

CHRISTMAS ON MAIN

The Grinch
Next
Door



KATE TILNEY
LANA DASH

THE GRINCH NEXT DOOR

CHRISTMAS ON MAIN

KATE TILNEY

LANA DASH

The Grinch Next Door is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Kate Tilney and Lana Dash

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval systems, without express written permission from the author/publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Kate Tilney](#)

[More by Kate Tilney](#)

[About Lana Dash](#)

[More by Lana Dash](#)

PROLOGUE

Aurora

The lawyer's words suddenly give my life some much-needed direction.

“Seriously?” I ask with excitement at the same time my older sister, Allegra, asks in disbelief.

I turn and stare at her profile, wondering why she isn't feeling like our world has just opened to all sorts of new possibilities. My mind is swimming with ideas of what I can do with this money.

We've been summoned to the law offices of our late great aunt's lawyer. A stocky older man with crisp white hair who looks like he should be sitting in a rocking chair on his front porch littered with grandchildren, not in a cramped office with piles of manila folders and loose paper stacked near to the ceiling.

“That's what it says right here.” Mr. Griffith says, holding up the paperwork in front of him. “The last will and testament of your Great Aunt Doris clearly states that she's left her store in the township of Central Coast, California, to the joint ownership of one Allegra Melody St. Clair and Aurora Alice St. Clair.”

I can't control myself as I fidget in my wooden chair. After years of my mother yelling my full name whenever she was upset with me, hearing him read it out loud brings back an uneasy feeling like I'm a child in trouble and not a twenty-two-year-old adult.

Mr. Griffith takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. It is as if simply giving us this news is weighing on him as well. It's not until this moment that I realize that Allegra and I aren't the only ones who lost Doris. She was a beloved member of this small town, not only because her shop brought joy to the community. She loved to pay it forward and care for anyone who crossed her path.

I remember once, when I was a little girl and visiting over the summer, there was a teenage boy sitting out on the bench in front of her shop. His clothes were worn and dirty, and his hair grew in a matted mess on his head. The fear I felt when he looked up at us as we approached the store stopped me dead in my little Mary Jane tracks. If it weren't for my hand in Aunt Doris's, I might have run off in the other direction down the street.

But Aunt Doris held onto me tight, not letting my fear get the better of me and forcing me to really see the boy in front of us. His eyes were dark like the night sky and filled with a sadness that my seven-year-old self wouldn't understand until years later. He wasn't sitting on that bench because he was waiting for his mom or dad to pick him up. He was sitting there because he had nowhere else to go.

Aunt Doris spoke to him in hushed tones that I couldn't hear, but the boy nodded at whatever she said to him. I don't know what came over me at that moment, but I reached my little hand into my pocket and pulled out a small carved

wooden snowflake. Aunt Doris had let me pick out something to keep in her shop earlier that morning, and I thought nothing was more magical than snow.

Just as the boy walked away, I pulled my hand from Aunt Doris and ran after him. It took my little legs twice as many steps to catch up with him, but when I did, he stopped and stared at me in confusion. Neither one of us said a word, but I handed him my snowflake. Hoping it would bring a smile to his face the way it did mine.

“What does that mean exactly?” Allegra asks, interrupting the memory that I’d long since forgotten until this moment.

“It means you own her store, Christmas on Main, as well as the adjoining parking lot,” Mr. Griffith says.

“So how much is that in dollars?” I ask, ignoring the side-eyed look I’m surely getting from my older sister.

It’s terrible to ask such a question at this moment, but just that momentary trip down memory lane is stirring up all sorts of emotions inside me. I need something else, anything else, to focus on to keep the feelings of grief from hitting me. Allegra doesn’t need me crying, especially in front of a man we only met.

“The building and lot alone are worth a pretty penny.” Mr. Griffith gestures to the paperwork. “But when it comes to the business itself, it’s hard to put an exact dollar amount on it, but it’s easily worth four or five times as much as the property alone.”

“Seriously?” Allegra and I both ask again in unison.

I had no idea a small year-round Christmas shop could be so profitable. I’m sure Allegra is already crunching the numbers in her head. I mean, this is what she does for a living.

And there is no way she's going to be interested in halting her climb up the corporate ladder to run a Christmas store in small-town Central Coast, California with her younger sister.

“Your Great Aunt Doris knew what she was about. I don't mind telling you, there have been some big-name investors eyeing it, but she refused all their offers.”

“Why?” I blurt out the question, and this time, I definitely feel Allegra's judging eyes swing over to me.

Mr. Griffith shrugs. “Sentiment. The desire to leave a legacy. That store was Doris's life's work.”

Her legacy is so much more than that shop. But seeing as she was a woman who never married or had children, it was easy for her to dedicate her life to it. I just feel bad that we are the only ones left for her to leave this place to—a workaholic and a wanderer.

Another memory pops into my mind—Aunt Doris letting me help her set up the display window.

“Does she still have that little village with the ice figures skating around in the front windows?” I ask.

Mr. Griffith thinks for a moment before he gives me a quick nod of assurance. Allegra cuts me off before I can ask about the motorized train set that runs on a track around the perimeter of the shop. I always loved following it around the store, wishing I could be riding it, traveling to some great adventure.

“What's been going on with the store since she passed?” Allegra asks. “Did she have any employees? Has the store been open at all?”

I'm not surprised my sister is thinking about the logistics. I doubt she'd even care what kind of shop it is as long as it is

successful. If she's not careful, she'll end up alone with only her spreadsheets to keep her warm.

“Doris had a part-time gal who came in a few times a week,” he explains. “But she's due to have a baby the week before Thanksgiving, so she won't be available to help you this Christmas season.”

I sneak a glance over at Allegra. She may be able to hide what she's feeling in a corporate conference room, but I'm her sister. The flicker of concern in her expression makes me think that she might be feeling in over her head.

Her uncertainty of the situation causes a pit to form in my stomach. Allegra has always been the one who has had a handle on whatever situation we find ourselves in. I guess it's just the burden of being the older sister. She makes everything she does look so simple. Too often, I forget that just because she makes it look simple, that doesn't mean that it is. I'm going to need to step up and show her and my parents that I'm more than a flake squandering my college education, hopping from one job to the next.

“There are also a couple of young men around town who would help out as needed.” Mr. Griffith says. “I think it was some farmer and handyman, but that was all off the books.”

My concerned gaze meets Allegra's. Neither one of us says anything, but our shared look speaks volumes. Neither one of us is equipped to run this place. Sure, this is right in her occupational wheelhouse to take it over, but Allegra is already so busy at work. She can't take this on, too.

I, on the other hand, have had plenty of retail jobs all through college. But none of them had the responsibility that comes with being the boss. If I screwed up at my old jobs, I'd

get canned and move on to the next one, no harm, no foul. But this time, it's not just me who will be affected if I screw up.

I may not be exactly what we need to fill Aunt Doris's shoes, but my unused degree might be able to help us keep the doors of Christmas on Main open. Setting up social media and updating the website for the shop could help bring in a whole new group of clientele. The more people that spend money, the quicker we can hire extra help. I've seen plenty of case studies where a strong social media presence helped a small business grow to a household name.

According to Mr. Griffith, Christmas on Main isn't exactly floundering, but we'd be a fool to think its success isn't a direct result of Aunt Doris. Now that she's gone, Allegra and I are going to have to prove to this community that we can carry on Aunt Doris's legacy.

"I'm sure you ladies will have more questions. It's a lot to process, but your Aunt Doris left you her store for a reason. I know she had every confidence in you both."

I don't miss the doubtful expression that appears on Allegra's face. She may not think we are the right people for the job, but there must be a reason that Aunt Doris chose us to take over.

"You'll be needing these." Mr. Griffiths pushes the legal documents across his desk towards us.

There is no mistaking that Allegra isn't officially on board with this whole situation. She's going to need to feel some sense of control at this moment, so I try to give her a reassuring look and let her grab the paperwork. We both know that I'm not the responsible sister who should be holding on to it anyway.

He jingles two sets of keys in his hand before handing one to each of us. “Look, there’s even two little angels. One for each of you.”

Mr. Griffith pushes up from his seat, letting us know that our business with him is done. The bowl of candy corn, which I’ve been eyeing since we walked in, calls to me as Allegra turns to follow Mr. Griffiths to the office door. I sneak a few pieces and pop them into my mouth quickly before following them.

I tap my finger on the tip of the small conical hat of the witch figurine sitting on the receptionist’s desk. It’s nearly Halloween, and before we know it, Christmas will be here. We don’t have much time to find our feet before entering the shop’s biggest season of the year.

“Should we grab a coffee or maybe some hot apple cider?” I ask, pulling my scarf over my head and wrapping it around my neck as we head out of the law office.

Allegra is quiet for a moment, and I’m sure she’s about to give me some excuse about needing to get back to work, but then she surprises me.

“Yeah,” she says with a nod. “We do have a lot to talk about.”

There’s no controlling the smile that spreads across my face. It’s the first time I’ve smiled since we got the news about Aunt Doris’s passing. As the younger sibling, getting a chance to spend time with Allegra was the height of my day. And since it’s been forever since we’ve spent any time together, besides the afternoon of my college graduation, the feeling of excitement strikes me, even if we are just going to get a drink.

We walk down the street and find a small café with the delicious scent of coffee wafting outside, luring us in.

“I’ll get a green tea with a slice of lemon, please,” Allegra says.

Ugh, that’s so boring.

I’m looking for something that is equal parts tasty and photogenic. It’s been a few days since I’ve posted anything on social media, and my followers wonder when I go quiet. So, posting a picture of my favorite pumpkin drink with the hashtag #sistertime will be enough to let them know I’m still alive.

