

THE HOLIDAY SEASON



6 NEW HOLIDAY STORIES FROM YOUR FAVORITE BESTSELLING AUTHORS

VI KEELAND & PENELOPE WARD

JEWEL E. ANN ● SARINA BOWEN

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PIPPA GRANT

THE HOLIDAY SEASON



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THE HOLIDATE SEASON

[Get Sleighed by Vi Keeland & Penelope Ward](#)

When my ex dumped me right before Christmas, I was left with a luxury, all-expense paid trip for two to Cabo—private jet and all. Somehow, my best friend roped me into giving away the other half of the trip as a contest prize on her podcast. Kelly won the “World’s Worst Dump Story.” She and I didn’t meet until we arrived at the airport, which was when I discovered *she* was actually a *he*. Apparently we’d forgotten to include *open to women only* in the rules. My trip to Cabo started as a disaster, but as time went on Kelly and I grew close. Until someone unexpectedly showed up...

[Christmas in Birdville by Jewel E. Ann](#)

Henry Bechtel’s mom is coming home for Christmas. Only, he lost the family house in a game of poker. Days before his mom’s arrival, he meets the new owner and seizes the opportunity to coerce her into letting him move back “home” for the holidays. What he doesn’t know is that she has questionable motives, too.

[The Lucky One by Sarina Bowen](#)

Finnish hockey player Ivo Halla is new in town. He can’t speak the language, he can’t understand the coach. Life is hell until he walks into an Italian cafe (thank God “pizza” is the same in Finnish and English) and falls for the waitress. He’d better learn the language soon, or she won’t agree to date him...

First Holiday by Katee Robert

After a year of turmoil, Hades and Persephone prepare for their first holiday together.

A Cloverleigh Farms Christmas by Melanie Harlow

Christmas Eve at Cloverleigh Farms is even more exciting this year, thanks to a blizzard, a power outage, and a baby that wants to make a dramatic entrance. Catch up with the beloved Sawyer family and find out what happens when Meg and Noah's bundle of joy gives the family a wonderful—and sudden—reason to celebrate!

Have Yourself a Grumpy Little Christmas by Pippa Grant

Trevor Stafford hates Christmas. But his best friend's little sister, whom he stupidly agreed to take in as a temporary roommate when she got a new nannying gig down the street from him, loves it.

She's turning his house into a freaking winter wonderland of bad memories.

But the bigger problem?

He's had a crush on her for years, and there's no amount of annoying holiday cheer that can cure him of his attraction. If anything, watching her in her natural element is making it worse.

What's a grump to do when the last thing he ever wanted is suddenly the only thing he needs?



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GET SLEIGHED



VI KEELAND & PENELOPE WARD



CHAPTER 1

SARAH

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

My best friend, Jane, had been calling every day since my breakup, trying to get me to go out. But I just wasn't ready yet.

“Anything that doesn't involve men,” I said. “I'm pretty sure I've developed an allergy.”

“This is most definitely a man-free activity. Can you be at the recording studio at nine?”

“Where are we going?”

“Nowhere. My guest for tomorrow just canceled. I need you to fill in.”

Jane was the host of a hugely successful podcast called *Fun with Dick and Jane*. There wasn't actually a cohost named Dick. The title referred to the subject matter of the show—dating *dicks*. I'd been a guest a few times before.

“I don't know how much fun I'll be. What's the topic?”

“Well, my guest was supposed to be Cheri Lord, the woman who just wrapped that reality TV show where your exes get to pick who you should date. Did you see it?”

“No, I didn't, but I saw it advertised.”

“You have to watch it. It was a shit show. She cheated on most of her exes, so they all picked serial cheaters and

assholes. Anyway, tomorrow's show was billed as 'The Ex Factor – learning from your mistakes.' So you'll be perfect."

I sighed. "Will you come with me to Cabo the day after Christmas if I do it?"

"You know I wish I could. I've never been on a private plane before. But the show has me doing appearances in New York since I'm going to my parents' for Christmas. Trust me, I would much rather be on your fancy vacation than doing that. Every time they make me do these dumb things, at least one creepy guy shows up and just stares at me from the back of the room as I talk. And there's always an old biddy who raises her hand like she wants to ask a question, but then lectures me on improving my language or acting more like a lady on the show. Did you ask Emily if she can go?"

"She's going to Virginia to meet the parents of that new guy she's dating."

I really didn't want to go to Mexico alone, but I also wasn't giving up the amazing trip my ex had bought me for my thirtieth birthday last month—an all-expense-paid vacation for two to Cabo San Lucas, on a private jet with a stay at a five-star hotel that I could never afford, even if I flew coach. When Trent had dumped me two weeks ago, telling me he'd fallen for his *nineteen-year-old* assistant, he'd suggested I take a friend. I was pretty certain the idiot hadn't paid for the trip anyway, probably just put it on his daddy's black card, like everything else in his spoiled life. *Whatever. I'm not bitter or anything...*

"So will you be tomorrow's guest? *Pleeeeeease.*"

I really didn't feel like it, but Jane was always there for me. "Sure, no problem."

"Awesome. I'll bring Bloody Marys for breakfast."



The next morning, I arrived at the recording studio a few minutes before nine. Jane kissed my cheek and handed me a cocktail with celery, bacon, and olives sticking out. “Think you can come up with five signs that the new guy you just met is destined to be your ex?” she asked.

I snort laughed. “If I could, I probably wouldn’t still be single.”

Jane waved me off. “Just make up something that sounds clinical. You’re good at sounding smart.”

I polished off the last of my Bloody Mary during the ten-second countdown before we were live. Jane opened the show with her usual taglines, and then did a plug for one of her sponsors before introducing me.

“Ladies, I have a treat for you today! The one and only Sarah McGraw is here to discuss all our screwed-up relationships. If you’re a new listener and haven’t had the pleasure of meeting Sarah yet, let me give you the lowdown. Sarah is a graduate of Brown University—summa cum laude, because she’s no slouch. She holds a PhD in clinical psychology and is a practicing marriage counselor right here in sunny Los Angeles. More importantly, she’s been my best friend since we were four years old and was the *only person* to warn me not to date Tommy Finnegan in high school, even though I did it anyway, and he dumped me *a half hour* after he took my virginity. So please give a warm *Fun with Dick and Jane* welcome to Sarah as she helps us see the warning flags about the men we meet *before* we open up our hearts *and wallets* to them!”

I smiled and spoke into the microphone. “Wow, that’s some introduction. Thank you. Tommy Finnegan, huh? That’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time.”

Jane laughed. “He was so damn good looking. Tommy, if you’re out there listening—or if any of our listeners know a Tommy Finnegan who graduated from Carnegie High in New York in 2010—I’d love to see a photo of him now.”

I shook my head. “Oh my God. People, please do *not* send her a photo, especially if he’s still good looking. She’s a sucker

for guys with dimples.”

Jane sighed. “That I am, Sarah. That I am. But as long as we’re on the topic, I think Tommy is as good a place as any to start today. You warned me not to go out with him, so I’m guessing you saw a red flag before I did.”

“Uh...yeah. He’d dated half the school. His nickname was *Fuck Me Finnegan*. And he took you to see a *porno* on your first date.”

“Hey, don’t knock it. I learned a lot of useful tricks from that movie.”

I laughed. I’d forgotten what a good time Jane and I had on the air. It was pretty much a comedy show for the next forty-five minutes as we talked about Jane’s past relationships and the red flags she should have seen, but didn’t. After, she opened up the call-in line for questions, and the fun continued.

“Hi, Jane. Hi, Sarah. My name is Megan.”

“Hi, Meg!” we said in unison.

“Jane, I just wanted to call in and tell you that Tommy Finnegan breaking up with you a half hour after sex is not the worst breakup. *I have the worst story*. My ex, Jason, dumped me while he was still *inside me*.”

My eyes widened. “Oh my.”

“That’s not the worst part,” the caller said. “He also told me he had cancer. He said he didn’t know how much time he had left and wanted to be free.”

I held my hand over my heart. “Holy crap. He really had cancer?”

“No! The bastard freaking lied.”

“Jesus,” Jane gasped. “That might be the worst breakup story I’ve ever heard.”

“Sadly, I’m still struggling to get over him. This just happened a month ago. So I wanted to ask Sarah if she has any advice on getting over a guy who doesn’t deserve you.”

Jane looked at me and smirked. “You go solo to Cabo and sleep with the hottest guy you find?”

I chuckled. “Not happening.”

The next few calls were women sharing their horrible breakup stories. One had been dumped at her father’s wake, and another said she went to work on a Tuesday morning and her boyfriend moved his stuff out of her house and into the next-door neighbor’s. Apparently he’d been sleeping with her for a while. Holy crap, by the time we took a sponsor break, there were more women waiting on hold to share their stories than time left on Jane’s show.

She took off her headphones for the short break. “I have a crazy idea...”

“Oh no—I’m not going to get locked out of a window on the thirty-second floor trying to spy on a guy you went on one date with again, am I?”

“No, this is better. Why don’t we run a contest on my show: *worst dump story ever*. The winner gets to go to Cabo with you!”

I shook my head. “I don’t know...sharing a hotel with a stranger?”

“We go out with men we meet on dating apps. Sharing the penthouse suite of a luxury hotel with a woman is a lot less scary. Plus, you said it had two bedrooms, right? So it’s not like you’d be sharing a mattress. I bet I could get one of my sponsors to cover the cost of the winner’s trip. It would be a win-win. You’d have a single woman to travel with and a big fat check from one of my sponsors!”

“I don’t think so...”

“Don’t say no until I hit up my sponsors and see what they’re willing to pay, okay? Let’s see what we’re talking about...”



In a matter of just a few minutes, Jane ended up getting more sponsorship for the contest than she knew what to do with. And now I was officially roped into this.

The podcast was also flooded with so many emails that the staff couldn't keep up with sifting through them. The contest was dubbed "Christmas in Cabo," since the winner and I would be leaving the morning after Christmas.

A week had passed, and today was the big day where we were going to announce the winner live on the air after reading the top three selections. The show had posted ten finalists previously on their website so that listeners could vote for the top three online.

I sat in my seat across from Jane in the studio, anxiously awaiting the results. Not like I was going to meet the winner today, but I was still nervous.

"Okay, folks..." Jane announced. "It's the moment you've all been waiting for. After hundreds of astoundingly horrible—but oh so good—dump stories were submitted, we were able to narrow it down to three. Are you ready, Sarah?"

I pretended to be more excited than I was. "I'm super stoked, yeah. I can't wait to see which one the listeners chose. I have to say, they all have my own dump story beat."

"Okay, without further ado, let's get to it. The second runner-up submission as chosen by our listeners is—drumroll, please!" The sound tech played a rolling drum sound effect as Jane said, "Kate from Irvine! Kate wrote in: 'You could say I was indirectly dumped. My friend was on Tinder and matched with my boyfriend at the time. Not only was he on the dating app, actively cheating on me, but he'd used a photo of the two of us as his profile picture and cut most of me out of it.'"

I cringed and spoke into the mic. "Kate, you are so much better off without him."

Jane continued, "Kate, while you were not the winning submission, we *will* be sending you a consolation package that will include a *Fun with Dick and Jane* T-shirt and matching beer koozie."

“Oooh, I want a beer koozie!” I joked.

“We’ll hook you up, too, Sarah.” Jane laughed. “Okay, now to our next finalist. The dump story our listeners chose as the first runner-up was submitted by Leela from Riverside, who wrote: ‘My father unexpectedly passed away last year. After the burial, my boyfriend texted me that my dad’s death had taught him that life was short. He no longer felt it would be fair to string me along when he wasn’t in love with me. So not only did I lose my dad, I also lost my boyfriend in the same week. Oh, and my dad had left my ex an expensive watch in his will, thinking he would be my husband sometime soon, and the idiot demanded we actually give it to him.’”

“Oh, Leela. What a jerk,” I said into the mic.

“Leela, while you totally deserve a trip to Cabo after dealing with that insensitive loser, again, you are our first runner-up. But the good news is, our producers will be sending you a *Fun with Dick and Jane* self-care package that includes wine, chocolate, and the best in beauty care, thanks to our sponsors. Thank *you* so much for participating, Leela!”

I spoke into the mic. “Enjoy, Leela!”

“And now for the moment we’ve all been waiting for.” Jane paused. “The winner of the 2022 Christmas in Cabo contest. It was a tough one. But this person’s dump story seemed to resonate with our listeners the most. Kelly from Burbank. Kelly wrote in with a story that made our blood boil. Kelly writes: ‘A few years ago I was dating someone I also worked with, who gave me the impression that they were trustworthy. I told this person about a concept for a unique product I’d come up with. I shouldn’t have. Because, not soon after, I was suddenly dumped, and the company we both worked for introduced plans for a new product. It was exactly what I’d shared with the snake who dumped me, down to every last detail. The company went on to make millions off this device, and I got no credit for it, because I’d never patented anything. My ex, however, was promoted.’” Jane paused. “So, Kelly...”

The sound tech introduced some celebratory music.

