled and motioned for her niece to follow her. They went downstairs, and to the recently remodeled basement before they headed outside to the backyard where the sight of the wrought-iron table and chairs reminded Eloise of the tea parties.

"We should have the tea party," Eloise suggested.

"We could."

Margaux unlocked the loft and flipped the light on. "We did some work in here as well."

Eloise stepped into the space she planned to live in during the summer

and gasped again at the changes her aunt had made. A place that used to drab was now bright and cheery, with light gray flooring, a white kitchen and bedroom. All accented with navy blue, giving the space a nautical feel.

“Is the roof still open?”

“It is.”

Eloise climbed the spiral stairs to the top and sighed when she stepped into the loft space. In the room's corner, two easels stood, ready for use. She walked to the door and turned the knob, stepping out into the sunlight. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, taking in the sun. After a moment, she looked around the space and saw herself painting there as the sun rose and set. Eloise couldn't wait to capture the beauty of Seaport.

She ran to her aunt, who waited for her in the other room and fell into her arms. Eloise lost control of her emotions and wept. She had missed her aunt more than anything and couldn't believe she was finally home. Margaux hugged Eloise and told her everything was perfect now.

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Heidi McLaughlin is a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestselling author of The Beaumont Series, The Boys of Summer, and The Archers.

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