“And can I get an extra dollop of whipped cream and some nutmeg shavings on top?” I ask with my brightest smile to the barista. “That will really make it pop in the picture.”

A man in line behind us lets out a derisive snort that stops me dead in my tracks. I’m so tired of men and their unasked-for commentary about women and their preference for pumpkin-flavored anything. With this world going to hell in a handbasket, is it too much to ask for the simple things in life to be enjoyed in peace?

I turn to give the man my most withering stare, but my eyes meet nothing but a mountain of thick muscle. My eyes roam up his chest to meet the man’s dark blue gaze.

“Do you have a problem?” I ask, ignoring the heat pulling deep into my lower belly as I take in his handsome face.

The bearded man smirks, but not in the flirty way I’m used to getting from guys. It’s more like he can’t be bothered with a woman like me. I guess the decade of years he has on me makes him think I’m a stupid little girl.

“Yeah,” he says. “I need my caffeine fix, and you are holding up the line.”

Before I can really lay into the guy, Allegra tugs on my arm and mumbles something about needing to get back to work. This guy is lucky I have more important things to do than slice him with my words. But the next time I see this guy, he will be hurting.

I follow Allegra to a corner of the café and sit down.

As tasty as this drink looks, I must take a moment to get a few pictures and upload my post. The notifications on my post start appearing on the screen before I can even put my phone down and take a sip.

Allegra sets her cup of tea down on the saucer with a clatter, making me look up. “I’m just going to say it. What do either of us know about running a Christmas store?”

“I don’t know?” I dip my finger into some of the whipped cream and lick it off. “How hard can it be?”

I’m trying to sound like this isn’t going to be some big undertaking, so Allegra doesn’t run screaming from this café back to her life in the city.

“It could be fun,” I add.

“It could also be a lot of work and lead us both into debt.”

I don’t mention that my backpacking trip through Europe last year already beat the shop to it.

Allegra opens the folder Mr. Griffith gave us and scans the pages. “I will say he wasn’t kidding. We could make an awful lot of money if we found the right buyer.”

“How much money?”

“Enough money to cover a couple of years of living expenses in New York City while you ‘figure things out.’”

It stings when my family points out the fact that I haven’t figured out exactly what I want to do with my life. Maybe I was subconsciously waiting for this moment. Maybe this is my time and the place where I find what I want to do with the rest of my life. Just because Allegra has known what she’s wanted with her life practically from the womb doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t need time to make that decision.

“You mean enough money to impress that boss of yours into giving you a promotion,” I snap back.

Allegra meets my gaze, and I can see the moment she decides she might take this crazy journey with me.

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking. Right?” I ask.

“If you’re thinking we make this the most profitable holiday season ever at Christmas on Main so we can flip it in the new year and with our pockets full—” she says with an unsteady chuckle. “Then yes.”

“So we’re doing this?” I raise my mug to her.

She nods and lifts her mug to clink mine. “We’re doing this.”

ONE

Aurora

The sound of another glass bulb shattering on the shop floor is muffled only slightly by the joyful holiday music playing loudly over my cell phone.

“What was that?” Allegra calls out from the back of the shop.

It’s been nearly a month since we’ve taken over running Christmas on Main. The transition for both of us has been a bit rocky at times, but we are working through the kinks one day at a time. Allegra oversees the business side of the shop, like running the numbers and making spreadsheets. I’m sure it’s much more complicated than that, but I swear my eyes glaze over whenever she tries to tell me what she’s doing. I’m in charge of overseeing the social media side of things. We will share the responsibility of working with the customers.

Which is what I was in the middle of doing when I knocked another Christmas bulb off the tree. I’m trying to make a video of the latest viral dance craze, but there isn’t enough room in the shop to get it right without knocking something over.

“It was nothing.” I drop to the ground and pick up what pieces I can before using the toe of my shoe to sweep the

remaining shards under the nearest display table.

Thanksgiving is a week away, and the views for the videos I've been posting around the shop have really started taking off. I've even had a few customers come and tell me they've lived in the surrounding area all their lives and never heard of Christmas on Main until they saw my videos.

"You broke another one." Allegra does little to hide the annoyance in her voice. She already told me two broken bulbs ago to take my dance outside.

I flash her a sheepish grin. "Good thing we have a store full of them. A few broken ones won't make a difference."

"If you keep this up, we won't have any more merchandise left to sell."

"The lighting is better in here."

Allegra points at the front windows, bright from the afternoon sun. "There is plenty of good lighting out there. Use it."

It's moments like this that I know I need to pick my battles with my sister. We may be equal shareowners of this place, but she still likes to play the "I'm older and wiser, and so you have to listen to me" card.

"Fine, but you are going to have to be in charge of the front counter," I tell her as I grab my tripod with my phone attached and head for the front door.

"Try not to break anything on your way out," she calls after me.

I turn with the tripod in hand, ready to tell her where she can stick her warnings, but the tripod swings into a painted miniature plaster gingerbread house. We both watch in horror

as it tips off the ledge on the shelf it is sitting on and crashes to the ground.

“That one’s on you,” I say quickly and run out the front door before she insists that I clean up the mess.

Outside, the town is in full swing with preparations for Christmas. Lights are being strung up and down the main drag through town, and lush wreaths are being hung on every doorway in sight.

Someone has left their ladder near the front of our shop. I look around, trying to find the owner, but there is no one around. Whoever it is, they may have gone to the café for some coffee or the diner for a bite to eat. Either way, I need all the space in front of the shop to get my dance video done and uploaded as soon as possible.

I move the ladder to the side, out of my intended shot, and set up my tripod. I press record on my phone and step back into the viewfinder. The singing begins, and I move to the beat. There’s no way I’d tell Allegra this, but she’s right about coming outside for better lighting and more space. The sign for the shop is still in view for anyone watching to see and hopefully draw them in to check us out.

Just as I make my last turn and pose for the camera, I notice something behind me on the screen. I spin around.

“Oh my gosh,” I yell when I realize they are legs belonging to a man dangling from the shop’s roof ledge.

A string of expletives that would have made even saucy Aunt Doris blush erupt from the man as he tries to hang on to the ledge to keep from falling. His legs swing around, trying to find something—oh shit, the ladder!

“Hang on,” I tell him, running over to where I moved it a few minutes ago.

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” he asks angrily, but his grip on the roof releases.

I watch, my breath caught in my throat, as he drops to the ground.

PAZ

I’m only given a second to brace for impact before I land. My right ankle rolls beneath me, but I manage to keep myself from falling over. I take a few tentative steps, testing out the extent of my injury. It’s not broken, but I’m pretty sure it’s sprained.

“Are you okay?” The female voice asks behind me.

I turn and find myself face to face with the woman I ran into at the coffee shop a few weeks ago. The one that looked like she wanted to take her hot coffee and toss it in my face when I mocked her choice of flavored latte.

It’s clear from the way her concerned expression morphs into a look of contempt that she remembers me, too.

“You,” she sneers.

“Me,” I say, matching her tone.

“What the hell were you doing on my roof?”

I glance at the shop and then back at her. “Your roof?”

She rests her balled-up fists on the wide curve of her hips, trying to look imposing but managing only to look slightly adorable.

This woman is one of Doris's nieces who inherited her shop. It's still weird to think of anyone else but Doris owning Christmas on Main. I've seen the two of them around but haven't formally introduced myself yet.

I easily have a decade on this woman, but that doesn't stop my body from reacting to her beauty. Her heart-shaped lips and ample hourglass figure is tempting me in a way a woman hasn't tempted me in a long time.

"I was setting up the Christmas lights," I begrudgingly explain. She should be grateful for the help.

"We didn't ask you to do that."

"You're right." I nod. "Your Aunt Doris did. Before she—"

The woman flinches at the mention of her late aunt's name. It wasn't my intention to bring up what I'm sure is a painful reminder of her loss. Even if she was careless about moving my ladder.

"You could have killed me, you know," I say as I limp over to my ladder and break it down to carry back to my own shop.

"I didn't know you were up there." She falls into step next to me.

The wind kicks up slightly, blowing the soft scent of vanilla and gingerbread in my direction. My dick twitches at the thought of her wrapped up in my arms and inhaling the intoxicating scent directly from her skin. This intrusive thought surprises me. I don't know this woman, and I have no intention of getting to know her. But every time our paths have crossed, she's occupied my thoughts long after she's out of my sight.

That first day we met, I found it hard to concentrate on my work. No woman has ever had a hold on me like that before.

Probably because I've lived a life of constantly being disappointed by the people who should have been there for me. I keep people at arm's length for a reason, with one of the only few exceptions being Doris. Maybe that's why this woman is slipping past my barriers. She's a relation to the one person I called family.

"Forget about it," I say to her and myself. I don't want to let anyone in. Getting close to people is only going to cause heartache down the road. I'm not looking to deal with heartache.

"I really didn't think anyone was up there," she continues, ignoring me. "I was making a Christmas video for the shop."

Of course, she was. What else should I have expected from a woman who orders a drink solely on the merit of whether it looks good on camera? What ever happened to living your life instead of trying to project an idealized version of yourself for others to enjoy on the internet?

All I can say is that you will never catch me making a video like that.

"That's fine if you want to spend your life documenting everything you do," I stop and turn to face her. "But next time, someone could really be hurt by your carelessness."

Her lips part in surprise, like she's not used to someone telling her like it is. But I'm not one to pull any punches, even if she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I wait only a beat to see if she has any biting remarks to make back at me, but when she says nothing, I turn back towards the door of my hardware store.

"You're welcome, by the way," I call over my shoulder before heading inside.

TWO

Aurora

“He’s nothing but a judgmental, arrogant jackass,” I tell Allegra as we set up the new price tags around the shop.