“Our hearts break for the betrayal you endured. We believe you deserve to take your mind off things for a while. You, my friend, have won the trip to Cabo San Lucas with my girl, Sarah! A limo will pick you up and take you to the airport where you and Sarah will fly via private jet to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, the morning after Christmas. Should you decide for any reason not to accept this grand prize, the trip will go to our first runner-up, Leela from Riverside. Our producers have all of your information and will contact you via the email you provided to make the arrangements. A huge congratulations, Kelly! You deserve it after all that!”

“Yay, Kelly!” I clapped, but inside I was beginning to wonder what the hell I’d gotten myself into.



I ended up skipping Christmas with my family this year. With the Cabo trip coming up, it would’ve been too much to fly to New York and then get back here the next day to catch my plane. And admittedly, there was another reason I was avoiding it: I would’ve had to endure their questions about my current dating life, and worse, rehash the story of what happened with my ex to those who had no idea we’d even broken up.

The morning after Christmas, I couldn’t have been more ambivalent about this whole vacation-with-a-stranger thing. My plan was to enjoy this time alone and not worry about whether this Kelly chick and I got along. We didn’t even have to see each other, I suppose. It *was* nice that half of the trip wouldn’t be going to waste. But vacationing with a stranger is awkward—plain and simple. I didn’t need us to be Thelma and Louise. I just needed to be able to tolerate her in the event she chose to hang out with me and not do her own thing.

The plan was for Kelly to meet me at the airport after the limo dropped her off. They’d let me know the exact spot where they’d be bringing her so I could wait there. I had no idea what to expect; I didn’t even know this chick’s age. For

all I knew, she could have been old enough to be my grandmother or eighteen.

Finally, in the distance, I could see the black limo approaching. Butterflies swarmed in my belly. Okay, maybe I wasn't as ambivalent as I'd thought. It felt like I was The Bachelor, waiting for the limo to pull up and not knowing what the woman exiting the vehicle was going to be like.

When the limo pulled up, no one came around to open the back door. Instead, the door swung open and out came one of the tallest men I'd ever seen. He wore a Hawaiian shirt, a jumbo straw hat, and had what looked like Mardi Gras beads around his neck.

What the hell?

"Please tell me you're Sarah." He smiled.

I had to admit, under that gargantuan hat, he had a pretty gorgeous face and piercing blue eyes.

I cleared my throat. "I am."

Before I could get another word out, I went flying into the air. He'd lifted me up off my feet and spun me around so fast I nearly vomited.

"Dude, this is gonna be awesome," he said as he planted me back on my feet.

Dude? "What? Excuse me. Who are you, and where the hell is Kelly?"

"You're looking at him." He held his hand out. "Kelly Fugger. Great to meet you, Sarah."

"Kelly Fucker?"

"Fugger. F-U-G-G-E-R."

Well, isn't this a bitch... I'm fugged.



CHAPTER 2

SARAH

“How can you be Kelly? You’re supposed to be a woman...”

The guy pulled out the waistband of his shorts and peeked inside. “Sorry. Still not a woman. Though I have to admit, it’s been a while since I had a reason to check.” He shrugged. “I’ve had a bit of a dry spell since the vibrator thief and I split up.”

I blinked a few times. “Vibrator thief?”

He nodded. “That’s how I won the contest. My ex, Kelly ___”

I interrupted him. “Wait, your name is Kelly *and* your ex’s name is Kelly?”

“I know what you’re thinking, but she didn’t steal my name, too. She was born a month before me.”

The lines that had been etched into my forehead since he stepped out of the car deepened. “I’m so confused...”

He nodded. “I felt the same way when I saw Dr. Phil unveiled at our annual new-product presentation.”

“Dr. Phil?”

“That’s what I’d named the vibrator I’d invented. You know, before Dr. Phil started on *Oprah*, he used to host self-help seminars, and now he’s a relationship guru.” Kelly shrugged. “Isn’t that what a vibrator is? Self-help when you’re

in a bad relationship? Anyway, the company I work for renamed it Butterfly Kisses or some shit like that, so it's probably why you never heard of Dr. Phil the vibrator."

I rubbed my temples. "Listen, Kelly, I'm not sure where the mix-up occurred, but the contest winner was supposed to be a woman. It wasn't open to men."

He wagged a finger at me. "That's what I initially assumed, but I checked the rules on the website before I entered, and it didn't mention that you had to be a woman."

The stretch limo started to pull away. I raised my hand and yelled, "*Wait!*" But the damn thing kept going.

I shook my head. "Well, I'm sorry the podcast must've forgotten to put that in the rules, but I can't share a hotel room with a man."

"Still haven't forgiven the gender for what your ex did, so you don't want to be around a man, huh?"

"What? *No!* I mean, yes, I'm still angry at my ex, but no, that's not the reason I don't want to share a room with a man."

"So what's the problem?"

"I'm just not comfortable doing that."

"Is it because you're attracted to me?" He pointed to his eyes and fluttered his long, dark lashes. "Some people call these bedroom eyes."

Oh my God. "Listen, Kelly. I'm really sorry for the mix-up. But I'm not going on this trip with you. I was already hesitant about sharing space with a woman. There's just no way I can go with you."

He nodded. "I understand."

"You do?"

Kelly rubbed his bottom lip with his thumb. "What if I get my own room? And just catch a ride with you on the PJ and share the meal and alcohol plan that comes with the hotel stay?"

I shook my head. "I don't know..."

We were still standing out in front of the private-jet terminal. A guy in a uniform walked over. “Ms. McGraw?”

I turned. “Yes?”

“Your flight is ready to board.”

“Okay. Can you just...give me one moment, please?”

“Sure. But that’s all we have. The air traffic controller is backed up, and if we don’t take off in the next fifteen minutes, we’re going to lose our spot.”

I nodded. “I’ll just be a minute.”

Kelly lifted a brow. “So what do you say? Am I in?”

I didn’t want to go on a trip with this guy, but I felt badly about the mix-up. Plus, how could I say no when he was willing to get a separate room? I took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay, but you need to find your own place to stay.”

“Sweet!” An adorable, dimpled smile slid across his face. Kelly grabbed his luggage and motioned to the door with a wide swing of his hand. “Shall we?”

I sighed. “I guess so.”

A few minutes later, we were walking side by side on the tarmac, making our way to the plane. “For a second there, I was thinking this wasn’t going to happen,” he said. “But once I heard your last name, I knew it was fate.”

I scrunched up my nose. “My last name?”

“McGraw.” He winked. “That’s Dr. Phil’s last name.”



Wow. He cleaned up really nice.

If Kelly hadn’t waved and stood up from the table where he was already seated when I walked into the restaurant, I might not have recognized him. He’d shaved the beard he’d been sporting this morning and was now dressed in a jacket and tie. The hotel’s restaurants all had a strict dinner dress

code. The maître d' walked me over. Kelly stepped around to the chair across from his and pulled it out.

“Thank you.” I smiled as I sat. “I almost didn't recognize you without the beard, straw hat, and mismatched Hawaiian clothing. You went from tourist to chic.”

He took the seat across from me. “And I almost didn't recognize you smiling.”

I bit my lip, embarrassed. “I'm sorry about the way that I acted earlier. I was just caught really off guard.”

Kelly laid the napkin over his lap. “It's okay. I get it. I hope you don't mind me saying you look prettier with a smile.”

“Thank you.”

He looked around. “This place is fancy. How's your room?”

“It's really nice. How about yours? Were you able to get a room at the place next door the front desk recommended?” Unfortunately, the hotel where I was staying was booked solid.

“No, they were sold out. Most places were. I'm a few blocks over at a motel. They only had a room available for five of the six nights, but I'll find someplace to stay the last night.”

I'd thought a lot about how I'd made Kelly go somewhere else, as I lay poolside being served piña coladas this afternoon. While I didn't think I should've had to share a room with him, it was wrong of me to not offer to cover the cost. I'd made a boatload off the contest from Jane's sponsors.

“I'd like to pay the cost of your hotel room. You won a contest fair and square, so you shouldn't have to pay for any of the trip amenities that were promised to you.”

Kelly waved me off. “It's okay. It's not that expensive, which is fair considering the rats.”

My eyes widened.

Kelly grinned. “I'm joking.”

I chuckled. “Thank God. It’s hard to tell when you’re kidding. Like this afternoon, were you serious about inventing...you know, Dr. Phil?”

“I don’t joke about vibrators,” he deadpanned.

“Oh...”

He smirked. “I’m teasing. But to answer your question, yes, I did invent Dr. Phil. I’m a product developer for Lucy Goosey Couples Toys.”

The waiter came over with a basket of tortilla chips and guacamole and asked to take our wine order. I told Kelly I wasn’t picky, and he proceeded to speak to the waiter in fluent Spanish, without even needing to look at the menu.

“Wow, did you just order wine?” I asked when the waiter walked away.

He nodded. “A merlot. I read an article on the plane about a local winemaker, so I asked the waiter if they carried it.” Kelly held the basket out to me to take a chip before taking one for himself. “You know, because my travel buddy wouldn’t speak to me during the entire flight.”

“Sorry about that, too. Luckily, the piña coladas I had after we arrived helped me climb down off my high horse.”

“It’s fine. I’m just messing with you again.” He dipped his chip into the guac. “So tell me, are you really a marriage counselor, or was that just a bit for the show?”

“No, I’m actually a marriage counselor.”

“What’s that like?”

“Well, there’s never a dull moment, that’s for sure. One minute I’ll have a couple in my office crying, and the next minute a couple will be screaming at the top of their lungs.”

“Yeah, my business is the same. Some testers cry, some scream for joy.”

I started to smile, then stopped. “Joking, right?”

“Yes, indeedy.”

“So how did you get into your line of work?”

“Engineering degree from MIT, of course.”

“I can’t tell if you’re kidding or not?”

“I’m serious. I went to school for engineering, then did a stint as a developer for a robotics company. I was bored to death. Saw an ad for a job making women’s products, and I applied, half as a joke. Seven years later, I’m still there.”

“So you like your job, then?”

“Mostly I enjoy the human-testing phase where I get to try the products out on people.”

My eyes grew wide.

Kelly’s blue eyes sparkled as he leaned in. “Breathe. I’m joking. There is a human-testing phase, but we just read their written feedback.”

That was pretty much how the next two hours went. Kelly entertained me with his dry sense of humor while we drank two bottles of delicious local wine. I couldn’t remember a time when I’d laughed so much on a first date, except...this wasn’t a date. After dinner, Kelly walked me to the elevator.

“What time do you want to meet for breakfast?”

“Is nine too late? Service ends at ten.”

“Works for me. ’Night, Sarah.”

“Goodnight, Kelly.”

Back in my room, I washed off my makeup and changed for bed. Even though wine usually made me sleepy, I felt a little wired as I slipped beneath the covers. I was also feeling a little *needy*. It must’ve been all that talk about vibrators. So I got back out of bed and went to the hidden pocket in my suitcase to grab the little toy I’d brought with me. It took all of three minutes to get myself off. When I was done, I set my pink vibrator on the end table and reached up to turn the light off. But something on the bottom of the toy caught my eye. It looked like a logo with two script letters entwined, and if I wasn’t mistaken, the letters were *LG*. I lifted it for a closer

inspection—sure enough, the manufacturer name stamped onto the bottom of the logo was listed as *Lucy Goosey*.

Oh my God.

Was it possible that my tripmate was responsible for the orgasm I'd just had?



CHAPTER 3

KELLY

Sarah was already seated, with a heaping plate from the buffet, when I spotted her in the restaurant. I headed straight for her table and slid into the seat across from her.

“Aren’t you gonna get food?” she asked with her mouth full. “I’m sorry—I was too hungry to wait.”

“I’ll get something in a minute. I want to ask you something first.”

“What’s up?”

Filled with adrenaline, I wriggled my brows. “Feel like going on a little excursion today?”

“Depends.”

“Do you have plans?” I asked.

She wiped her mouth with a napkin. “I booked an appointment at the spa for noon, actually.”

“Cancel it. I have something better.”

Sarah shook her head and sipped her coffee. “I don’t know what could be much better than a deep-tissue massage, but I’m listening.”

Stealing one of the grapes off the side of her plate, I chewed and said, “I rented an ATV to tour the beach. It’s the best way to see everything. It’s got two seats, so what a waste if I don’t have anyone to go with me.”

She bit her bottom lip and seemed to be considering my offer.

“Come on,” I prodded. “The spa will still be here tomorrow. But I could only get the ATV for today. They were booked the rest of the week.”

“Okay, then.” She shrugged. “Yeah. I’ll go.”

“Sweet.” I smiled before getting up to head to the buffet. “Be right back.”

Now I felt like I could relax and eat. For some reason, I’d been anxious to ask her to go with me. While Sarah had seemed pretty standoffish when we first met, she now seemed a bit more open to actually hanging out and having fun on her vacation. So at least there was hope. I certainly hadn’t come on this trip expecting to be attracted to my travel mate. In fact, I’d had no expectations about anything at all. I’d been bored one day on my lunch break, fucking around when I entered that contest. I never in a million years thought I’d actually win the damn thing. Which is probably why I didn’t take things seriously at first. Case in point, I’d worn that get-up to the airport to be funny. Of course, Sarah thought I was a lunatic. Turns out, she was only half-right.



After picking up the ATV and gearing up in our helmets, we took off and explored the beautiful white-sand beach, basking in the bright sunshine while waves crashed in the distance. I didn’t mind having her arms wrapped around me one bit. It was hard to hear each other while we were riding, though, so we had to speak loudly.