“You have been talking about him for three days straight,” she grumbles. “When are you going to let it go?”

“I’ll let it go when he apologizes.”

Allegra scoffs and rolls her eyes. “What does he have to apologize for? You were the one who nearly killed the poor guy while he was hanging lights for our shop. Free of charge, I might add.”

“You move one little ladder, and no one lets you live it down.”

“He fell off our roof! If he’d been seriously hurt, he could have sued us and poof, our store is gone. No potential buyers for us.”

She yells at me like I’ve forgotten that fact. But how can one forget when the Grinch next door has been seen limping around town as a constant reminder? I’m sure that he can’t wait to tell people all about how I tried to kill him. It was not the best first impression I was trying to make in this town. We

can't afford to have the community afraid to shop here for fear of getting maimed or worse.

“You just haven't met a guy that didn't find your sunshine personality instantly delightful,” Allegra says as she straightens the tags I've already set up.

Her words hit the target right on the bullseye, but I'm not going to admit that. It does drive me crazy when I meet someone who I don't instantly connect with. It's one of the few traits that I like about myself. A therapist once pointed out to me that my need for positive attention stemmed from growing up in my older sister's long shadow.

I couldn't compete with her grades or drive to be number one, so I found other ways to stand out. And it doesn't help that the only good-looking guy in this small town is the only one immune to my charms.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, trying to change the subject from the handsome handyman next door to a hot meal from the diner across the street.

“I could eat.”

“Good,” I hand her the rest of the tags in my hand. “I'll go get us some lunch.”

“Okay, but if you see any ladders, please don't move them.” Allegra laughs to herself.

I don't bother to look back and head out of the shop. Despite the decorations looking like the set of a Christmas movie covering all of Main Street, the one thing we are missing is snow. Central Coast isn't a town that gets much of any weather other than bright sunny days. Ninety-nine percent of the year, this place would be the perfect place to live, except around Christmas.

The scent of greasy food cooking on the grills hits me the moment I walk into the diner. It's busy with a handful of tourists taking a break from their tour through town. I love seeing that most of them have their Christmas on Main bags next to them, and it makes me think that maybe Allegra and I can really pull this off. I just need to convince my sister not to sell but to keep the shop in our family.

I take a seat at the counter and open one of the laminated menus tucked in behind the salt and pepper shakers. Everything looks amazing, and my grumbling, empty stomach is urging me to go crazy with my order.

Taking my time reading over the menu, I've nearly decided on what to order when someone slides into the counter seat next to me.

"Am I safe if I sit down?" A deep voice asks.

There's no mistaking who the owner of the voice is. Our limited conversations have been playing on a loop in my mind.

I turn and meet the penetrating gaze of Central Coast's local handyman and hardware shop owner.

"I can't make any promises," I say menacingly, but it only makes him chuckle quietly.

Why is it that when I try to charm this man, he only scowls at me? But when I try to give his Grinch attitude back at him, he laughs. I can't figure him out.

"Here." He hands me a sheet of paper. "I've put ladders on a special discounted price just for you."

I look down and see a flier for an after-Thanksgiving Day sale at the hardware store. It's my turn to laugh at him.

"What?" he asks, looking down at the flier.

“I didn’t realize people still hand out fliers to spread the word about an upcoming sale.”

He frowns at me. “I’m a fan of the classics.”

“Clearly.”

“Let me guess, your idea of effective marketing is making a dance video to get people to shop at the store.”

I nod. “Among other things.”

“You’re in Central Coast, not Los Angeles. The people around here are not so quick to change with the times.”

“And you’re suggesting that I stand on a street corner and hand out fliers?”

“Among other things.” He smirks.

I press my thighs together, trying to ignore the heated tingle that flutters in my lower belly whenever this man is near me. I’m normally not drawn to a man with a beard, and he looks like he could use a haircut. But there is something about him that makes me want to lean over and straddle his lap.

My curves are sometimes too much for the guys my age. They don’t appreciate what a curvy girl can bring to the bedroom. But this man has a look in his expression that tells me he wouldn’t shy away from the challenge.

“I think there’s only one way to find out who’s right—me. And who needs to catch up with the times—you.”

For once, the smile he flashes me isn’t one of mockery but of sincerity. And I’m hit with a feeling, a familiarity that I can’t place.

“What do you have in mind?”

“The day after Thanksgiving is always a big shopping day. Why don’t we each trade our marketing tactics for the other?”

“How so?”

I shrug. “You can hand out fliers for Christmas on Main, and I will make some social media posts for the hardware store. Then we will see whose plan is the most effective,”

“Me,” he interrupts, but I continue.

“And who needs to lean too heavily on the only way they know how.”

“You.”

I hold out my hand for him to shake. “Are you in or out, old man?”

It’s too tempting not to push him into this bet because I know I will win.

His left eyebrow ticks up in mild amusement, and he takes my hand in his. “It’s a bet.”

My heart rate ticks up a notch. There’s no denying the strength and warmth from his touch. It makes me wonder what else those hands could do to me if I let them.

“I’m Aurora,” I tell him when I realize I don’t know his name.

“Paz.”

It’s not often I meet someone with a name more uncommon than my own.

“Is that short for something?”

“Pascal,” he says. “It’s the only thing short about me.”

I'm momentarily stunned by the boldness in what he's just said that I lose my ability to verbally jab back.

"And when I win," he says softly, leaning close to whisper into my ear. "You will be modeling the new line of ladies' tools that I've just started selling at the shop."

The woodsy scent of sawdust and woodsmoke makes me want to climb up this mountain of a man.

"And when I win," I counter. "You will be starring in a series of sexy Santa videos for Christmas on Main's social media."

"Deal."

THREE

Paz

“I’ll be damned,” I grumble under my breath as I unlock the hardware store door to let in the early bird shoppers the morning after Thanksgiving.

There are plenty of familiar faces in the line of customers as they begin to shuffle in, but there are just as many new faces, too. What’s even more surprising is that they aren’t all men. Not that I don’t think women shop at hardware stores, but I just don’t see many around here.

Aurora had previously spent the afternoon taking videos around the store but wouldn’t show me any of the finished products. She told me that if I wanted to see what she put together, then I’d have to find it online by myself. I think she knew that was a guarantee that I wasn’t going to take the time out of my busy day for something like that. She may have joked at the diner when she called me “old man,” but my lack of technology proficiency is really starting to show the age range between us.

I heard her talking to one of the customers when she was recording that she had recently graduated from college. There’s another big divider between us. She continued on to

higher education while I worked my ass off doing multiple jobs around town to save every penny for this store.

Doris even helped me prepare the paperwork for my business loan application with the bank. She'd been looking out for me ever since I was just seventeen years old, and she found me sitting on the bench in front of her shop.

My father had just come off a three-day gambling bender and managed to lose everything we owned but the car, which was good because we'd been living out of it for the last year and a half. I'd long since stopped going to high school and was working any under-the-table, cash-paying job I could find to keep us fed.

But after an argument with my dad, which I started when I didn't want to hand over my meager earnings so he could go right back to the poker table, he kicked me out of the car and left me on the side of the road. I'd never heard of Central Coast in all our nomadic travels around California. But it was the first town I came upon after picking a direction on the highway to go.

Doris could see that I was in trouble, but she didn't look at me like I was a charity case. She offered me work and found me a place to stay. With her guidance and pull in the community, people stopped looking at me like I was a teen delinquent with no family but a productive member of society.

I missed out on a lot of experiences because of my need to grow up too quickly, but I wouldn't be where I am today without everything she did for me.

"I've never seen this place so packed," Dr. Hastings says, patting me on the shoulder. "Even when my dad was running the store."

I'd stepped in to buy the business from Dr. Hastings after his father passed five years ago. With his own thriving medical practice, he wasn't interested in keeping the place for himself.

"I'm more surprised than anyone," I say, looking around.

Aurora clearly knows what she's doing when it comes to marketing a business on social media. Christmas on Main never struggled under Doris, but some of the town's people were a bit skeptical when Aurora and her sister Allegra were handed the reins after Doris's passing. Not only have they maintained the appeal and popularity of the place, but they've also brought in new customers.

Aurora and I may have made a bet on whose marketing strategy would work best, but I'm starting to think that whatever my fliers did, it's more of the tail end of what Aurora's already set in motion.

"Any chance you stopped by Christmas on Main this morning?" I ask Dr. Hastings.

"I dropped my wife off there on my way here." He smiles brightly at me. "The place was packed."

I cross my arms over my chest. "I thought as much."

AURORA

"Since when do you use fliers for marketing?" Allegra asks between customers.

Defeat seemed impossible when I made the bet with Paz. But nearly all the customers in the store are holding onto one of the fliers that he used to pass out in town.

"It's a great deal," one female customer says nearby.

“I know, right? Two birds, one stone.”

The conversation between the two customers pulls my attention away from the customer I’m checking out. But I don’t miss that they are looking at the fliers as they are talking. It occurred to me, at that moment, that I didn’t check out the flier that Paz made for his marketing strategy.

A few hours later, there is finally a lull in the crowd of customers, and I can finally get a break. I head out of the back room of the shop towards the alley filled with Christmas trees and sit down on some empty crates piled near the door. I lean back and take a deep breath. This day has been crazy busy, but totally worth it. Allegra was smiling from ear to ear, seeing all the business we’d had before noon. I’m hoping this feeling she’s having can be used to convince her that keeping the shop just might be a good idea.

The wind kicks up, and something flutters against my leg. I look down and see one of Paz’s fliers. His hardware logo is printed across the top with the word “sale” in bold font letters. I read over the sales items he’s using to draw people in, but my eyes are drawn to the words printed at the bottom.

“An extra 10% discount on your entire purchase when you shop in-store with your same-day Christmas on Main purchase.”

“That sneaky son of bitch!” I say, standing up from the crates.

A family with two small children standing a few feet away from me stops looking at the Noble Fir they’ve been eyeing and looks over at me. The two little boys have wide-eyed expressions on their faces from hearing me curse while their parents are glaring at me.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell them and run back into the shop.

“Where are you going?” Allegra calls after me as I run for the front door.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell her and bolt out the door.

The hardware store is packed with customers, many of whom I’d just rung up, checking out his sale items.

Paz is working behind the counter, checking out customers, when he notices me standing there. He leans down to the teenage boy bagging the items and whispers something to him. The boy nods, and Paz looks back at me and points in the direction of the backroom of his shop.

I weave my way through the customers and meet him in the back room.

“What the hell is this?” I ask, holding up the wrinkled flier in my hand.

He squints at it like he doesn’t immediately recognize what I’m holding. “It looks like—”

“Cut the crap,” I say, crumpling up the paper and throwing it at his head. “You cheated.”

“Did I?” He asks, crossing his arms and leaning back against his office desk. “Or did this old man beat you at your own game?”

I open my mouth to argue, but nothing comes out. He’s right. I’m not angry at him for what he did. I’m angry at myself for not thinking of this strategy on my own. Not only did he get customers into our store, but he got those same customers to come into his shop as well.

“You didn’t beat me.” I step towards him. “Our place has been packed all day.”

He pushes off the desk and takes a large step towards me, closing the rest of the distance between us. “This is the first break I’ve had all day. And it wasn’t for the lack of customers.”

“You—” I seethe in frustration, but his closeness is very distracting. It’s clear that he’s shaved most of the scruff off his beard and trimmed his hair. It’s easier to see his handsome features, and I wonder for a moment if he did this for me.

The idea that he did this for someone else sends a jolt of jealousy pulsing through me, and I’m suddenly angry at him again.

“You what?” He asks.

“You are infuriating. And cocky. And an all-around jackass.”

He smirks, and the heat between my thighs feels like a blazing inferno.

“Aww, come on. You should be careful, or you might hurt my feelings, Princess.”

“Princess?” I gasp.

“Well, if the glass slipper fits. Not many people are handed a thriving business straight out of college. Some of us have to work for all that we have.”

“I was wrong, you aren’t a jackass.” I push him hard in the chest. “You’re an asshole.”

Paz grabs my wrists and pulls me close to him. The room feels suddenly smaller and hotter all at once. I lean my head back and close my eyes just as his lips crush against mine in a searing kiss. His hands move to my ass, and he lifts me up as if I don’t weigh a thing. We spin around, and he sets me down

on his desk. I loop my legs around his waist, and he presses his hard cock against my aching center.

“Oh god,” I cry out, finally feeling some relief from the ache that has been pulsing through me nearly since the moment we met.

Paz growls into my neck, and his grip on my ass pulls me closer against him.

“Hey boss, we could—” someone says from the door to the backroom. “Oh, crap! I’m sorry.”

We pull apart just as quickly as we came together. The loss of the heat from his body no longer pressed against my body sends a shiver of cold running through me. I slip off the desk and stand on wobbly legs.

“I’ll be right there,” Paz says to the guy but doesn’t take his eyes off me. He doesn’t speak again until we hear the worker leave. “I should get back to work.”

“Yeah,” I say, trying to catch my breath. “Allegra will be wondering where I am.”

It’s obvious to me that we still have some things to discuss, most importantly the fact that he just had his tongue in my mouth and was dry-humping me on his desk. But Paz doesn’t say anything else. I’m beginning to understand that he’s not the type of guy who will use words when a brooding stare will do the trick.

Like, I don’t already have enough to deal with trying to find a way to convince my sister not to sell our Christmas shop, but add a confusing guy next door to the mix, and it’s clear that this holiday season is going to be the craziest in my life.

FOUR

Paz

It's been a week since Aurora and I made out in my office. And I haven't been able to get the feel of her body and the taste of her out of my mind. No amount of beating myself off in the shower will tame my dick when I think about her, and it's not like I can keep my distance. She's working right next door, day in and day out. It's hard to focus when I see her making her videos out on the sidewalk in front of our stores or when she's picking up lunch for her and Allegra at the diner. Everywhere I turn, she's there.

"Bossman!" Caleb, the part-time worker that caught us in the back room, calls out.

I straighten and realize I've been rooted in the same spot near the front windows, stocking the same shelf as I was twenty minutes ago. I'd been distracted when I noticed Aurora making a video with Van, the guy who has been selling Christmas trees in the alleyway next to Christmas on Main.

"Yeah?" I clear my throat and look over at him.

"Do you want me to take over for you?" He asks, gesturing to the box of nails in my hand. "Maybe you need to take a break and get a cup of coffee or something?"

“Coffee, yeah,” I say, putting the box down on the shelf. “That sounds like a good idea.”

“Maybe get an extra one for Miss St. Clair next door,” he continues with a knowing grin.

“What, are you trying to play matchmaker or something?” I snap at him half-heartedly.

Caleb chuckles. “Well, I mean, I don’t think I have to try too hard after what I walked into—”

“Okay,” I hold up my hand to stop him. “I’m going.”

The wind is wild when I head outside and make my way towards the café for some coffee. I put in an order for a black coffee for me and a peppermint monstrosity for Aurora. Caleb may be just still in high school, but he isn’t wrong about using coffee as a way to talk to Aurora.

As I approach her shop, I can see through the front windows that she’s wrapping up one of the nutcrackers that I made for a customer.

I’ve been supplying Christmas on Main with wooden handmade goods for years now. Doris insisted when she found out that woodworking was something I had a passion for. Woodshop was the only class in school that I was any good at, and I used it to center me through all the chaos with my dad.

The twinkle of the bell above the door pulls me back from the darkness of my past and back into the light of my present—specifically Aurora. I keep waiting for the moment that my messed up past tells me to run, to sabotage what little happiness I can find in my life. But there is no hint of that little voice in my head when I see her.

“Thank you, dear,” the older woman says as I hold the door open for her. With her nutcracker wrapped in her hand,

she walks slowly but steadily towards her car parked just in front of the shop.

The wind suddenly picks up, and all the paper snowflakes hanging in the shop whip around like they are in a wind tunnel. Some of them were getting tangled in the strings of the others hanging, and some were just ripping.

“Oh no!” Aurora calls out. She races around the counter to try and grab the ones that have fluttered to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I say, stepping into the store and quickly closing the door behind me.

“It’s not you.” She holds up the destroyed holiday art in her hands. “It’s been happening all day. I guess my attempt to add some snow to this snowless town was a bust.”

I watch as she tosses the ripped snowflakes into the trash behind the counter.

“For what it’s worth, they looked really nice.” I shrug. “It’s the closest thing to snow I’ve seen in a long time.”

“Snow is magical.” She smiles brightly, stunning me in my spot. “Thirsty?”

“What?”

Aurora points to the two coffee cups in my hands.

“Oh, right,” I say, offering one to her. “I thought you might be interested in a caffeine pick-me-up.”

“Always,” she sighs in relief and comes around the counter to take it but trips on a loose cord.

She falls into me, and I manage to keep us both upright without spilling a single drop.

AURORA

It's been five days, thirteen hours, and about twenty-seven minutes since Paz kissed me. Not that I'm counting or anything. I mean, how the hell do you kiss someone the way he kissed me and wait that long to talk to that person? Sure, it's the start of the Christmas season, and both our businesses have been busy, but it's been torture waiting for him to make his next move. And it's not like I can really talk about it with Allegra. When I first told her about the kiss, she didn't have the reaction I'd thought she'd have. I was expecting a reaction like one you'd get from your best friend. Instead, I got a less-than-enthusiastic look from my older sister before her boss called, thankfully interrupting our conversation. I didn't need a lecture from her to rain on my parade.

I know there are ten years between us, and some people like to pass judgment on whatever kind of relationship we might have, but I've never met anyone like him before. Paz challenges me in a way that both infuriates me and thrills me.

"You should get some tape and secure that loose cord," he says, helping me up.

I've been meaning to secure that since I found the wooden Christmas village, packed it up in the storage room, and brought it out onto the storeroom floor for display.

It was Allegra's favorite when we were little kids. I thought it would help sell her on the idea of not wanting to sell the place. To tap into the nostalgia of happy childhood memories and being here with Aunt Doris.

Allegra was shocked when she saw it again for the first time in years. It was like watching little Allegra all over again as she smiled brightly, flipped the switch, and turned the lights on inside all the houses.

“What’s going on in here?” Allegra asks from the doorway of the backroom.

Paz and I pull apart, like we’ve just been caught by our parents making out or something.

“Nothing,” I say, reaching the coffee Paz had originally offered me. “He’s just dropping some coffee off.”

“Yeah.” He hands me the cup.

Allegra’s gaze flits between Paz and me. I can see the wheels turning in her head, but I’m not interested in sticking around to find out what she thinks of him just turning up like this.

“I’m going to take my break now,” I tell her as I take Paz’s hand in mine and lead him out of the front door.

Once we are outside, he adjusts my hand in his so our fingers are interlaced. It’s a small gesture but one that says so much. We walk down the street without saying a word. The silence isn’t uncomfortable but peaceful. It’s the first moment I’ve had since arriving back in Central Coast where I haven’t had to think but just be here. It’s exhausting trying to document every moment, to think about how this can be used to make more content. This time with Paz isn’t for anyone but him and me.

We walk to the center of town and sit down on the steps that lead up to the gazebo. The wind kicks up, and I shiver slightly at the cooler air.