“So what happened with your ex?” I shouted as we rode along the beach.

“You want me to talk about that now, when we’re supposed to be having fun?”

“Why not? That way we can get all the downer stuff over with. Would you rather tell me about it over dinner when you can hear a pin drop?”

She shouted over the motor. “Okay...my ex, Trent, who I’d been with since college, left me for his nineteen-year-old assistant. That’s all there is to it. Happy now? He traded me in for a new model.”

“You know what they say when it comes to newer models versus the original?” I yelled.

“What’s that?”

“They don’t make ’em like they used to. Cheaper parts. Anyway, you’re a smoke show, Sarah. He’s smoking crack.”

“Well, thank you.” She held onto me tighter. “You know, it kind of felt good yelling everything out.”

“Really? Do it some more.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yell out your frustrations!”

I didn’t think she was going to take me up on that until I heard her scream behind me at the top of her lungs.

“Fuck you, Trent!”

“There you go!” I said, revving the engine and going a bit faster. “He’s missing out on a damn good time here, too. Suits him right.”

We rode along without talking for a bit.

“Your turn,” she said. “I know a little about your dump story. You said her name was Kelly. What was so special about that vibrator anyway?”

“The clit tickler,” I yelled.

“What?”

“Did you not hear me? Or do you just want to hear me say it again?”

“I heard you. I guess I couldn’t believe my ears.”

“Clit tickler!” I yelled even louder. “Say it again for the people in the back. Clit tickler!”

She was laughing hysterically. “Please explain.”

“I don’t know how comfortable you are with this stuff.”

“Do you think I’m some kind of prude? I’ll have you know, I actually own a Lucy Goosey vibrator.”

“Oh man. Do you happen to have the make and model number?”

“Why?”

“I want to know if I had anything to do with the design.”

“I can let you know.” She squeezed my side. “Anyway, tell me about this clit-tickler thing. How did it come about?”

“Well, as you know, my ex also worked for the company. One night I was...going down on her. And she said, ‘Damn, you’re so good at that. You should patent it.’ I asked her to be more specific. She said it was the precise way I tickled her with my tongue. So I started designing this contraption that would attach to the vibrator and apply just the right amount of pressure on a woman’s clit. The idea of a clit tickler was nothing new. But it was the specific mechanism and speed options of the one attached to Dr. Phil that made it special—that and the warm lubricant dispenser.”

“How could she do that to you?”

“Very easily. She’s an asshole, number one. Number two, we had detailed discussions about it, so I made it easy, I guess. Because all of our conversations were verbal, I had no way of proving she wasn’t the one who’d initiated the design.”

“Fuck you, clit-tickler-stealing bitch!” she screamed.

“Nice!” I laughed. “I like it when you’re angry.”

“Would you be offended if I bought Dr. Phil, though? You know, to see firsthand what you’re talking about?”

“Butterfly Kisses, it’s officially called. And not at all. I absolve you of any guilt.”

Sarah and I had a really good time on the ATV ride, but I didn't want to push my luck with her. So after we returned our vehicle, I told her I was heading back to my motel.

“Would you want to join me for dinner?” she asked.

I acted casual. “Yeah, I mean, if you want the company.”

“It would be nice not to eat alone.”

“That's the only reason you want me there, so you don't have to look pathetic?”

“No. I want you there because I enjoy your company,” she admitted.

“Okay then.” I grinned. “Why don't I go back, shower and change, and I'll meet you at La Casa at seven.”

She smiled. “Sounds good.”



Five margaritas in, Sarah was shitfaced. Let's just say, she asked if I wanted to dance—even though there was no music or dance floor in this place. It was all good, though. This lady needed to unwind. After talking further at dinner, I learned she was more deeply scarred by her breakup than I'd thought. It had done a number on her self-esteem and made me want to kill that fucker for making her think she was less than she was, when in reality *he* was the insecure one.

I got the impression that she felt sorry for me because of what happened with my ex stealing my idea. I never wanted to come across as braggy, so I didn't flaunt my wealth. Even though I didn't get credit for Dr. Phil, I'd made millions by going on to create a number of novel adult products that did very well. I now also owned a decent amount of stock in the company. Basically, I was shacking up at the motel down the road when I could've funded this vacation for both of us many times over. I hadn't taken the trip for the free ride. It was about the blind adventure for me.

“Can you walk me back to my room?” she asked.

I paused, unsure if she was suggesting *more* than just a walk. “Of course. I wouldn’t let you walk back alone this late.”

There was a mellow breeze as we meandered back to Sarah’s suite. I wanted to see her all the way to the door since she was too drunk to be trusted to find her room.

When we finally got there, she looked at me hazily. “Would you want to come in?”

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that if I went in, there was a damn good chance something might happen between us. And damn, did I ever want it to. This girl was so hot, smart, funny—but vulnerable. And as I’d learned from talking to her tonight...special. She was real. As real as my dick was hard right now. But unfortunately, she was also drunk as a skunk. And I would never take advantage of her under these conditions.

“I’ll tell you what...” I said. “I’m not gonna come in right now. Because you’re really drunk. But if you still want me to come *visit* in the morning when you’re clear headed, I’m down. You just let me know.”

She snorted. “You think I’m trying to get in your pants?”

“I didn’t say that. I just said you’re drunk, and it’s better if I don’t come in.”

She pointed into my chest with her index finger. “I’m not...trying...to...get...in...your pants.” She stumbled. “You’re not even my type.”

“Oh really? What’s your type?”

“Uglier men than you, typically.” She snorted.

“That’s very offensive,” I joked.

“Well, then you’re easily offended.”

“That I am definitely not. I’m a huge dude named Kelly, my last name is Fugger, and I design dicks for a living. Definitely not easily offended.”

She giggled. “Anyway, don’t need you to come in anyway. I have my Lucy Goosey toy tonight, thanks to you, Fucker.” She hiccupped. “Fugger. Fucker. Whatever.”

“Alright, drunk.” I laughed. “Go have fun with your Lucy Goosey. Get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow?” I reached down and kissed her forehead.

She smiled up at me and hiccupped again. “Night, Clit-Tickler Fucker Fugger.”



CHAPTER 4

KELLY

The following morning, Sarah didn't show up for breakfast. I was disappointed, but figured she might have had a bit of a hangover and slept in. When lunchtime rolled around, I went back to her hotel even though I wasn't hungry, hoping maybe she'd make it for the next meal. But after two hours of sitting in the lobby outside the restaurant that served lunch trying to look casual, it was clear she wasn't coming again. I did a quick sweep around the pool and beach, thinking perhaps she'd just ordered room service and was now basking in the sun. But Sarah was nowhere to be found. It made me a little worried, so I decided to call her room from one of the hotel phones before I left to make sure she was okay.

"Hello?" a hoarse voice answered. I wasn't even sure I'd reached the right room, the person sounded so terrible.

"Sarah?"

"Yeah?"

"It's Kelly. Are you okay?"

"Not really. I've been throwing up since the middle of the night. And, well, let's just say that's not the only way things are exiting my body."

"Ah. Not fun. I noticed last night that you ordered the first two margaritas on the rocks before you switched to the frosted ones. You think the ice got you?"

“Maybe.” She sighed. “I’d been so careful. But tequila makes me stupid, and apparently I’m paying for it now.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Nothing really. I think it’s mostly run its course. There’s not much left in my stomach for my body to reject. Now my head is just pounding, which is probably because I’m so dehydrated.”

“There’s a grocery store down the road. I’ll go grab you some supplies and leave them at your door.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to. Give me about ten minutes. I’ll knock to let you know when they’re there, and you can open after I leave so you have your privacy.”

“Okay, thank you.”

The trip for supplies took longer than I expected. I wound up going to two stores since the first one didn’t have everything I needed. When I arrived at Sarah’s door, I set the bag down and lightly knocked. I started to walk away, but her door opened.

I turned. “How you feeling?”

She smiled halfheartedly. “As good as I look.”

Sarah’s hair was disheveled, her skin was pale, and she didn’t have an ounce of makeup on, but she was still absolutely gorgeous. “If you feel as good as you look, then let’s go ziplining, because even sickly you’re more beautiful than any woman in this hotel.”

She blushed. “That’s sweet of you, even if it’s not true. Would you...want to come in and hang out? I don’t think what I have is contagious...”

I had actually made a reservation to go ziplining, but if my choices were an adventure in the jungle or holding Sarah’s hair back while she puked, sadly, I’d rather play ponytail holder. “Sure, if you’re up for it.”

She opened the door and stepped aside, and I whistled when I got a look at her suite. “So this is how the other half lives? The cockroaches in my place kept me up half the night singing ‘La Cucaracha.’”

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I’m joking.”

“Thank God.”

“They were actually singing ‘La Bamba.’”

Sarah smiled and pointed to the bag in my arms. “If you don’t have Gatorade in that bag, I can’t promise the next time I puke it won’t be on you.”

I reached into the bag and pulled out a red Gatorade. “Even though the alternative is so tempting...”

We sat down on the couch in the living room. Sarah chugged electrolytes while I unloaded the rest of my custom-made Mexican-hangover/Montezuma’s-revenge kit. I held each item out to her like I was Vanna White.

Pepto Bismol – “Fun fact,” I said. “There’s no medicinal reason it’s pink. The manufacturer adds the color to make it more appealing to children.”

Saltines – “It’s less about the cracker and more about the salt. It helps you retain water when you’re dehydrated.”

Ginger Ale – “Settles the belly.”

A giant orange – “Vitamin C.”

The last item on the bottom of the bag was a movie-theatre-sized box of Red Hots. Sarah’s nose wrinkled. “Those cure an upset stomach?”

“Nope, these are for me. I love these damn things. I like to shove a whole handful into my mouth so my eyes water.”

Sarah laughed. “Thank you for doing all this.”

“No problemo.”

“I hope I wasn’t too obnoxious last night. I’m normally a two-glasses-of-wine-max drinker. Maybe three on Christmas

when I'm with my entire family. I guess since I skipped Christmas this year, I made up for the lost alcohol by drinking five at once."

"Nah, you were fun. But what do you mean you skipped Christmas?"

"My parents are super festive—Christmas sweaters with bells and all." She shrugged. "I just didn't feel much in the mood to celebrate, so I lied and told them my flight got canceled at the last minute."

"What did you do on the big day?"

"I stayed home in my pajamas and ate a frozen Lean Cuisine. I think it might've been the first time in my thirty years that I didn't open a single present on Christmas."

"That sounds...sad."

She chuckled. "It was. I don't recommend it." Sarah cracked the top of the Pepto bottle open and chugged from the plastic. "What did you do for Christmas this year?"

"My family's pretty small. It's just me, my mom, and my uncle, Jimmy. Mom is super religious, so I took them to midnight mass on Christmas Eve. I sleep over at her house on Christmas Eve every year because the thing that makes her the happiest in the world is putting presents under the tree after I fall asleep and waking up to open them all together."

"Awww... That's so sweet."

"Yeah, my mom thinks so. But that's mostly because she has no idea that I slip Uncle Jimmy his real gift without her seeing."

"Which is..."

"Weed and German porn."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. He looks forward to his one joint and 1950's-era German pornography all year. It's become sort of a silent tradition, ever since I stumbled onto his collection during a visit when I was eighteen."

She laughed. “That’s so funny.”

“Not to Uncle Jimmy. He takes his porn stash very seriously.”

Over the next few hours we wound up talking about our favorite Christmas memories. I told Sarah about the year my mom woke me and my sister up at the crack of dawn, put us both in the car in our pajamas, and drove us to the airport for a surprise trip to Disney. It was my happiest Christmas, until I realized the vacation had been my sister Elizabeth’s Make-A-Wish trip, and it meant she’d be gone a few months later. She’d had terminal leukemia. Sarah told me about the boy next door whom she’d had a crush on from the time she was ten, but he was four years older. And how at eighteen she’d tricked him into standing under the mistletoe. Then when he went to kiss her cheek, she turned her head and slipped him the tongue.

By the time we came to a lull in our conversation, it was already dark outside.

“Oh my God. What time is it?” Sarah asked. “We’ve been sitting here rambling all day.”

I looked at my phone and realized it was also the first time I’d touched it all day. “It’s almost eight.”

“I monopolized your entire day sitting here talking about Christmas. You could have been outside enjoying the sunshine.”

“It’s okay. I like talking to you.”

She smiled shyly. “I like talking to you, too. Even though all of our talking about Christmas made me realize I was an idiot for skipping Christmas this year. It’s going to be a long three-hundred-and-sixty-two days until the next one.”

That gave me an idea. “Why wait that long? There are no rules about when we celebrate the holiday.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a giant tree in the lobby. I think we should have your missed Christmas tomorrow night. We can even make it

fun and grab some cheap presents.”

Sarah’s face lit up. “You’re totally getting these wooden cockroaches I saw a guy carving on the street.”

I laughed. “Okay, but I’m warning you, I actually know all the words to ‘La Cucaracha’. My Spanish teacher, Ms. Chiesa, used to make us all sing it every year. If I get those, expect to be hearing it.”