“Here,” Paz says, taking off his flannel jacket and wrapping it over my shoulders.

I set down my heavenly peppermint mocha and push my arms into the sleeves. The rich scent of him surrounds me, and

I close my eyes and imagine for a second that it's his strong arms around me instead.

"Thanks," I say, turning to meet his gaze but finding it already on me.

The look is piercing but not in an intrusive way, but one that makes me feel that he can see more of me than I ever let the rest of the world see, even Allegra.

"I haven't stopped thinking about that kiss." He leans close but still leaves a breath of space between us.

"Me either," I breathe out.

He closes the distance, but this time, the kiss isn't frantic but measured. Like he wants to savor this moment just as much as I do, his arms loop around my waist and pull me closer to him. But something pokes into the side of my waist.

"Ouch," I say, pulling away from his lips.

"What?" He asks with concern.

I reach into the pocket of his jacket and pull out keys, but it's the keychain that I think is the culprit. It's a small wooden snowflake attached to the ring of keys by a thin leather strap.

The memory of when I was a little girl giving this to a teenage boy flashes in my mind.

"Where did you get this?" I ask, looking up at him.

"Oh, um," he says, looking down at it with a small smile. "A little girl gave it to me. I never knew her name. But it was the first kind thing anyone had done for me in a long time." He looks up at me. "It was actually the first day I arrived in Central Coast."

"I know," I nod.

Paz tilts his head in confusion. “You know?”

“I know because I was there.”

Paz’s brow furrows in confusion for a moment until he fully contemplates what I’m telling him.

“That was you?”

“You looked so sad,” I tell him. “And the idea of snow always made me so happy. So I figured it would do the same for you.”

He looks down at it in my hands. “It did.”

I never thought I’d see that boy again. And I guess I never did. But here he is, the man he became, sitting in front of me. A full-circle moment that seems impossible to have.

“What makes you happy now?” I ask, hoping so much that I already know the answer.

Paz brushes a lock of hair off my face and tucks it behind my ear. This simple touch from him sends a wonderful shiver through me, leaving a trail of tingles on my skin in its wake.

“Being here.” He brushes his lips against mine. “With you.”

FIVE

Aurora

The last few days sneaking around with Paz have been the most exciting in my life. Living in a small town comes with many perks, but the curious eyes of its watchful and nosy citizens aren't one of them.

A few people had seen Paz and I kissing on the steps of the gazebo, not that we hid that very well, but some gossips spread the news like wildfire through the town. Thankfully, Allegra has been so consumed with her focus on the store and, I'm pretty sure, the sexy Christmas tree farmer in town. If the news has reached her, she hasn't said anything to me.

Either way, it's been nice having the time to ourselves, even if they're just flirty text messages under the guise of working on posts about the store.

PAZ: When can I see you?

ME: I'm working right now.

I SNAP a quick selfie of myself in the corner of the shop, away from view of Allegra. It's an overhead shot to optimize

my best angle and capture an enticing view of my cleavage for Paz.

PAZ: Are you trying to kill me?

ME: Hardly. But I'm using my womanly wiles to convince you to come over after we close. That way, I can finally get that Sexy Santa footage from the bet you owe me.

PAZ: Careful. You owe me pictures of you with the ladies' line tools I'm selling. I never said what you were going to wear with them.

ME: Nothing, I hope.

PAZ: Okay, you are trying to kill me.

"WE HAVE a new buyer interested in the place," Allegra says, interrupting my teasing.

"Oh," I say, sending Paz the red lips emoji. "That's cool."

"Don't you want to know more about them?"

Not even a little.

"Sure." I slip my phone into my back pocket. It buzzes with Paz's response, and I wish the vibrations were somewhere else to help the pleasurable ache between my thighs. "Tell me about the buyer."

I'm frustrated from wanting nothing more than at this moment to go next door and have Paz fuck me on his desk until I forget my name. Instead, I'm here, having to feign excitement about a potential buyer for whom I don't even want to sell this place.

“He’s overseas,” Allegra explains. “But headed to the U.S. for the holidays. I guess he works with those really elaborate Christmas Markets they have in Germany.”

That’s actually cool. I’ve always wanted to go to one since Aunt Doris told me about them when I was a kid.

“I’m not totally sure,” she continues. “The line wasn’t very clear. But he’s interested in our store and willing to pay twenty percent about the best offer we’ve had. And in cash.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling my hopes of convincing Allegra not to sell start to deflate in my chest. “Nice.”

“Oh, nice?” Allegra looks at me in confusion. “Is that all you have to say?”

Now is not the time to convince her. She’s too excited, and if I bring it up, she might dig in her heels and never listen to my side.

“Sorry. I must be in shock.” I try to pretend to be more upbeat about it, but I can’t be sure if I’m at all convincing. “That’s just a lot to wrap my head around. Especially with this season still in progress and whatnot.”

And what not? Since when do I talk like this?

“Oh, sure. That makes sense.” Allegra points to the phone in my pocket. “You’re probably thinking about your next promo video, right?”

Not in the way she’s thinking I am.

“Something like that.” I force a smile.

“I totally understand. I get that way sometimes about my spreadsheets.” She glances around the empty shop. “Well, we don’t have to decide anything today. But it’s exciting.”

“Yeah. Exciting.”

“So, it’s almost eight. How about we close a little early?”

This changes my mood from hopeless to hopeful.

“You want to close early?”

Allegra must have some mysterious plans that she doesn’t want to tell me about because there is no way she’d close the shop early if she didn’t. But I’m not going to focus on that now. With Allegra gone for the evening, I can get some more alone time with Paz.

“Yeah, it’s dead. We both have things to do, right?”

“Yeah.” I think about all the things I’d like to do to Paz.
“Things to do.”

PAZ

If Aurora were anyone else, I wouldn’t be dressed in this damn suit looking like a half-naked Santa.

“No,” I hold my hands up to stop her. “I draw the line at you oiling up my bare chest.”

“Come on,” she pleads and tries to give me a sad puppy dog face.

“Not going to work.” I shake my head. “That look won’t work on me.”

She quickly shifts tactics from sweet to seductive in the blink of an eye.

“What if,” she says, unbuttoning the top few buttons of her shirt. “I let you oil my chest first.”

My dick is instantly back at attention. It hasn't really had any relief since the photo she sent me earlier. But with every button that pops open, I'm harder than the last.

"No." I try to sound determined, but there is a definite uncertainty in my resolve that she doesn't miss.

Aurora moves behind one of the taller racks to block her from view of the shop's front windows and slips off her top. It's suddenly much harder to breathe as my gaze drinks in the swell of her breasts. My hands itch at my sides to run over to her and help her remove her holly green bra.

"I, um," I sputter as she reaches to pick up the bottle of baby oil and drizzles some across her breasts.

"This could be you," she says, smoothing out the slippery liquid.

My resolve is like a taut string, ready to snap at any moment.

"Mmmm," she moans.

"There it is," I say as the string snaps. Crossing the distance between us in just a few steps, I yank off the Santa coat and toss it on the ground.

Aurora giggles as I lift her up into my arms, and she wraps her legs around my waist. There is no hiding what I feel for this woman. My raging cock is practically screaming all the filthy things I want to do to her from inside Santa's pants.

"What if someone walks by?" She asks between kisses.

I glance over my shoulder to see if we can be seen by anyone, and I see that there is a chance at this angle if they press their face against the glass. There is no way I'm going to take that chance. I'm the only one who gets to see Aurora like

this. Shifting us around, I take a step back, and my foot catches on something.

With my hands on Aurora's ass and nothing to catch us, we both fall to the ground like a tree falling in the woods. It wouldn't be so bad if it had just been us that fell, but a second after we hit the floor, so does something else. Aurora's wide eyes find mine before we both look to see what's happened.

"No," she yells, pushing off me. "No!"

It takes me a moment to realize what exactly happened. But then I see it. The cord that I'd warned Aurora about a few days ago is still tangled around my ankle, and the tiny row of wooden houses it's attached to is on the ground.

"Allegra is going to kill me," Aurora says, her voice tight with emotion.

I lean up and pull my foot free of the cord before examining the damage.

"I'm sure we can fix it," I offer.

She shakes her head. "It was a one-of-a-kind."

Aurora grabs her shirt off the floor and pulls it on. She's trying to hide the tears in her eyes, but there is no missing them.

"It's going to be okay." I rub my thumb over her cheek to wipe them away. "Whatever it takes. We will get this fixed."

I've never been more determined about anything in all my life than when she nods and wraps her arms around my neck. I hold onto her, pulling her tight against me. There is nothing I wouldn't do for this woman.

SIX

Aurora

You can do this. Just walk in and tell her the truth. Well, tell her most of the truth. Allegra doesn't need to know how the Christmas village got broken, just that it was.

I can see my sister smiling in the shop, and even from here, she looks like she's glowing. It's been so long since I've seen her so relaxed, and now, I have to go in there and ruin her good mood.

Here we are once again. I screw up, and Allegra must deal with the fallout. For once in my life, I don't want to be the one disappointing her. She already has so much on her plate, and here I am, messing things up again. Only this time, I've messed up a family heirloom that she loves.

"Are you going in, sweetheart?" Mrs. Hader asks, walking out of the shop and holding the door open for me.

"Yes," I say while I fight the urge to make a run for it. "It's time to face the music."

"Okay, dear," she says, clearly confused by my comment, but she moves on without another word.

Rip it off like a bandage. It's still going to hurt, but it won't be so bad in the long run. That is if she doesn't lunge

over this desk and strangle me with the very cord that was the cause of all this mess. The same cord Paz warned me to tape down but had the kindness last night, not to say I told you so.

“I didn’t think you were working until this afternoon?” Allegra says when I walk in.