CHAPTER 5

SARAH

Kelly and I agreed to meet at 4 PM by the giant tree in the hotel lobby. The plan was to exchange gifts down there, then go out to dinner. I was definitely getting in the post-Christmas spirit.

One of the best parts about celebrating Christmas after the holiday? Clearance. I'd asked the manager of the place I was staying for a recommendation on where to get after-Christmas stuff, and he'd ordered a car to take me to this small plaza of shops. After browsing a few different stores for something to wear, I was able to find the perfect ugly Christmas sweater, for a great bargain. Since it was hot, I'd wear it inside the hotel only and take it off before dinner. And not only had I picked up the wooden cockroaches from the street vendor for Kelly, but I found him another special surprise gag gift as well.

I couldn't remember the last time I was this excited about "Christmas." Maybe the key was to celebrate away from my family, after the actual holiday, with a handsome stranger. Perhaps this needed to be a yearly tradition. Although I doubted I'd meet anyone by chance again as interesting as Kelly.

Once I got back from shopping, I had about an hour to get ready. Before heading downstairs, I put on a red mini skirt that matched my sweater.

I was so excited to see what Kelly had in store for me. I was a few minutes early, so I stood by the tall Christmas tree and waited, holding the gift bag.

When I turned around, I spotted big, larger-than-life Kelly walking toward me wearing...*what the heck was that?* I soon realized it was a hat with Santa's legs at the top. It was made to look like Santa's feet were sticking up in the air as he got stuck in the chimney, which in this case was Kelly's head. How bizarre—but totally Kelly.

“Nice hat.”

“Thanks. I looked everywhere for a Buddy the Elf costume, but no luck.”

“I'm so glad you didn't find one.” I chuckled.

“That would've been awesome, though. You have to admit.” He looked down at my sweater, adorned with embroidered cats in winter hats. “Nice sweater. I love it.”

“It was the ugliest sweater I could find. I'm taking it off for dinner, though. It's too hot.”

“Taking it off is even better.” He smiled mischievously.

I blew out a breath of air, burning up. “Shall we sit to open our presents?”

He placed his hands on my shoulders. “First off, Merry Christmas.”

A shiver ran down my spine from the contact. “Merry Christmas to you, Kelly.”

“I think we should wait to open the presents, actually,” he said.

I looked around. “Wait for what? What else is there?”

I noticed he was carrying a black backpack, which he now removed from his shoulder.

“You can't have a Christmas party without music and appetizers, Sarah.”

He pulled a Santa Claus statue of some kind out of his bag. He pressed a button on its feet before placing it on the ground next to us. Santa began swaying his hips to the tune of “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.”

“You could’ve just played music on your phone, but he’s adorable.”

“Music from my phone wouldn’t have been as embarrassing. It’s more fun to watch your face turn red right now.”

Next, he took out some Christmas cookies in a plastic container that looked like they’d come from the supermarket bakery sale section.

Last, he removed two red Solo cups from the bag and a carton of eggnog before pouring us each a glass.

“I’m glad you came prepared,” I said.

We sat there with our battery-operated Santa playing music and sipped our eggnog while munching on cookies. Despite being too hot, this was my favorite Christmas in a very long time.

“Present time!” Kelly announced.

I put my cup down and clapped my hands. “I’ll go first,” I said. I handed him the gift bag, which had little Christmas trees all over it.

“Should I be afraid?” he asked.

I giggled.

He ripped open the first box, and his eyes widened as he lifted the two wooden cockroaches. “I see you’re a woman of your word.”

“How could I *not* get these for you?”

“By the way, last night, they serenaded me with ‘Feliz Navidad’.”

I cackled.

“I love them. And they’ll always remind me of this trip.” He smiled. “Also, I’ll spare you my rendition of ‘La Cucaracha’.”

I pointed. “There’s something else in the bag.”

Kelly looked down. “Oh yeah.” He reached in and opened the second package.

When he saw what was inside, his jaw dropped. He took them out and began shaking them around. “My life is now complete. Who knew there was such a thing as penis maracas?”

These maracas had dicks for handles and big testicles for shakers.

“Given your line of work, I figured those are perfect.”

“Hell yeah. These babies are going right on my desk at the office.”

“Cool.” I laughed and took a deep breath, anticipating what kind of crazy thing he’d bought for me.

“I got you something, too.” He smiled.

“I figured.”

Kelly reached into his backpack and took out a small, wrapped box. He handed it to me. Seeming a little nervous, he licked his lips as he waited for me to open it.

Is something going to jump out at me?

When I opened the box, my mouth fell open. “Kelly...”

It was the most gorgeous jade pendant—a green, oval stone, surrounded by small diamonds.

“This is... It’s beautiful.” I looked up at him. “This isn’t real, is it? The diamonds and all?”

“Everything is real, yeah,” he said.

My eyes widened. “Kelly...why did you do this? We were supposed to give each other gag gifts. I—”

“I wanted to. And I didn’t think there were any rules.”

“This is too much,” I stuttered. “I can’t take it.”

“Well, you’d better, because I’m not taking it back.”

Wow. “It’s...” I sighed.

“Look, you hosted me on this vacation. And I wanted to give you something to remember me by.” He winked. “After all, that jade is *Kelly* green.”

“It’s truly beautiful.” I rubbed my finger over the stone. “Will you help me put it on?”

“Of course.”

I lifted my hair as he took the gorgeous piece and placed it around my neck.

I fondled the chain. “I’ll always cherish this. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He beamed.

Kelly had already made me feel special tonight, and we ended up having an amazing dinner after our little Christmas party. We continued to chat, and I loved how self-deprecating he was, despite the fact that he was also quite successful, as I’d come to learn. And he was a damn good person. Even after his ex burned him, he’d still found it in his heart to forgive her. He understood that holding on to toxic resentment was worse for him than anything else. He was wise and offered a perspective I knew I would take home with me. Actually, I started really hoping this didn’t have to be the end for us. But at the same time, I knew I wasn’t over what had happened with Trent, and I didn’t want to lead Kelly on if I wasn’t ready to start anything. But did Kelly even want something with me? He hadn’t been all that forward, so I wasn’t sure.

After our dinner, he walked me back to my room. I’d done something earlier that I hoped wouldn’t backfire now. I was about to find out.

We arrived at my door, and he looked up at the mistletoe I’d hung earlier.

“Well, well...what do we have here?” I said.

“That looks like a mistletoe to me.” He grinned.

“Indeed, it is.”

Adrenaline pumped through me. I reached up, wrapping my hand around the back of his neck, and stood up on my tiptoes. Thankfully, he lowered his beautiful face down to me. When our lips met, I realized how much I’d been starving for this. I slipped him the tongue and heard him laugh under his breath.

He spoke over my lips. “She strikes again.”

He was right, but this time, it was so much sweeter.

Our kiss grew more intense as Kelly took the reins, pushing his tongue deeper inside my mouth. He tasted so damn good. I felt my panties getting wet and knew I had a choice to make. I could open the door and pull him inside, or open the door and say goodbye. In the end, fear won out over passion.

I pulled away and suddenly said, “Goodnight, Fugger.”

His mouth opened and closed a few times. “Okay...uh, goodnight.”

I used my key and slipped inside my room. Leaning my back against the door, I panted as my heart raced, my body still aching for Kelly.



CHAPTER 6

SARAH

I slept like shit.

Not only was I chock full of pent-up frustrations after the amazing kiss with Kelly last night, but I also felt terrible about how I'd pushed him away. He'd been nothing but kind to me—taking me out on an ATV tour, nursing me when I was sick, and then last night he'd given me a gorgeous, expensive necklace. And what had I done in return? Let's see... I'd refused to share my beautiful suite that he'd rightfully won, bought him cockroaches as a gift, and to top it off, I'd dragged him under the mistletoe for a kiss and promptly ran away like he'd given me something contagious.

This morning, I also felt panicky that our trip was coming to an end. I decided I needed to pull up my big-girl panties and lay my cards on the table—tell Kelly I liked him and thought maybe there was something there, but that I was nervous about jumping into something so soon after my breakup. I hoped maybe he'd be okay taking things slow. But when I called to ask if he wanted to meet for breakfast so we could talk, he didn't answer. By lunchtime, I still hadn't heard from him, even though I'd left a message. Finally at two in the afternoon, my phone buzzed. Seeing Kelly's name flash on my screen, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hey. I was starting to get worried,” I said. “It's not like you to skip a meal.”

“I grabbed a muffin at my hotel before I went to find a place to stay tomorrow night.”

I’d forgotten the hotel where he was staying didn’t have a room available for the last night of our trip. “Did you have any luck?”

“Not anywhere around here. Every hotel on this side of the island is sold out. I found something about a half hour away, though. Before I booked it, I called the hotel you’re staying at and asked if anything opened up. They said they might have a room for me, but they won’t know until tomorrow morning. Apparently, a guest had a family emergency of some type and is trying to get a flight out, which would leave a vacancy. So I figured I’d wait on booking a place on the other side of town, since they seemed to have plenty of rooms there.”

“Oh, wow. It would be great if you could get a room here.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it. The walk to a hotel with blue balls kind of sucks.” Kelly laughed. “Less chafing if I can move closer.”

“About that…”

“It’s fine. I’m just teasing you.”

“It’s not fine. I was actually looking for you earlier, hoping we could talk about last night—about the kiss, I mean. What are you doing right now?”

“I was thinking about going for a swim. It’s hot as hell today.”

“Would you want to do that over here at my hotel? We could have piña coladas poolside, my treat?”

“Will you wear the white bikini you had hanging in your bathroom when you weren’t feeling well the other day?”

“The white thong?”

“That’s the one.”

“Sure, if you want.”

“You can’t see me, but I just fist pumped.”

I laughed. I could totally visualize the fist pumping. “Meet you in the lobby in a half hour?”

“Sounds good.”

Even though I was going to the pool, I put on a full face of makeup. I also heated up my curling iron and made some loose waves in my hair before slipping into the white bikini. I tied a sheer white sarong around my waist and added a big straw hat and sunglasses to complete my ensemble. Checking myself out in the mirror, I thought I looked pretty good. That gave me the confidence I needed as I made my way down to the lobby to meet Kelly. But my outfit wasn’t powerful enough to stop the nervous jitters that swarmed in my belly when the doors slid open at the lobby level. I was anxious and excited and...

What the...

I froze midstep getting off the elevator.

What the actual hell?

I blinked a few times, certain I had to be imagining my ex standing at the front desk. But no such luck. That man was definitely Trent.

The elevator car doors tried to close, but I was still standing halfway in and halfway out. So when they hit me, they bounced back open. The woman working behind the desk heard the sound and looked up. Noticing the shocked look on my face, her brows drew together, and Trent turned to follow her line of sight.

A smile spread across his annoyingly handsome face. “There she is...”

“What—what are you doing here?” I shook my head.

“I came to grovel and get my girl back.”

A few feet behind him, the lobby door swung open and Kelly strolled in. He took one look at me and whistled. “Wow. My girl looks *smokin’* hot today.”

Trent’s eyes jumped back and forth between Kelly and me before scanning the rest of the lobby. He seemed to be looking

for another person, anyone other than me that Kelly could've been talking to. But we were the only three in the lobby, so it was pretty damn obvious. His eyes narrowed. "Who the hell are you, and why are you calling *my girl your girl*?"

I walked over to Kelly first and quickly explained who Trent was.

"*This* is what you wanted to talk to me about?" Kelly folded his arms across his chest.

I shook my head. "No, no—not at all. I had no idea he was coming when we spoke a little while ago."

"Who the hell is this clown?" Trent thumbed at Kelly.

"This is...Kelly. He won your half of the trip."

"*Won* my half of the trip? What are you talking about?"

"It's a long story, but Jane ran a contest on her podcast, and the winner got to join me on the trip."

"You auctioned off my spot on our vacation for a date?"

"No, no. It's nothing like that. It's not a date."

Kelly frowned. "That kiss at the end of the night last night sure felt a hell of a lot like a date."

Trent scowled. "You kissed this joker?"

Kelly took steps toward Trent. "Who you calling a joker?"

Oh shit. This was about to turn ugly. I stepped between the two men and put my arms out to keep distance between them.

"Kelly, I had no idea Trent was coming. Would you mind if we skipped the pool so he and I can talk?"

Kelly frowned and shook his head. "Whatever. I'll see you around." He turned and stormed out the lobby door. Watching him walk away upset caused a lump to form in my throat. So I ran after him. "Wait! Kelly!" But he was already marching across the parking lot and didn't turn back.

Trent followed me outside. "Sarah, what the hell is going on?"



CHAPTER 7

KELLY

Maybe I overreacted.

I shouldn't have left her alone with him. But then again... she sent me away instead of telling me to stay, so alone time with him was what she'd apparently wanted.

Sitting at a bar by the beach not far from my motel, I read the text from her again.

Sarah: I'm so sorry my ex showed up. I had no idea he was planning on coming here. I felt like I needed to hear him out. I'm sorry he ruined our plans and you left upset.

I didn't respond. A full hour passed, and I came to the conclusion that if she hadn't reached out to tell me he was gone by now, maybe her asshole ex was getting his message through to her. But it was killing me to sit here and do nothing, so I finally texted her back.

Kelly: Look, Sarah, I don't know your ex from Adam, but what I do know? You deserve better than that guy. I don't know what he's saying to you right now, and I don't give a fuck what he has to say. Not everyone deserves a second chance, especially lying, cheating bastards. I've said my piece.

She didn't respond. Another hour went by, and I decided to go back to my room and figure out an exit plan. The more time that passed, the more I started to feel like she might be taking him back. And that sucked. Because I was really starting to like her and had a different idea of how this trip might have ended. For a while there, I'd believed I'd won more than a trip

—it'd felt like I'd won the lottery. And now it felt like it was all a freaking dream.

My phone rang. My pulse raced for a second because I thought it was her, but unfortunately, it wasn't. It was a call from Sarah's hotel.

“Mr. Fugger?” a woman said.

“Yes.”

“This is Vanessa from the resort hotel?”

“Hi.”

“This is a courtesy call to let you know that the room I mentioned to you earlier, the one we thought might become available tomorrow night, is in fact going to remain occupied. The situation with the occupants' family emergency changed, so they've decided to stay through the remainder of their trip after all.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Well, thank you for letting me know.”

I hung up and pulled on my hair. *What now?*

If I wasn't going to have a place to stay tomorrow night, I needed to book myself a flight for tomorrow. I didn't want to stay here anyway if Sarah's “boyfriend” would be sticking around.

I opened my laptop to check flights. There was only one plane out in the morning and a couple more at night. I called the airline. That 10 AM flight was full. They told me they could put me on standby if I wanted to just come to the airport, so that's what I decided to do. Given that Sarah still hadn't contacted me, I was at peace with the decision to leave. Her silence spoke volumes.



The following morning, I was all packed up but felt my walls breaking down a bit. My original plan had been to leave

quietly, with little fanfare. But a part of me couldn't do that without seeing her face one last time. I owed her at least a proper goodbye after the time we'd had together, despite my bitterness over her not texting me back.

I decided to have breakfast at the restaurant in her hotel. It would be her call if she wanted to join me. When I got there, I texted her. If she didn't text back this time, it would be the last time I ever reached out.

Kelly: Hey. Not sure if you're still sleeping or what. But wanted to let you know I'm here at the restaurant for a quick breakfast before I head to the airport this morning. I'm leaving soon, if you're around to say goodbye.

Not even two seconds went by before a response came in.

Sarah: Goodbye? What do you mean?

Kelly: I had to check out of my hotel, and the room at yours didn't pan out. Between that and your original vacation partner showing up, I thought it was best I head out early. My flight leaves at 10 AM.

Sarah: Your flight? Oh my God! Don't you dare leave! I'm coming right down.

Confused, I sat at a table and waited.

The next thing I knew, Sarah was running into the restaurant—in a short, white bathrobe.

I couldn't help but laugh as I stood up from the table. "You could've gotten dressed."

She fastened the tie around her robe. "You were really going to take off?"

"You never texted me back last night. What did you expect?"

"Not this!" She sighed. "Trent wouldn't leave. We spent hours going back and forth—mostly him trying to make excuses for what he did and explaining why I should take him back. It was torture. By the time he finally gave up and realized I wasn't letting him stay with me, it was so late that I decided to just contact you this morning. But you beat me to it."

My eyes narrowed. "Where is he?"

“He went back to the airport late last night.”

“He’s gone?”

“Yes. I sent him packing. I’m never taking him back after what he did to me. Never.”

Relief washed over me. “Well, good.”

“He asked me to explain what was going on between you and me. I told him the truth: that, sure, you were a contest winner, but that you turned out to be so much more.” She inched toward me. “Kelly, in the short time we’ve known each other, you’ve taught me that life is too short to waste time with anyone who doesn’t appreciate me. The last thing I told Trent was that I would send him one of your clit ticklers so he could give it to the next poor woman he screws over, because she’s going to need it when he leaves her high and dry. He looked at me like I was crazy, but I didn’t care.” She laughed, then said, “I realize now I should have texted you last night to tell you all this. I never imagined you would have tried to take off so soon.”

“I thought you were...with him. I didn’t want to stick around for all that.”

“No.” She shook her head. “All I’ve wanted this entire time was to get back to you—to get back to that moment where you and I were going to have piña coladas at the pool. I’m so sorry that never happened.”

I took a step closer. “You’d said you needed to talk to me yesterday—before he showed up. What was that about?”

“I was going to ask you to spend tonight with me. In my room. In *our* room. The room that was rightfully yours from the beginning.”

My heart sped up as I cradled her cheek. “You sure that’s what you want?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Letting out a sigh, I tried not to seem overly excited. *But I was.* “Okay. If that’s what you want.”

She looked down at herself. “I need to get into something more presentable. Will you come upstairs for a bit and then we can come back down for breakfast together? You can dump all your stuff there, too.”

I gathered my stuff as adrenaline pumped through me. “Let’s go.”

I followed Sarah back to her room and noticed she hadn’t taken the mistletoe down.

“You kept it hanging.”

“Yeah.” She smiled as her cheeks reddened.

Before she had a chance to open the door, I pulled her toward me, taking her lips with mine. I just couldn’t wait to taste her again. Sarah moaned into my mouth as she used the key card to open the door, our lips still locked, our tongues colliding.

“Maybe we could skip breakfast,” she said into my mouth.

My heart thundered against my chest. I stopped and looked into her eyes. “I need you to clarify what you’re insinuating because I’m too damn excited right now and could very well draw the wrong assumption.”

“Do you want me, Kelly?” she whispered.

“Fuck, yes. I want you in every way.” Pulling her close, I said, “And just to be clear, by that I mean more than just a vacation fling, Sarah. I want us to continue seeing each other when we get home...if that’s what you want.”

“It *is* what I want. And *also* to be clear, I’m not wearing anything under this.”

I felt my dick stiffen. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I’m saying I want to get laid right now, if that’s what you want, too.”

My mouth curved into a huge smile as I nodded. “Sleighed.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Getting laid over Christmas time...‘sleighed’.”

She snorted. “That’s probably the corniest thing you’ve said thus far, Fugger.” She ran her hands through my hair. “It’s a good thing you’re irresistibly handsome...with special talents.”

“You have no idea.” I gestured toward my bag. “I’ve got two penis maracas in there I’ve got plans for—and a hungry tongue. It’ll officially be next year by the time you want to leave this room.” I lifted her up.

She wrapped her legs around me. “Well...Merry Fugging Christmas to me!”



THE END

Merry Christmas to our Readers!



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Vi Keeland is a #1 New York Times, #1 Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestselling author. With millions of books sold, her titles are currently translated in twenty-six languages and have appeared on bestseller lists in the US, Germany, Brazil, Bulgaria and Hungary. Three of her short stories have been turned into films by Passionflix, and two of her books are currently optioned for movies. She resides in New York with her husband and their three children where she is living out her own happily ever after with the boy she met at age six.

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CHRISTMAS IN BIRDVILLE



JEWEL E. ANN



CHAPTER 1

HENRY

The Afina house was mine, until I lost it with a straight flush. Let me repeat ... a straight flush. My great grandfather built the Victorian farmhouse for his bride, Marian, in what is still one of Ohio's smallest river towns. Birdville has a population of just under seven hundred.

The firstborn male inherits the Afina house. After my dad died two years ago, my mom moved to Germany where she and my dad had planned on retiring in the same town where my great grandfather was born.

She moved out.

I moved back in.

Thankfully, I kept my trailer. It's like the universe knew I'd fuck things up.

We're not a wealthy family—we've just always owned the most coveted house in Birdville. We were a coal mining family before my grandfather became a plumber, like my father, and like me.

So while I sit in my pickup truck outside the Afina house, I can't help but think of my mom's announcement that she's coming to Birdville for Christmas.

That fucking straight flush.

Since I lost the family home just over six months ago, this will be my first time back inside it—as a hired plumber.

I knock on the door three times. It takes an eternity for someone to answer.

“You must be the plumber,” a fifty-something woman says, blowing at her silver and blond bangs to expose her kind blue eyes.

I hold up my toolbox and give her a guilty shrug.

“It’s the bathroom down the hall and to the right.” She shows me a canning jar filled with what looks like the makings for cookies. “I have to finish putting these together. Let me know if you have any questions Mr. ...” Her gaze slides to my shirt and the name tag I’m not wearing.

I refrain from sharing my real name in case she makes the connection to it and the house she stole from me. Okay, it technically wasn’t her, but the sting is still too real to give a shit. I glance at the jar in her hand and smile. “Mason. Mason Ball.”

“Very well, Mr. Ball.” She shoots me a courteous smile and sashays to the kitchen.

I’m pleasantly surprised. She seems normal.

After I lost the house, the loan shark put it up for auction. Serena Soro, a writer of some sort, purchased it and nearly everything in it. I’d never seen her until today, nor had anyone else to their knowledge. She has everything delivered to her house. Rumors have been flying around since the day the moving company pulled into the driveway and unloaded her belongings.

She’s a recluse.

A vampire.

A witch.

A serial killer.

A child trafficker.

And a million other wildly crazy speculations.

Not gonna lie ... I stuck a few bulbs of garlic in my toolbox just in case.

After fixing the slow flushing toilet and the leaky faucet, I poke my head in the kitchen. It's all so familiar, even the sweet smell of sugar and vanilla bean wafting from the kitchen. My mom loves to bake.

Even the furniture is ... *was* mine. However, there are no Christmas decorations. Not so much as a string of tinsel or sprig of mistletoe. Our house used to be the biggest attraction in town over the holidays. Garland for days and enough indoor and outdoor lights to illuminate a whole galaxy.

"You're good to go," I say.

She glances over her shoulder, a bit of flour smudged along her cheek. "Thank you. Can you leave an invoice?"

"Sure." I take another glance around the kitchen. "Did you know this house has been here for generations?"

"Oh ..." She measures baking powder and deposits teaspoons of it into the long row of jars. "Are you originally from Birdville?"

"I am." I scribble out an invoice. "Do you like the house?"

She chuckles. "Sure. What's not to like? It's charming with a beautiful view of the river. The woodwork is a work of art. Every room feels like a warm hug this time of year."

I no longer feel that warm embrace, but it does have a beautiful view. There's an attic room with a colossal window that makes one feel suspended over the water because the drop beneath it is so steep. Growing up, it was my favorite room. My sister thought there were ghosts up there. After she died, I believed *she* was the ghost in the room. I wonder if she's still up there, trying to figure out how in the hell I managed to lose the family home.

"Well, here you go." I place the invoice on the counter away from the lineup of jars. "Let me know if you have any issues. I think it should be fine now."

"Do you bake?" she asks.

“Sometimes,” I say, hoping reheating pizza in the microwave counts.

She screws a lid on one of the jars and hands it to me with a wink. “For you, *Mason Ball*.”

Embarrassment fills my cheeks. Women are too observant for their own good. I clear my throat and offer her a sheepish grin. “Thank you.”



CHAPTER 2

“Henry, I saw your van at the Afina house this morning. What was she like?” My neighbor, Doyle, coughs from his old gray Chevy Malibu. Cigarette smoke billows out the one-inch crack of his window. Betty won’t let him smoke in the trailer since he set the last one on fire, so he spends most of his days smoking in his car while on neighborhood watch. The only thing that needs watching is him—so he doesn’t set anything else on fire.

“Uh ... she was fine,” I say, glancing up from my mail.

Doyle coughs up part of a lung. I expect a red *splat* against the window. Thankfully, there isn’t one. “Was she a hottie?” He waggles his bushy, white eyebrows before pinching his lips around his cigarette.

“I’d say she’s in her fifties, so I’m going to decline making any comment on her level of hotness.”

“Fifties, huh? She got a good pair of legs on her? I’m a leg guy. But you know this because you’ve seen my Betty.”

“Indeed.” I smile. “I’ve seen your Betty. There’s something about her. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but it’s special for sure.”

“Fingers to yourself, Henry.” He holds up his cigarette while wiggling his other fingers. “These digits will be the only ones to touch Betty’s *specialness* you speak of.” He winks at me. “If you know what I mean.”

I taste a little bile. “Good talk, Doyle ... good talk.” With a quick wave, I retreat into my trailer, peel open a can of wild caught salmon, and spread half of it on two slices of bread with some mayo and sweet relish.

My phone screen lights up with a text from my mom. It’s the middle of the night in Germany. What’s so urgent?

Mom: The garland’s in the attic. Use ribbons to tie it to the railing. Wire will scratch the wood.

“I don’t know if it’s still in the attic,” I mumble my reply. I’m on the fence about telling her the truth via text message or waiting until the last possible minute when I see her in person.

No garland.

No railing.

No house.

The Penneys might save me on this one. They have to. Five years ago, they had a house fire across the street from our house. Lost everything except human lives. Mom repeated, “It’s just stuff, Elizabeth,” to Mrs. Penney on so many occasions I lost count.

Just a house.

Just furniture.

Just materialistic things that don’t matter in the bigger picture.

With Christmas upon us, I have to believe my mother will heed her own sentiments and stay focused on that bigger picture when she discovers the Afina house and all of its belongings are no longer in the family.

Here’s the bigger picture: I haven’t gambled, not once, since I lost everything.

Baby steps.