“I’m not.” I shake my head, gathering the courage to say what I need to say. “But I have to tell you something.”

Allegra examines my face, and the glow in her expression from earlier dims slightly. “What is it? Are you okay?”

“No.” I shake my head and draw in a ragged breath. “It’s about the Christmas village.”

Allegra’s gaze flits from me to the table where the village sat yesterday.

“What about it?” she asks. “It looks fine.”

What?

I turn, expecting to find the table empty from when Paz and I moved it yesterday to the backroom, but instead, I find it sitting on the table once again, looking as good as new.

“What the—“ I start to say but walk over to it and lean down to examine the damage.

Without knowing what happened, you wouldn’t know that this thing was broken last night.

“What about the village?” Allegra asks behind me. “It looks fine.”

“It does look fine,” I echo after her, still confused.

It’s only when I see the snowflake painted on one of the doors that I realize what happened. It’s in the same shape as

the snowflake I gave Paz all those years ago. And I know that it wasn't painted on her before.

“What is going on? I'm so confused.”

I straighten and turn back to my sister. “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“Forget what? You didn't say anything.”

“Exactly,” I run past her towards the door. “I've got to go.”

Her response is drowned out by the bell being rung by the Santa on the corner, looking for donations.

I head right for Paz's shop and run in. He isn't working behind the counter, but the kid who caught us together before. There's no time for embarrassment. I need to see Paz.

“Where is he?” I ask.

The kid points up to the apartment above the hardware store where Paz lives. “But he said not to be disturbed. He was up all night working on something.”

“I don't think he'll mind.”

I'm through the door and up the steps to the apartment in a flash. I thump my fist against the door and wait.

“What is it, Caleb?” Paz yells.

I don't want to give away the surprise, so I don't tell him it's me. I thump my fist against the door again.

“What did I say about disturbing me, Caleb?” Paz asks as he swings open the door. His eyes widened in surprise. “You aren't Caleb.”

“Nope.” I shake my head and look him up and down.

Paz rubs the heels of his hands against his eyes to wipe the sleep away. It's almost as if he can't believe I'm standing here right now. He's dressed in gray sweatpants that hang low on his toned hips and no shirt. My lower belly flips with excitement. I've imagined this moment so many times, and it's finally here.

"This is definitely how the fantasy begins, but in my dreams, you are wearing less clothes," he says. His voice is gruff from just waking up.

"You were up all night fixing the Christmas village for Allegra."

He shakes his head. "I did that for you."

I step close and run my fingertips slowly down his washboard abs. "So, in this dream, how little am I actually wearing?"

Paz rakes his finger into my hair and tilts my head up to meet his lips. It's tender but full of anticipation for so much more to come.

"Nothing," he whispers against my lips.

"That sounds good to me."

PAZ

Aurora pushes me back from the doorway and kicks the door shut behind her.

Moments ago, I was so tired I was going to rip Caleb a new ass hole for waking me up, but with Aurora standing in front of me, tempting me with the very fantasy that's been playing on a loop in my mind, I'm wide awake.

“I like your place,” she says, glancing around. “It’s cozy.”

That’s a generous way to describe the makeshift apartment. I converted it from an office to a studio back when I bought the place. It was my way of saving on my expenses and putting everything into the shop. It’s only really been me since then, so the tight living space that consisted of a living room, kitchen, and bedroom all in one was all I needed.

The idea of buying a house wasn’t at the forefront of my mind until recently. Very recently.

Aurora takes off her jacket, letting it drop to the ground. I watch in stunned silence as she peels one piece of clothing off at a time until she’s standing in front of me in only her bra and panties.

“Close,” I smirk at her. “But you aren’t quite there yet.”

She smiles back at me, amused. “I can’t give you all of the goods at once.”

I look down at the tent, my raging cock as made in my sweatpants. “I’m not sure I can wait any longer.”

“That’s the idea.” Aurora takes my hand and leads me over to the bed.

I sit down at the foot of the bed and spread my knees to make room for her to stand right in front of me. My hands move slowly up either side of her thick thighs to her ample waist. I can’t wait until I’m balls deep in this beautiful woman. There is a small damp spot on her silk panties from her arousal.

Aurora leans over and whispers into my ear, “Lay back on the bed.”

My heart is thumping so hard in my chest you'd think I was running a marathon. Well, this is going to be a different kind of marathon. I've waited what feels like forever for this woman. I'd wait forever for her, but thankfully, she's not making me wait that long.

I scoot backward on the bed and lay down. Aurora climbs up onto the bed, moving like a cat up my body. She reaches out and runs her hand up my cock, squeezing it gently. My eyes flutter closed as the pleasure and relief flood through every cell in my body.

I'm so lost in her one touch that I don't realize she's tugged down my sweatpants and freed me from the cotton confines. Her warm tongue licks up and down my shaft, before she takes me in her mouth.

The breath in my lungs isn't the only thing sustaining me. Her tongue moves in rhythm with her hands, and I'm very nearly ready to come.

"Aurora," I breathe out. "I'm so close."

She doesn't pull off me, as I suspect. Instead, she takes me deeper, to the point that her chin bumps my sensitive balls. A vibration, deep in the back of her throat, begins, and I can't hold back the release of my seed into her mouth.

"Was that as good as the fantasy?" she asks, looking up and wiping the corner of her mouth.

"No." I shake my head. "It was fucking better."

I pull her up my body and flip her over on the bed, so I'm above her. She squeals at the quick movement and giggles up at me. There's no way I should already be getting hard again. But there is something about this woman that makes me insatiable for her. I will never have enough of her.

“I can’t believe you stayed up all night working for me.”
She cups my face in her soft hands.

“When are you going to get it?” I ask, shaking my head in her hands. “I’d do anything for you.”

“Anything?” she asks, pushing her legs apart and allowing me to position myself between her thighs.

“Anything.” I reach between us and pull her panties to the side before pushing deep inside the woman of my dreams.

SEVEN

Aurora

Since our arrival back in Central Coast, I've spoken only a few times to Van, the Christmas tree farmer, who's taken up residence in our alley by the store. He was gracious enough to agree to be in one of my video posts. It's kind of a cross-promotion thing for the shop and his Christmas trees. But even in those few interactions, it's clear to anyone with half a brain that he's crazy about my sister. And she feels the same about him.

Allegra likes to think that she keeps her cards close to her chest, and for most people, she's probably able to hide the things that she's feeling, but I'm her sister. I know when she's falling in love.

He's a good guy, so it was a no-brainer to agree to help him out when he wanted to surprise Allegra with a little time away from the shop.

The door to the alley in the backroom door opens, and Van pokes his head in.

"Is everything ready to go?" he asks in a conspiratorially low voice.

“Yep.” I hold up the bag I packed for Allegra. “Operation Make-Allegra-Calm-Down-and-Fall-in-Love-with-Christmas-So-She-Decides-Not-to-Sell-the-Store is a go.”

“Wow,” Van chuckles. “That is quite a name. And you’re the marketing guru?”

“Shut up. Do you want the goods or not?”

“Yes, please,” he says before giving me a dramatic bow. “Marketing Goddess.”

“That’s better, Tree King.” I curtsy back to him and hand over the bag. “Do you think this will work?”

The hopeful expression on his face is mixed with a hint of uncertainty. I want to tell him that he doesn’t have to worry about how she feels for him, but that’s not my place to spill her feelings. I’ll let her take that next step on her own if she hasn’t already.

“I sure hope so,” he finally says. “How long do you want me to keep her out of your hair?”

“As long as it takes.”

“Deal.”

We shake hands to seal the arrangement before he heads into the storeroom to sweep my sister off her feet for some Christmas romance.

It’s critical that Van works his Christmas dick magic to enchant my sister into wanting to stick around. She keeps talking about people interested in buying the shop. And we are only a few days away from Christmas. Time is quickly running out if I have any hope of convincing her not to sell.

I know that she has this whole other life away from the shop. One that she thrives in and loves. But I also wonder if

she's just sticking with it because it's all she knows. I want her to see that she has other options—if she wants to take them.

Almost as soon as Van exits the back room, Paz walks in with a look on his face like a deer in headlights.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as I lift onto my toes to kiss him.

“Your sister,” he says, pointing over his shoulder. “She’s kind of—intense.”

“She is.” I nod in understanding. “But she means well.”

“She does. And she cares about you.”

I tilt my head and study his expression for a moment. “What were you two talking about?”

Paz smiles like he has a secret. “The weather.”

He doesn't elaborate, even when I try to get him to tell me with the promise of sex later. His resolve is surprisingly strong for someone who can't keep his hands off me.

Caleb is in charge of his shop at the moment, so Paz is free to spend the next couple of hours with me.

We are like two teenagers, taking every stolen moment out of view of the customers to kiss and touch one another.

“I'm trying to upload this post,” I sigh as Paz stands behind me and kisses a trail up my neck to my earlobe.

His dick is pressed in the small of my back, and I want so badly to reach behind me and get him off right here in the shop. There's no one in the shop at the moment, so the act wouldn't be as risqué as it sounds, but that could be fun too. The way I'm feeling at this moment, nothing with Paz is off-limits with me.

I feel like a woman starved, and he is the delicious dessert inviting me to devour him. Don't get me wrong, he's done his share of devouring me with that gifted tongue of his.

"You're making it very hard to concentrate," I giggle as his teeth tug on my earlobe.

"Really?" he pretends to sound surprised, but he has to know what he does to me. "Does this help?"

His warm, strong hands slide up under my shirt to my satin-covered breasts. From the look of it, we don't appear to be doing anything but standing very close to one another, but if someone walked in here and saw us, I know Allegra would kill me and then Paz.