CHAPTER 3

A bone-rattling gust of wind shakes my trailer in the middle of the night like an earthquake. In fact, when I wake to silence, I'm certain that's what happened because there's no wind. I lumber from my bed to get a drink of water and see if anything was damaged. While I tip back a glass of water, my vision snags on headlights pointed at the back of my trailer in such close proximity it seems unlikely they're not on my property.

"What the hell," I mumble to myself.

Squinting to see if anyone's in the vehicle, I grab my jacket and swing open the door.

A white BMW is parked in my yard. Parked is a generous word. Crashed is more like it. The hood is bent from taking out my mailbox which is on its side beneath my bedroom window.

I knock on the driver's window. "Yo! What have you done? You're in my yard! Are you alive?" I frown when the hunched body resting against the deployed airbag doesn't move. "Are you okay? Need me to call an ambulance?" I ease open her door.

A woman lifts her head with long dark hair stuck to her face. She blinks several times. "Where am I?"

"You're in my front yard. It's a ... no parking zone. I'm calling for help."

"No! No. No. Please no." She pounds her fists into the deployed airbag and searches for the seat belt. "No police. No

reporters. No one.” Her fingers peel the hair away from her face before she squeezes her body out of the car like the first stick of gum in a pack.

“You’ve done some damage to my property.” I nod to my mailbox on the ground.

She flinches when a gust of wind barges past me right into her car. “I’ll pay for it.”

“I’m sure you will, but I want it in writing, which means we need to call the police and make an official report.”

“Cash. I’ll give you cash.” She rubs her forehead with her palm. “Wait ... crap ... my wallet is at my house. Listen, help me get my car back to my house, and I’ll pay you double the damage and a little extra to keep this between us.” Her tired, brown eyes catch the glow of my porch light while she tucks her black hair behind her ears.

She’s rather ... pretty.

And it’s the middle of the night.

She’s shaky.

And she just mowed down my mailbox with her fancy car.

Yet ... she’s still mesmerizing for some reason.

“Why do you need help getting your car home? You can see over the airbag, and the dent in your hood isn’t too bad. It should run just fine.”

Her nose wrinkles while she hugs herself. “I-I’m feeling a little woozy. I think it’s best if I’m done driving for the night.”

“It’s after two in the morning, and you want me to what? Drive you home because after nearly hitting my house and killing me *you* feel a bit woozy?”

She’s broke. She stole this car, and she’s broke. What other reason would there be for her to be out at this time? Drugs? Maybe.

Her pouty lips dip into a frown. “It’s the holidays. Where’s your spirit of giving?”

I cough a laugh. “Spirit of giving? That’s just perfect. It’s always the person with the short straw getting lectured on things like the *spirit of giving*.”

She blinks slowly several times. “You have beautiful eyes. Did you know that?”

Pfft ...

Is she trying to flatter me? Does she think batting her eyelashes at me and complimenting my eyes is all that’s needed to remedy the situation? Is this supposed to get my dick hard?

It’s hard, but it’s more of a middle-of-the-night confusion, maybe even an angry kind of erection.

“Where do you live?” I ask.

“Five minutes from here.”

“Fine.” I fake a grumble, but I’d be lying if I said I’m not curious about her situation. And her. But mainly her situation.

Minutes later, she’s murmuring directions to her house.

I nod with each one. “What were you doing in the trailer park at two in the morning?”

“Research.” She stares out her window.

“Researching what?”

“The area.”

“Why?”

“Do you always ask so many questions?” She pins me with a look that would make a lesser man shudder. A lesser man with average eyes, not beautiful, blue eyes like mine. Yeah, yeah ... I fell for her compliment.

“When I’m driving strangers home in the middle of the night, I feel entitled with my line of questions. I’m Henry, by the way.”

She nods several times. “I’m aware.”

“Did I tell you my name earlier?” I squint at the road, trying to recall when I told her my name.

“Go right here. Then left.”

I turn right and then left.

“Last one on the right,” she says.

I let up on the gas, the tires slowing to a stop before I reach the driveway.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

I stare at the Afina house. “You live here?”

“I do.”

“I was here yesterday. I met the owner. She wasn’t you.”

Her head whips in my direction. “You were here yesterday? You’re the plumber?”

“Um ... yeah. Why?”

“I ...” She squints for a few seconds. “I had no idea.”

I laugh. “Why would you?”

Okay, this chick is not playing with a full deck of cards.

She shakes her head. “Lola ... uh ... you met Lola. She’s my assistant. I’m Serena.”

“You’re the writer?” I pull into the driveway.

“I am.”

“I don’t know if anyone in this town has seen you ... until now.”

“I don’t go out much.” She steps out of the car.

I follow her to the front door, zipping my jacket against the nippy air.

“Cash work?” She heads down the hallway. Just before taking a right into the office, she glances over her shoulder and eyes me. I think she has a tiny grin stealing her lips, but it’s hard to see in the dim light.

Do I amuse her? Is she flirting with me again?

I tear my gaze from hers and glance around more than I did yesterday. My mom is going to kill me for losing

everything. Unless ...

“I have a better idea,” I mumble.

She returns with an envelope. “Will two thousand cover your mailbox and your time driving me home?”

It’s a fifty-dollar mailbox. I charge seventy an hour as a plumber. Two thousand is more than generous. Or at least it would be if I didn’t need something else from her. “Listen, Serena ... can I call you Serena?”

“It’s my name. Go for it.”

“What are your holiday plans?”

Her eyes narrow in distrust. “Well ... my plans are to pretend it’s not the holidays.”

“Great. So you don’t have family coming into town? No big parties? Nothing like that?”

Her head eases side to side.

“I don’t want your money. I want to stay here for the holidays with my mom who will be arriving in a few days.”

Serena blinks for a good five seconds. “This isn’t a bed and breakfast.”

“I don’t need it to be a bed and breakfast. I just need it to be ...” I pop my lips a few times and adjust my shoulders into the most confident posture I can manage.

“To be what?” Her head cants.

“Mine. I need it to be mine just for the holidays. Until December twenty-seventh to be exact.”

“You need what to be yours?” Her eyes narrow even more.

“This house.”

Another long series of blinks. I’m not sure if she’s in shock or deep thought.

“Why?” she asks.

“This house is called the Afina house. It has been since it was built three generations ago by my great grandfather

Hermann Bechtel. I inherited it two years ago after my father died and my mother moved to Germany.”

Serena doesn't respond for several long moments. She's too busy chewing on the inside of her cheek, lips twisted. “So why'd you sell it?”

I bob my head side to side. “That's complicated. I didn't have a choice, but my mom doesn't know. And if I don't have to tell her before Christmas, I'll choose that option.”

“What's my role? If I'm not the owner, how will you explain me to your mom?”

Holy Christmas miracle ... is she really considering this? Just like that?

I honestly hadn't gotten that far, but now I need a solid plan. “You could stay at my place. A house swap for the holidays. No need for you and my mom to meet.”

Her brows draw together for a beat before she covers her mouth and snorts. “House swap? *This* for your trailer?”

“What's wrong with my trailer? Aside from the fact that it no longer has a standing mailbox?” I cross my arms.

Her nose scrunches. Then it relaxes as she sighs. “I'll stay upstairs in the attic.”

“For two weeks?”

She nods. “There's a mini fridge.”

“If my mom sees you—”

“She won't.”

This is too good to be true. I best not press my luck, so I nod.

“Why'd you lose the house?”

I narrow my eyes. “Why'd you run into my mailbox?”

“I have narcolepsy.”

“What?”

“It's a neurological disorder where—”

“I know what it is. I just wasn’t expecting that to be your reason.” I roll my eyes. But if I’m honest, I don’t really know a lot about narcolepsy, probably just a generic idea that it has something to do with not being able to stay awake.

“I’m more dangerous during the day. Sadly, I’m less likely to fall asleep at night. Except tonight.” She frowns. “That was unexpected.”

I chuckle. “Tell me about it.”

“Why’d you lose your great grandfather’s house?”

I glance at my phone. “It’s a quarter after two in the morning. Can we finish this conversation another time?”

Serena nods several times, curling her hair behind one ear.

I still don’t get why she’s going along with this so easily. Not that I’m complaining.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

I open the door. “Home.”

“How will you get there?”

“Legs. I’ve got a working pair. See you Monday. That’s when my mom arrives. I’ll bring groceries, clothes, and some photos to put back on the mantel. And we’ll have to decorate for Christmas before I pick her up from the airport. Are the decorations still in the attic?”

Her head inches side to side.

“Where are they?” I ask.

“I uh ... gave them away.”

“For Frosty the fucking snowman’s sake ... did you get rid of *all* the decorations? Not having this place decorated for the holidays is nearly as bad as no longer owning it. How am I supposed to explain this to my mom?”

She shrugs. “Not my problem. It’s my house. And I don’t decorate for Christmas. I had to get rid of some shit. Why would I keep it?”

“Shit? It’s not shit. Do you have any idea how many dollars in outdoor lights you gave away?”

“No.” She lifts one shoulder.

“Sorry, writer woman, you must be rich. Lucky you. But I’m not, and now I have to buy a crap ton of lights to replace the ones you gave away.” I shut the door behind me.

“Hey!” she yells when I reach the sidewalk. “You can’t be mad at me for that. Are you out of your mind?”

I keep trekking my way toward home. “You ran into my mailbox and stole my house. I can do whatever I want.”



CHAPTER 4

SERENA

“Hi.” I open the front door to my ... guest? No. That’s not right. Roomie? No. He’s not a roomie.

Tenant? Nope. Not unless he’s paying rent.

“Are ... you going to invite me in?” Henry asks.

“Of course. I was just trying to figure out how I would explain you if I had to.”

Henry stares at me with his duffle bag slung over a shoulder. “To your assistant?”

I shake my head. “She went home for the holidays. I mean ... just to anyone.”

He pulls off his beanie to reveal his dark head of matted hair. But those eyes ... their blue perfection makes up for everything else that’s a little unkempt. “I’m a thirty-one-year-old male. Six-two. A Pisces. I’m freakishly good at badminton and pickleball. Single, but not desperate. And I might have a walnut allergy because when I eat them my tongue feels like it’s been attacked by razor blades.” He shrugs. “You could start there if you have to *explain* me.”

I step aside and press my lips together for a beat before murmuring, “Not exactly what I meant.”

Henry stomps his brown work boots on the mat before stepping inside. “I’ll put my stuff away. If you want to help

out, you can get the lights out of the back of my van and take them out of their packaging.”

“I don’t want to help you do that.” I follow him to my bedroom, where he shoves clothes into drawers and onto hangers next to my clothes. “Do you know if there are hidden areas in this house? A secret door? A space beneath floorboards. Anything like that?”

Henry exits the closet, tossing his duffle bag on the floor and kicking it under my bed.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m looking for something.”

“If it’s in a hidden spot that you know nothing about, then it’s safe to say it’s not yours.”

I lift my chin. “Everything in this house is mine.”

He smirks. “I’m in this house.”

Don’t grin. Don’t grin!

I grin.

Henry’s amusement vanishes. “You scare me.”

“Why?” My accidental amusement sags into a frown.

“Because you’re too okay with this.”

“Okay with what? Owning you?”

He scoffs. “You don’t own me.”

“I own your *family* house. Your mom doesn’t know you lost it. And you’re living with me for the next two weeks. I think I pretty much own you.”

“I’m going to buy this house back from you. It’s only a matter of time.” He jogs down the stairs.

I shove my feet into my boots and snag my coat from the hook before following him to his van. “You are not buying back this house. It’s not for sale. It will never be for sale again as long as I’m alive.”

Henry chuckles, throwing open his van's side door. "So how's this going to go down? You're leaving me the house in your will? Or I'm going to have to..." he peeks back at me, and his gaze ping-pongs in both directions before a toothy grin steals his face while he makes a throat cutting gesture at his neck "...to you."

I frown. "The latter."

He lifts his eyebrows. "Really? I'm going to have to ..."

Again, he makes the throat cutting gesture.

"Stop." I giggle.

"See. You're laughing." With a load of lights in his arms, he struts to the front porch, dropping them unceremoniously on the top step. "That means you know how nonsensical it is for you to want to die in this house or die because of this house. This is a family heirloom to me."

"Yet you lost it or let it go. How exactly did that happen?"

"I'm just saying *if* my mom finds out you're in the attic, I'm going to need an explanation for you."

"That was a terrible subject change." I laugh, following him back to the van. The next thing I know, my arms are weighed down with lights. "I'm not helping you." I dump the lights on the top step next to the rest of them. "I have work to do."

"Writing?" he asks on his way to the garage.

I feel like a little dog chasing him, always two steps behind.

"We need to stick to discussing the things that matter," he continues. "How I lost this house is not important. The woman in the attic is very important. You could sneeze too loudly, and my mom will hear you." Retrieving the ladder from the wall where it's been since I bought the fully-furnished house, Henry takes it outside and props it up against the house.

"I'm now 'the woman in the attic?' Gosh ... just seconds ago I thought I was the homeowner."

With a little headshake, Henry grins. “Welcome to my world.”

“I’m going inside. Enjoy decorating this house for the last time.”

“Thanks for your help, Siri.”

“Serena,” I grumble a breath before closing the front door.



CHAPTER 5

HENRY

Sexy Siri is a tough one. Her lack of generosity makes it hard to think of her as sexy, but I'm willing to overlook her lack of help in the spirit of Christmas—and maybe a little because she accepted my offer. A fifty-dollar mailbox and no police report in exchange for two weeks at Hotel Afina.