"Maybe we should take a break." I lean back against his chest with a sigh. "Close up for just a bit."

"You already know what I would say to that offer." He grips my hips and presses his dick against me. "You feel so fucking amazing."

"Imagine if you were inside me."

"I haven't stopped since I woke up."

Spinning around in his arms, I point over my shoulder towards the door. "Flip the sign and meet me in the back room."

"You got it."

In the backroom, I clear off some things on the table to make room for me to hop onto it, but not before stripping off my red leggings. Paz nearly takes the door dividing the shop off its hinges when he comes back to meet me.

He crosses the room and stops just short of the table. I revel in the feeling of his hands sliding up my bare thighs to

the fabric of my panties. His fingers press against me to grip the flimsy fabric and pull it down my legs.

I watch in amusement as he ever so gently folds up my panties and slips them into his pocket.

“What are you doing?” I ask. “I’m going to need those back.”

Paz shakes his head but flashes me the smirk that once drove me crazy. But now, it drives me crazy in other ways. A flash of heat ignites my body, and I’m ready for whatever he has in mind.

“Lean back.” His tone is no-nonsense, and I like it when he bosses me around in the bedroom.

I do as I’m told, resting back on my elbows. Paz lowers down to his knees and uses his magical tongue to give me an orgasm that has me screaming his name.

“Did you hear that?” Paz asks. “It sounds like knocking.”

I’m still soaring from the pleasure he’s just given me. “I don’t hear anything.”

The sound of someone knocking on the shop door starts again, only this time we both hear it.

“That,” he says, pointing over his shoulder in the direction of the door.

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell him. “If they want something bad enough, they will come back when we are open again.”

Paz pushes to his feet and starts to unbuckle his pants. I scoot off the table and turn around.

“Perfect,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

I glance back over my shoulder at him and wiggle my ass. His hand moves down the ample curve of my body and smacks it. The sting is brief, but I know there will be a red handprint on me for the rest of the day. I love knowing his mark is on me.

He grips my hip with one hand and guides himself slowly into my slick pussy. It takes a moment for my body to adjust to his size, but with some measured movements, he pushes in as deep as he can go.

His arm loops around me and pulls me back against him. I match my breathing with his, wanting to make the connection between us to be even closer. He pushes in and out, the rhythm picking up and pushing us both closer to release.

“Faster,” I breathe, turning my head to find his lips.

We move together, the pleasure building between us. I will never have enough of this man. I can only hope that he feels the same way about me. Our start together was rocky, but we’ve quickly become so in sync with each other. The connection we share is more than just physical. I’m falling in love with him.

I’m so close. My inner muscles flex around him, and we both share in our release. Clinging to one another like there is no one else in this world. And for me, that’s the truth.

EIGHT

Aurora

The bell to the shop rings, alerting us that we are no longer the only people in the shop.

“I thought you locked the door,” I say, trying to pull on my leggings.

“I did,” Paz says, buckling up his pants.

We can’t let whoever is here find us back here. The last thing I need is for Allegra to find out that I closed the shop and hooked up with Paz on company time.

“Be right there!” I call out.

We straighten ourselves as best we can and walk out onto the showroom to find a very angry Allegra.

“What’s going on here?” She asks, looking between the two of us.

“Well, you see—” I start to say and glance over at Paz. I’m hoping he’s coming up with some brilliant excuse, but it’s clear from his dumbfounded expression that he’s got nothing.

“Nope.” Allegra wrinkles her nose in disgust. “I don’t need you to fill in any of the blanks. I have eyes.”

I look down at my disheveled clothing and realize too late that my leggings are on backward. There's no way Allegra's attention to detail won't clock that fact.

"Well," she says, pointing to the door to the backroom. "While the two of you were busy, and you were supposed to be minding the store, our buyer came."

I glance over and meet Paz's knowing look. We had heard someone knocking on the door, but we couldn't have known who it would be. Paz walks over to me, squeezes my hand, and whispers into my ear that he will be next door when this is over. I'm grateful that he isn't going to witness the tongue-lashing that Allegra is about to give me. Even as an adult, it still makes me feel like a child when she does it.

"I didn't know he was coming today," I say when the front door of the shop closes behind Paz.

"I didn't either, but it didn't look professional, and he wasn't impressed when he came during business hours, and you two were fogging up the windows."

For a panicked moment, I wonder. "Wait, did he see us?"

"I don't know." Allegra throws up her arms in frustration. "It doesn't matter. You said you had things covered here, and now you might have jeopardized the sale and everything we've been working for."

The guilt I feel is fleeting, and hope quickly replaces it. "Well, maybe it isn't such a bad thing if he doesn't want to buy."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe," I pause to gather the courage to be honest with my sister. "Maybe we don't have to sell. To him or anyone."

“But—we—what—why?” Allegra shakes her head. “But this has been our plan. From the start. We make the store extra profitable, and we sell it so we can get on with our lives.”

“What if this could be our life?” I ask, gesturing around the shop.

“I can’t believe you’re saying this. I—I—wait. Is this about the guy?”

I’m not going to lie to her. It didn’t start out that way, but what I’m feeling right now is certainly a part of it now.

“Not entirely.”

Allegra shakes her head and stares at me like I’ve suddenly grown a second head or something.

“I can’t. I can’t with this right now,” she finally says and turns to walk out of the shop.

PAZ

The girls’ voices are carrying out of the store as I walk out. The last thing I wanted to do was leave Aurora to deal with everything on her own. If I could just have kept it in my pants for once, she wouldn’t be in this position.

But then again, selfishly, I don’t want to see them sell. I don’t want Allegra to lose the one reason she is sticking around in Central Coast. If it were up to me, I’d put a ring on her finger and never let her walk away from me. But in the end, she has to make that decision to want to stay.

I decide not to head back to my shop, not yet, at least. I want to see if Aurora is going to need some support after this blowout with her sister.

I can hear it the moment that Allegra is done and storms out of the shop. Aurora isn't far behind her, but she has a look in her eyes that tells me that she isn't looking for comfort but looking for a punching bag.

"What happened?" I ask.

"You happened," she snaps. "I was doing everything right before you came along and changed everything."

"The tone you're using sounds like what you're saying is a bad thing, and we both know that isn't true."

"Don't talk to me like I'm a little kid."

"Aurora." I sigh. "I know you are upset, but picking a fight with me won't make you feel better."

"You sure about that?"

I hold up my hands in defeat. "Clearly, I'm not helping the situation."

"I don't need saving," she says, trying to push past me.

My arm shoots out to stop her long enough for me to say, "Do what you need to do to figure out what you are feeling. But remember that I'm not going anywhere. No matter how hard you try to push me away. I'd do anything for her."

The resolve in her expression softens slightly, but she doesn't say another word. I pull my arm out of her way and let her walk off down the street. I'm going to need some help if I'm going to get my Aurora back. And I know just who to talk to.

NINE

Aurora

I'm nothing short of a screw-up. I told myself that this time would be different. That this time, I wouldn't fail because I couldn't let Allegra down. She's always doing things to help others, and she asked me to do one thing. What is wrong with me that I can't do anything right?

Walking around town is meant to help me relax and think of a way to fix things with Allegra. But that last conversation with Paz is still playing on a loop in my mind. He deserves someone so much better than me. Someone who won't let him down the way I let everyone in my family down.

Before I know it, I'm right back where I started. The unfortunate side effect of living in a small town is not a lot of places to go.

Paz is standing near the Christmas tree lot in the alleyway next to the shop as I approach. I search his expression for any sign of anger with me, but I only find concern. There is no way that I did anything in this lifetime to deserve such a man.

"Are you okay?" He asks, pushing off the wall and walking over to me.

"I'll get there."

He pushes a loose strand of hair that the wind has blown out of my ponytail behind my ear. “I know you will.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Paz glances over my shoulder and nods at someone. I turn but only see Van messing around with the plumage of one of his trees.

“What are you—” I start to ask, but he cuts me off with a quick kiss.

“I have something you need to see.” He takes my hand and pulls me into the alley towards the trailer in the back.

“Where are we going?”

Paz opens the camper door and pushes me gently in, but I stop when I see Allegra sitting on a sofa bench.

“Oh,” Allegra says, a look of disappointment crossing her face. “It’s you.”

I’m not ready for this. And I don’t know why Paz and Allegra would set this up only to have her act like she wasn’t just sitting in here waiting for me.

I spin around, ready to make a quick exit, when I see Van next to Paz. They both flash a conspiratorial grin and slam the door shut in my face. The lock clicks into place, and I know that I’m not getting out of here. But a girl can still try.

“Hey!” I bang on the door. “Open the door!”

“Yeah. Let us out.” Allegra calls from behind me.

“No,” Van yells through the door.

“Come on,” I plead.

“It’s for your own good,” Paz says.

“Seriously?” Allegra asks.

“Yes. Seriously.” Van answers her. “You ladies talk or just sit there. But we’re not opening this door until you two finally get on the same page.”

“But—” I start to say, but Paz cuts me off.

“It’s Christmas, for fucks sake.”

This is unbelievable. I’m being held hostage with my sister in her boyfriend’s camper while my boyfriend is on the other side of the door, acting like I’m the unreasonable one here.

“And your sisters,” Van continues. “Sisters should be getting along. Or at least speaking to each other at Christmas.”

“Says the guy who’s an only child,” Allegra snaps back.

The corner of my mouth ticks up in amusement. “Right? Like either of them get it.”

Allegra and I stare at one another, realizing that our attempts at freedom really are going to be contingent on us talking things out.

“I guess we should talk.” I sigh. “Since we’re both here.”

“I guess.” Allegra motions for me to sit. So I do. “So. Talk.”