I'm very suspicious of her lack of resistance to the idea, but I don't have time to figure her out. I have to figure out how I'm going to tell my mom that I've let her and the entire Bechtel family down. I fumbled the legacy ball. I'm a disgrace.

“Darling!” Mom hugs me, her thick red cardigan falling off her shoulders while her purse and carry-on bag hang from her arms.

“Hi, Mom.” I squeeze her tightly. It's been too long since we've been together. Even if she'll likely disown me after Christmas, I'm not going to let it ruin our reunion.

“It's so good to be home again.” She sighs while handing me her bag. “Have you visited your father and sister?” she asks as if they're in a house cuddled up next to the fireplace instead of six feet under dead grass and an inch of snow from last week.

“I have not. I thought we'd go together.” Or not at all. I'm not a fan of visiting graves. That's not where I feel close to the

deceased. Dad's ghost sits next to me in my work van, and Emily hangs out in the attic.

"Lovely idea." She chatters the whole way to the house and waltzes toward the front door, leaving me to carry her belongings. "Where's the wreath?" She halts several feet from the front door.

"It broke. Last year. I was going to find a new one but ..."

"You knew it was impossible since I made it." Mom glances over her shoulder while opening the door. She gives me a smile and wink.

"Yup." I had no idea she made it, but my feigned-innocent smile lies.

"Oh ... where's the garland on the stairs? And the mistletoe over the door? Henry ..." She peeks her head into the living room. "Where's the Christmas tree?"

"I thought we'd pick one out together." I rest my hands on her shoulders.

There's a clunking sound that comes from upstairs. I cough to see if it muffles the noise. "What's that?" She straightens, eyes narrowed.

No such luck.

"What's what?"

"That sound."

I shrug. Again, there's a *clunk*.

"Someone's upstairs," she says, heading toward the stairs. "Who's here?"

"Mom, wait ..."

"Did your Aunt Jan make the trip from Nebraska?"

"Mom—" I chase after her with her bags in my arms.

"OH!" Mom jumps at the top of the stairs.

Sexy Siri, wrapped in a towel, hair wet, eyes wide, slowly opens her mouth into an "O" or maybe an "oops."

“Oh my goodness! You have a girlfriend?”

Serena says, “No” at the same time as I say, “Yes.”

Shit!

Mom’s eyes widen, red lips parted, and she releases a tiny gasp. It *is* gasp worthy. That, I won’t argue. I’ve never had a girlfriend. I’ve had dates. Hookups. And a slew of awkward, sexual-tension filled situations with customers. Sadly, married women. But no girlfriend.

And definitely not a girlfriend who’s half-naked and denying that she’s my girlfriend.

Mom covers her mouth with a cupped hand, and she’s getting ... *dammit!* She’s getting all teary-eyed. I’m going to dash every single hope and dream she’s ever had for me.

No house.

No real girlfriend.

Merry-fucking-your-son-is-a-loser Christmas.

“Finally!” She quickly wipes the corners of her eyes.

Serena (yes, I know her name) stiffens, tightening the sash of her white robe as my mom hugs her, ignoring Serena’s adamant “no” answer to the girlfriend question.

“I think I’ve waited my whole life to meet you,” Mom squeaks with choked emotion.

Nobody waits their whole life for anything. The female genetic code comes with an extra chromosome of drama—sheer ridiculousness.

Serena’s eyes look like they might pop out of her head from the tight hug and total ambush.

“Honey...” I wet my lips and clear my throat “...buns ... uh ... surprise! My mom is here for Christmas.”

Mom holds her at arm’s length. “You’re so beautiful. I always knew my boy would find a beautiful woman. *Finally!* I’m getting grand babies.”

Oh no ... fuck me. Did she really say that?

Serena doesn't blink. Not once. Her gaze darts between Mom and me. A silent plea for an explanation.

"Sorry. Where are my manners? Mom, this is Serena. Serena, this is my mom, Martha." I pray for points from Serena for saying her name correctly.

"Serena. What a beautiful name. I can't believe Henry's kept you a secret."

Serena's brows scrunch together when she shifts her attention to me.

"Well, we're good at keeping secrets. Aren't we, doll face?" I wink at her.

She's going to kill me. My balls have already started their retreat to safety.

"So ... good." Serena finally manages two words.

"Well, get dressed." Mom kisses her cheek. "I'll change out of my travel clothes and start dinner." Mom heads toward Emily's old bedroom while Serena murders me with one look.

The bad kind of murder that involves slow torture.

"Give me a sec," I manage to say past the tight grip of death around my neck. I've never seen someone go so long without blinking. She's going to need some eyedrops. This house is rather dry in the winter.

By the time I deposit my mom's belongings in Emily's room, Serena is gone. The creaky stairs don't allow me to sneak up on her, which makes her condition quite shocking.

She's naked.

This is worth repeating. She's. Naked.

Granted, her back is to me.

Granted, she's in the process of stepping into a pair of polka dot underwear.

Granted, I should have asked if it was okay to come up here.

But ... she had to have heard me.

“Why the look, *boyfriend*?” Serena shakes me from my thoughts.

I tear my gaze away from her body and focus on her eyes. “It’s not like I was planning on this. You knew I went to get my mom from the airport. Why the hell did you wait until the last minute to take a shower? A noisy shower at that. Jeez ... could you have been any louder? What was I supposed to tell my mom?”

“It was the shampoo bottle. Then my conditioner. And I fell asleep after you left, so when I woke, I didn’t have much time. But I needed a shower.”

She’s speaking, but I’m too focused on her tits, taking a quick mental picture of them before she pulls a fluffy pink sweater over her wet head.

“Shower,” I mumble. “Got it.” While she steps into a pair of light blue jeans, I mosey toward the antique desk in front of the window. My attention shifts from the overcast December day to her desk littered with pens, highlighters, a keyboard, and an open notebook. “What is this?”

“It’s nothing. And it’s personal. And mine. So please give it back.” Serena reaches for the notebook when I snag it from her desk.

I turn in a slow circle, using my height and wingspan to keep her from taking it. She’s like a dog jumping for a toy being dangled just out of her reach. “Hermann Bechtel? Why is my great grandfather’s name in your notebook?”

She nabs it, but it’s too late to erase what I’ve seen. “Because ...” She hugs the notebook while I inspect her, void of all trust. She’s a slippery creature. I thought I was the one in control ... taking advantage of her mistake. Am I wrong?

“He built this house for my great grandmother, *Afina*.”

“Your ...” My thoughts trip over themselves. “Are you a cousin or something? I hope not. I’ve had a few inappropriate thoughts that I would never have about a cousin. I don’t get it. My great grandmother’s name was Marian not Afina. What are you talking about?”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.” She closes the notebook and shoves it into the middle desk drawer.

“What’s your play?”

She crosses her arms. “My play?”

“Yeah. You’ve been entirely too agreeable about all of this. You’re asking about hidden spots in the house. My great grandfather’s name is in your notebook. You’ve been relentlessly flirting with me. You’re obviously confused about the history of this house. I’ve seen you naked, which makes me think we might have sex. But now I think we might be related, so my mind is thoroughly fucked at the moment.” My thoughts don’t come out in order. I must have hit the shuffle button on my brain before I spoke.

Filter off.

Play shuffle.

Serena scoffs. “We’re not having sex, Henry.” She blushes and averts her gaze when she says it. “Your family has spent generations memorializing a house and the man who built it when it’s all been nothing but a glimpse of a tragic love story.” Her dark eyes meet mine again, but the blush remains. “Why do you think it’s called the Afina house?”

I blink several times. My dick has entered the conversation making it hard (pun a little intended) for me to focus on anything but her pink cheeks and the way she keeps wetting her lips. “The house is blue. Afina is blue in Romanian.”

“Albastru is blue.”

“How do you know?”

She rolls her eyes. “I have family from Romania.”

“So you’re asking me to believe that this house was named after your great grandmother who was not my great grandmother?”

“I’m not asking you to believe anything. I’m just stating facts.”

“Henry? Can you help me with dinner?” Mom calls from the main level.

“Yeah. Just a sec.” My lips twist, eyes narrowed at Serena.

“You can’t look at me like that. That’s not how a boyfriend looks at his girlfriend.” She winks and blows me a kiss before turning and plopping into her chair. “Shoo ...” Her wrist flicks over her shoulder. “I have work to do.”

“If you say anything to my mom about your ridiculous theory—”

“It’s not ridiculous. It’s the truth. But don’t worry, I’m not going to ruin anyone’s Christmas. You’re going to do that all on your own.”

“Because I said you’re my girlfriend?”

She twists, glancing at me over her shoulder. “The house, Henry. She’s going to be crushed that you lost the precious family home.” Her full lips twitch into a tiny grin. “But I’m flattered that you think she’ll be sad when she finds out I’m not your girlfriend.” On a shrug, she returns her attention to the computer. “I *am* quite the catch.”

I grunt and head toward the stairs. “I bet you fall asleep during sex. You and your narco ... whatever. I’d hardly call that quite the catch.”



CHAPTER 6

SERENA

After careful consideration, I've decided I can be Henry's girlfriend for two weeks if it gets me full access to his mom who probably knows a lot more about his great grandfather than he does. I bet she knows every crook and cranny of this house as well.

"How do you feel about oyster stew?" Martha asks, her hands busily chopping an onion.

"I feel like your son didn't mention my shellfish allergy." I smile.

Henry shifts his gaze after retrieving a pot from the hanging rack above the stove. His lips part to speak, but he says nothing.

"Oh dear ..." Martha frowns at him.

"However, I'm usually fine with oysters, clams, and scallops." I wink at Henry whose blank expression morphs into a tiny scowl.

"Thank goodness. This recipe was passed down from Henry's great grandma Bechtel."

"So she made it in this very kitchen?" I ask before opening the fridge to see how well he stocked it.

Very well.

It's at maximum capacity.

“She did indeed. This house is incredibly special to our family. Maybe ...” Martha glances over at me with a sheepish grin. “Maybe one day you and Henry will have a son and the tradition will continue.”

“Mom—” Henry’s face flushes as he adds a shot of Coke to his glass of whiskey.

I shut the fridge door. “What if we have girls?” I’m a writer. I can play this imaginary game.

“Well, I suppose times are changing. Should you have all girls, I think your firstborn girl should have this house. Don’t you?” Martha looks to her son for approval.

Henry eyes me for a second.

“Henry, what exactly was wrong with all the things I left you?” she asks while rifling through the drawers. “I don’t recognize a single thing in this kitchen. You could have at least put your new items in the same spot. It’s what makes most sense.”

He smirks, focused on his drink while swirling it. It’s a jab at me, but Martha doesn’t know it. *Yet.*

“Ask Serena. She’s the one who insisted we get new stuff. And she organized everything.”

“In that case, it’s fine.” Martha smiles at me. “Henry’s never had a girlfriend. You can do anything you want to the house if you stay with my Henry.”

He coughs, slowly shaking his head. “Thanks, Mom.”

“How did you two meet?” She slides the chopped onions into the soup pot.

“I was signing books at a bookstore in Cincinnati, and Henry was in my line.” I lean against the edge of the counter and cross my arms.

“Really? What do you write?”

“Literary biographies. I love history, studying the human condition, and finding common threads among us. There’s nothing better than being transported to another time in

another person's shoes who has lived a life rich in experiences, conflict, scandal, and even a little peril. I'm a sucker for tragedy and love."

"I can't wait to check out your books. And when did you start reading, Henry?"

He gulps the rest of his whisky and Coke and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "I was looking for a gift for my neighbor, and I saw Serena. She gave me the come-hither look, so I jumped in her line. She can't get enough of my eyes and my pretty little head."

Martha laughs. "Now that sounds more realistic. You do have beautiful eyes, just like your father's. All the Bechtel men have had beautiful blue eyes."

"Tell me more about the Bechtel men." I rest my hands on the edge of the counter.

"Well, I'm sure Henry told you his great grandfather built this house. It's called the Afina—" Martha starts to give me details.

"Why is it called the Afina house?" I interrupt.

Henry frowns at my question while refilling his glass.

I stare at the bottle before making eye contact with him again.

"Sorry, would you like a glass, *darling*?"

I slowly shake my head.

"Henry's great grandfather, Hermann, named it after the love of his life."

My heart constricts while my skin tingles with goose bumps. *She knows!*

"A Siamese cat named Afina. She died suddenly. Hermann found her dead the morning after his first night in the house. Can you imagine?" Martha slowly shakes her head.

"A cat?" I say, barely a whisper.

"Yes." Martha nods.

It's not that simple.

A cat?

A CAT?!

It's a flat-out lie. And weird. Absurd is more like it. Nobody in the whole Bechtel clan knows the meaning behind the name of this house they cherish—or now covet—so much.



CHAPTER 7

HENRY

I can't focus on work.

Merry cluster-fuck Christmas to me.

Serena is unpredictable and therefore untrustworthy. Worry strangles me every second I'm not home—well, at her house. Will she go off on her conspiracy theory about Afina to my mom? Will she let it slip that we are not in a real relationship? As is, we have to fake going to bed together every night. When my mom shuts her bedroom door, Serena goes to the attic to write. And I think—I hope—she spends most of the day, while I'm gone, falling asleep in the middle of taking notes in her secret little notebook.