“I don’t want to sell the store. And I think deep down you don’t want to either.”

That’s right, rip that bandage right off.

“But—” Allegra starts to protest, but I continue.

“Let’s start with why I don’t want to sell. You’ve always known what you wanted in your life. I’ve never had that.” I

point to myself. “I’ve been drifting, and for the first time since graduating, I’ve found something I’m good at.”

Allegra nods. “You are good at what you do. You’re so creative. So imaginative. I can see this place has been good for you. But this wasn’t in my plan.” She points between the two of us. “This wasn’t our plan. The one we made together from the start.”

I slump in my seat. She has many valid points. But I decide to try and throw one last Hail Mary.

“You know as well as anyone that plans change. And you have to adapt to them. Isn’t that what you’re always saying?”

“Yeah, but I have a career. I have a job I love and a boss who needs me.”

I brush the loose hair from my ponytail and sigh. “Does your boss need you, or have you just gotten comfortable?”

Allegra stops and thinks for a moment. And a flicker of hope lights in my chest.

“What about Van?”

She shakes her head. “I can’t plan my whole life around a guy I just met. A man whose identity I didn’t even really know until half an hour ago.”

Wait what?

“What is he, Bruce Wayne or something?” I smirk. “Does he have a secret bat cave and drive around the city fighting crime?”

“I mean, kind of.” She shrugs. “Not the bat cave or crime-fighting part. Just the billionaire part.”

“Seriously? How much money are we talking about?” I ask, knowing full well that Allegra is going to chastise me for saying it.

“Aurora!”

There it is.

“Hey Van?” I turn and yell through the door. “You’re a billionaire, and you live in a camper? What happened? Is your Montecito mansion being fumigated or something?”

“I don’t live in a camper. Not all the time. But this isn’t about me.”

“Yeah. Focus,” Paz says, and I can imagine him pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration with my lack of staying on point here. Then he mutters just loud enough that I can hear him. “For fuck’s sake.”

I smile. For some reason, annoying him like this is very amusing to me. Look out for a lifetime of this, buddy.

Turning back to Allegra, I whisper. “Does he have a place in Montecito?”

“Yeah, but he’s right. This isn’t about him or where he lives. Or even the fact that I’m crazy about him. I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“You were right. I am comfortable with my job,” Allegra explains. “I’m freaking awesome at it. But what if we do this and we fail? Brick and mortars are a dime a dozen.”

I try to give her my most reassuring smile. “Not our place. Our place is special.”

“What?” she scoffs. “Because it’s Christmas all year round?”

“That and it has us. Both of us. And if we work together, nothing can stop us.”

Allegra looks between me and then the door and then back again. “Are you sure this isn’t just about the guy? Because I’ll be pissed if I give up my career only to find out—”

“I’m not going to bail on you. And I’m not going to bail on Paz. I know we just met, but—I’m crazy about him.”

“You’re in love?” Allegra looks hopeful.

I glance over at the door and nod.

“How did we end up here?” She sighs. “Two sisters who couldn’t be more different, but we’ve found our place, and our hearts have found their matches.”

“Maybe Aunt Doris knew something we didn’t,” I say. “Maybe this was her plan all along.”

“So you’re saying Aunt Doris not only gave us her store but our men?”

“She’s the ultimate matchmaker.” I point upwards. “We see you, Aunt Doris.”

“The meddling—” Allegra shakes her head. “I guess there’s just one thing left to do. Well, two.”

“What’s that?”

“We tell the buyers to go suck it, and then we tell our men they’d better get used to having us around.”

Allegra pulls me into her arms for a hug. It’s nice to know that I’m not alone in this adventure of life. We’ve always been side by side, sisters for life. But somehow, the bond we share now feels even stronger. It’s the best Christmas gift my sister could have given me.

“Okay,” I say, pulling myself free and pounding on the door. “Open the door, Tree King. We’re friends again.”

“Yeah,” Allegra calls out. “Come get your sunshine!”

Is she talking to Paz?

The door opens, and Van steps aside to let me out. Then he walks into the camper and shuts the door behind him.

“Sunshine?” I ask

Paz shakes his head. “Don’t ask.”

I won’t now, but I definitely will later. Instead, I dive into Paz’s arms and close my eyes.

“Thank you,” I say against his chest. “How do you always know how to fix the broken things in my life?”

He gives me the smirk that drives me wild. “I guess it comes easy when you’re with the perfect person for you.”

“You think I’m perfect.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.” He laughs.

I push up on my toes to kiss him. “You are the perfect person for me too.”

Paz grows serious, and for the briefest moment, there is a flicker of doubt in what he is hearing me tell him. So, I reach into his jacket pocket and pull out the keyring with the snowflake key chain.

“It’s destiny for us.” I rest it in the palm of his hand and lay mine over it. “The universe or just the magic of Christmas pushed us together. And I’m never letting you go.”

“I love you,” I say so quietly that I almost miss it.

“I love you too.”

EPILOGUE

Christmas Eve

Aurora

“Can I take off the blindfold?” I ask.

I’m tempted to make some kind of joke about how we should add this blindfold to the bedroom, but with my luck, he’d pull it off, and I’d find us surrounded by most of the town.

“I fully intend on using it later with you,” Paz says, and without looking, I know we must be all alone.

My foot catches on something hard, and I nearly topple over, but Paz is quick and catch me.

“Careful,” he says. “Is this going to be a thing with you?”

“That’s entirely possible.” I chuckle. “Is that a deal breaker with you?”

“Nothing about you is a deal breaker.”

I suddenly feel the scruff of his beard on my cheek as he kisses me.

I want more, but since we are outside, I don’t think getting caught having sex on the roof only a few days after getting caught in the shop would be a good idea.

“Can I take this off?” I ask.

“Not yet.” He lets go of my hand. “Don’t move.”

“There’s no chance of that,” I say. I’ve already almost fallen once. I don’t want to do it again.

With my eyes covered, my other senses kick into overdrive. I can still hear the sounds of the people in town, but somehow, they sound far away. Are we on the roof? Paz did lead me up some stairs, but I’ve never been up here before. I didn’t even know that we could get up here.

Suddenly, there’s a sound of a cord being pulled quickly, followed by the rumble of a motor. I can’t imagine what he has planned, but I can’t wait to find out. Paz was gone all morning and told me it was because he had to travel two towns over to get my Christmas present.

The anticipation of what it could be is almost killing me. Something cold hits my cheek and then another on my arm.

“Is it raining?” I ask, reaching out for Paz.

He chuckles. “No.”

“Then what is it?” I ask as he helps me peel the mask back off my face. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. The night sky is inky black, and the lights from the surrounding businesses are burning bright.

We are on the roof, but I’m still not sure what this has to do with my Christmas present.

“Look up,” Paz instructs me.

I do, and that’s when I see them. The fluffy white flecks of snow fall down over both of us. My mind knows that it’s artificial. We are in a part of California where there isn’t snow,

but my heart still soars at the sight of it. This is the best present he could have given me.

“I love it,” I say, reaching out and trying to catch the flakes. “How did you do this?”

“I have a friend who works in Hollywood, and he helped me find a place to rent a snow machine.”

“This is incredible. I love it almost as much as I love you.”

He beams with pride and pulls me into his arms.

“I just wish I could give you your gift up here,” I say, and I show him the strap of my new bra.

Paz takes a step to the left to show me a small tent, all set up with what looks like a cozy bed situation inside.

“You really thought of everything.” I laugh.

“I tried.”

“Old me would want to capture this moment to share with my followers, but I think I want this only between us.”

“Well,” Paz wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. “We could still use the camera.”

“Let’s do this.”

ABOUT KATE TILNEY

Kate Tilney is the author of more than 100 steamy romances. A Midwest girl whose heart is in the mountains, her stories star curvy heroines finding true love and a happily ever after, usually with a mountain man or firefighter.

When she isn't looking up pictures of bearded men in flannel shirts (all for research, of course), Kate can be found making TikToks or curling up with one of her cats in front of a fake fireplace, pretending she's in a cabin.

[Join Kate Tilney's Mountain Man \(Etc\) Fan Club](#), her private reader group and follow her on [TikTok](#) for more fun content.



MORE BY KATE TILNEY

[Kings of the Mountain](#)

[Instalove Weekend](#)

[Ridiculously Royal](#)

[Sunset Canyon Fire & Rescue: The Veterans](#)

[Sunset Canyon Fire & Rescue: The Rookies](#)

[Camp Mountain Man](#)

[Shipwrecked Beach Babes](#)

[Jade Mountain Search & Rescue](#)

[Lancaster Ranch Cowboys](#)

[Love at the Fall Festival](#)

[The Firefighters Calendar](#)

[Mountain Man Animal Rescue Volume 1](#)

[Mountain Man Animal Rescue Volume 2](#)

[Prince Family Mountain Men](#)

[Curvy Girl and the Billionaire](#)

[Holidays with a Mountain Man](#)

[Mountain Man Fan Club](#)

The Curvy Girls' Bachelor Auction

Curvy Girls' Bucket List

A Short, Sweet, and Steamy Christmas

Firth Mountain Smokejumpers

ABOUT LANA DASH

Lana Dash writes short and steamy romances filled with heart, humor, and happily ever afters that will leave you swiping for more. From blue-collar bad boys to rugged mountain men, you will find a book boyfriend to swoon over in the span of your hour-long lunch break.



MORE BY LANA DASH

Sincerely Yours

Nice Girls' Naughty Book Club

Curvy Girls' Guide

Bad Bridesmaids

Wild Knight's Ridge Mountain Men

Knight's Ridge Fire Department

Alaskan Mountain Bush Pilots

Mountain Men Matchmaker

The Inexperienced Bachelor