“What are you working on now?” I slow my movements when I hear Mom's voice coming from the kitchen as I untie my work boots.

“I'm telling the story of a woman from a century ago who died of influenza eighteen months after she met the love of her life. She was a dressmaker in Cincinnati. They met when he came into her shop to order a dress for his mother. It was love at first sight. He built a house for her much like—”

Oh shit ...

I fake a cough so they hear me while I tear off my coat and hat.

“Is that you, Henry?”

“It is.” I poke my head around the corner. Cutout cookies, piping bags of frosting, and holiday sprinkles cover every inch of counter space. Cinnamon and vanilla fill the air along with Christmas music from my grandpa’s old turntable in the adjacent sitting room.

“How was your day, honey?” Mom smiles.

Serena smiles too, but it’s not comforting like Mom’s.

“Fine.” I wash my hands.

“There’s a powder room sink for your hands, Henry,” Mom scolds. “I taught you better than that.”

She did. But I can’t leave them alone for a second. Had I stopped to fix Mrs. Andrew’s clogged drain today instead of tomorrow, the atmosphere would be much different. Seconds count.

Ignoring Mom’s reprimand, I reach for a decorated cookie.

“No. Take one of those,” Mom says. “Serena decorated them. Eat her cookie. It will make her feel good after an afternoon of hard work in the kitchen.”

Serena’s cheeks bloom deep red. She’s thinking about me eating her cookie. She’s thinking it will make her feel good.

I’d do my best.

My gaze shifts from blushing Serena to my mom. It’s the only way to keep my dick in check. “Mmm ...” I take a bite of the cookie. “Serena’s cookie is good. Sweet. Moist.” I lick my lips and glance down at the sprinkles that drop to the floor. “And a little messy.”

Serena bites her lips together and focuses on the piping bag in her hands and the snowman she’s tracing in white.

“Kitten, you look a little tired. Have you had a nap today?”

Serena’s gaze shoots to mine, nose wrinkled. She’s not a fan of “kitten” or maybe pussies in general.

Oh well.

“Serena has narcolepsy. I don’t know if she’s mentioned it,” I say to Mom.

“Oh dear. I didn’t know that. Honestly, I don’t know a lot about it. Is that a sleeping disorder?”

“No worries.” Serena shoots me a stiff smile. “Your son doesn’t know much about it either. And I’m good. I want to help finish these cookies and clean up. Besides, your mom and I were in the middle of a conversation.”

“Oh, no, dear ... we’ll talk later. And I’ll have this cleaned up in no time. You go rest. I insist.”

“No. I couldn’t possibly—”

I slide my arms around Serena’s waist, pressing my chest to her back. She stiffens. I stiffen as well, just not in the same way. “Come on, my sweet little Christmas elf, let me take care of you.” I rest my chin on her head, thinking about kissing it, but I’m not sure we’re there yet, in our fake relationship.

Serena’s breaths quicken.

“Martha ...” She attempts one last plea with my mom.

“Go. Really.”

I smile at mom. *Thank you, Mother dearest.*

On a pitiful sigh, Serena surrenders, wiping her hands on a towel. “Thank you, Martha.”

“No. Thank *you*, sweetie.”

Oh joy ... they’re using endearing terms too. Have they also planned the wedding? I wonder what Serena’s planning on wearing for our wedding night? I’m partial to light pink and lace.

“I don’t need a nap,” Serena grits between her teeth while we ascend the stairs.

“Good. That means you’ll stay awake while we chat, button nose.”

“What are we chatting about, little chestnut?”

I grin.

“So glad you asked.” I slip my hands into the pockets of my cargo pants when she turns toward me after reaching the attic. “I thought we had an understanding. You keep your made-up story to yourself.”

She crosses her arms. “First, it’s not made up. Second, she asked about my current project.”

“Then you lie to her.”

“Whoa ... no. Just because you’re lying to your mom doesn’t mean I have to.”

I smirk. “So if you’re not lying to my mom, then you think we’re in a relationship.” I take a step closer to her.

She swallows hard.

“I’ll confess, since I’ve never been in a relationship, I can’t speak from experience, but I have it on good authority that people in a relationship have sex. *Eat cookies.*”

Her lips part, and I can hear her breaths one right after the other. I have *no* idea where I’m going with this or what I’m doing. Just like I have no idea why I’ve been mesmerized by this woman since she plowed over my mailbox.

It’s a joke. We’re joking. Bantering. Pretending. Right? Yet she helps herself to a long glance at my mouth before slowly inching her gaze back to mine.

“I’m never selling this house,” she says like it’s the only thing she can say to sound confident.

“We’ll see about that.” I let my gaze slide along her body.

“You should uh ... go help your mom clean up the kitchen.”

Scraping my teeth along my lower lip, *not* thinking about my mom, I murmur a slow “Uh-huh.”

“You look like your great grandfather.” Her unexpected comment brings my attention back to her face. “I’ve seen pictures of him.”

I slowly shake my head, closing my eyes briefly. “What are you talking about? Is this about your fictional account of

the history of this house?”

“No.”

“Then where are the pictures you have of *my* great grandfather?”

“They burned in a house fire my mom had several years ago.”

“Convenient.”

Serena frowns. “I’d hardly call it convenient.”

“It’s convenient that you’re trying to make claim to this house. And from what little I heard you tell my mom, I think you’re trying to imply your great grandmother was the great love of my great grandfather’s life.”

“She was. And if I find the hidden spot where he put letters from my great grandmother, Afina, and photos of them, then you’ll see the true history of this house.”

I chuckle. I can’t help it. This is ... crazy. “And you’re writing their story?”

Her head bounces into a noncommittal nod. “Well, I’m writing her story, and he’s part of it. She was orphaned. Then homeless. She was a survivor and very brave.”

“And she got influenza?”

Serena nods.

“And she died in this house?”

Another nod.

“If ... and it’s a big if ... what you’re saying is true, why do you think my great grandfather said Afina was a cat that died? Seems pretty insensitive to ‘the love of his life’ don’t you think?”

She shrugs. “I think he loved your great grandmother. If he was the man my great grandmother described in her journal, if his letters to her were true, then he was a good man. The kind of man who would love someone enough to make her feel like his first love even if she wasn’t. I don’t think true love is rare;

I think what's rare is the ability to truly love. I think good people recognize the abundance of love, the heart's ability to infinitely expand."

I nod several times. "Sure. I'll take your word for it."

She returns a shy smile. "Are you broken, Henry? Or have you not found your Afina? Are you still looking for the right person to crack open your heart and let your love flow freely?"

On a nervous laugh, I shake my head. "Is that what you think this Afina person did for my great grandfather?"

"I do."

"And who have you loved? Who opened your heart?"

"Well, I think the story of Afina and Hermann opened my heart as a young girl. I've loved. I've been married."

I can't help my surprise. "Really?"

"Yes. I married my publicist. He died of a heart attack. He died on Christmas morning."

Oh fuck ... is she serious?

"Hence you not celebrating Christmas ..."

With a half smile, she shrugs.

"I'm an asshole."

"Only for losing the family home, but it worked out for me, so I'm not complaining."

"It's not that simple."

"It never is," she says.

I give her response some consideration. I give *her* some consideration. "Well, I thought we were going to have fake relationship sex, but I feel like your dead husband put a damper on the moment. No disrespect to him, of course."

She chuckles. "Well, that's kind of you to not disrespect my dead husband as if it's his fault you suck at relationships. Real or fake."

"Ouch. That's harsh."

“Am I wrong? Are you living a life that will be worthy of ink on paper?”

“Listen, Henry, if a woman doesn’t make you think ... really think ... then keep moving. Find the one who takes your mind before your heart.”

My dad’s words echo from the past. He used to say my mom was the smartest person he’d ever met. Wise beyond her years. He said he fell in love with her words before she bewitched him with the rest of her enchanting self.

I’m not sure I like Serena’s Afina story, but I find myself thinking all kinds of things when I’m with her. And not just the things that make my dick stir—although, that happens a lot in her presence as well.

“I’m going to help my mom.”



CHAPTER 8

“I like her, Henry. You’re a lucky man.” Mom glances over at me when I grab a dishtowel and start drying the dishes.

“Yes, I’ve definitely outdone myself.”

Just not in the way you think.

“She told me she lost her husband on Christmas.”

“She did.”

She opened up to my mom before she told me. That’s not part of a fake relationship.

“She said it’s been hard to get in the Christmas spirit since he died. She also said making cookies with me today was the first time she felt like maybe one day she’d feel something besides grief. I think you’ve been a godsend to her.”

I bribed her to let me stay here. I’m not sure that counts as a “godsend.”

With little to say in response, I finish helping mom with the dishes and head up to check on Serena. I can’t stop myself from navigating toward her. It’s a foreign feeling.

When I open the door to the attic, Serena’s conked out on the blue velvet sofa, cuddled under a blanket.

I ease into her desk chair. Leaning back, I stare out the window, reminiscing about the days my sister Emily and I spent in this attic (when she wasn’t scared of ghosts) pretending we were in a snow globe. Sometimes we’d snoop through boxes, hunting for presents. But mostly, we listened to

Christmas music on my grandpa's old turntable and pieced together the train set that belonged to our dad.

With a smile on my face, I run my hand along Serena's antique desk. The screen lights up when I bump the mouse, filling most of it with lines and lines of words.

Words like "Afina." It's dotted all over the page.

Afina swiped her toe through the water, sending the cold droplets in Hermann's direction.

"Watch it, unless you're prepared to take a swim with me," he said, his voice guff.

Afina didn't miss the outline of a smile behind his thick beard. His legs swayed from the horizontal tree trunk dangling over the edge of the lazy Ohio River current. It was a rare moment to see Hermann with his brown trousers rolled up to his knees, shirt off, suspenders gathered at his waist.

"What are you doing?" Serena moves the mouse and the screen switches to an ocean with cliffs in the distance.

"I came to check on you."

"You mean snoop?"

I shake my head.

"What are you doing up here?" She yawns while pushing the desk chair. It rolls away from the desk just enough for her to wedge herself between her computer and me. Her arms cross, eyes narrowing. "I don't let anyone read my work until it's complete."

"Is it weird that I don't know anyone else with narcolepsy?" I cross my arms, mirroring her.

"It's like ... one in two thousand people have it. You live in Birdville. Population: just under seven hundred. You do the math."

"So you sleep all day?"

"I nap as needed."

“And when you’re not napping, you write stories about Afina and Hermann. Is it possible your great grandmother made everything up? Is it possible he asked Afina to make a dress for my great grandmother Marian, and Afina let her imagination run wild? Jealous of Marian and her life? Jealous of the house he built for her and not Afina? Is it possible that what’s been passed down in your family is fictional?”

She snorts, and I try not to like her smile, but I do. I like everything about her. Or maybe I just like being in this attic again, sharing space with someone.

“It was love at first sight for Afina and Hermann.”

“I don’t believe in love at first sight,” I say, staring out the window over her shoulder.

“No?”

I return my gaze to her, ready to shake my head, but I don’t for some unexplainable reason. “Do you?”

Serena smiles. “I believe in chemistry. Feelings. Emotions. A look. A smile. Perfect words at the right moment.”

Words ...

She continues, “I don’t think love is a culmination of anything. I don’t think it requires time. I think it’s a moment. The right one. No explanation. It doesn’t make sense. It’s just a mystery as old as time. People have been trying to define and redefine it forever. And much like life itself, no one really knows how long it will last. I mean ... maybe forever. Maybe not. But who cares? *Now* is as good as it ever gets.”

Words. She has damn good words. “When are you going to tell me why you were scared shitless at the idea of me calling the police the night you hit my mailbox?”

Serena eyes me for several seconds, an impending frown just seconds from capturing her lips. “When are you going to tell me how you lost this house?”

I shake my head and chuckle. “Tit for tat?”

“Sure.” Serena wets her lips.

I stare at them too long before clearing my throat and averting my gaze to the plush white rug on the floor. “I have a gambling problem. I mean ... I didn’t, but when my sister got sick, I couldn’t bear to watch my parents lose this house because of medical debt. I had a knack for winning. In hindsight, it was just dumb luck.”

Her nose wrinkles while she bites her lower lip. I kinda like it for some reason.

“They thought I was doing side jobs,” I continue. “But let’s be honest; it would have taken a ton of side jobs, and not giving Uncle Sam his cut, for me to have made a dent in the bills for those experimental treatments. I think Dad always knew I was doing something a little shady. And Mom didn’t blink or even take a moment to do any of the math. Every single one of us would have walked into a bank with a ski mask and a gun had we thought we could’ve gotten away with it. There’s really nothing you don’t do for people you love.”

Serena nods slowly, and a tiny flinch makes the muscles around her eyes twitch, but it’s gone as quickly as it happens.

“Emily surged into remission. Or so we thought. All that fighting ... then boom! A fucking blood clot takes her. Just...” I pull in a long, shaky breath through my nose “...gone.”

“I’m so sorry,” Serena whispers.

I blow that same breath out my mouth. “I needed to feel like everything wasn’t lost. The gambling became an escape from the grief. Money ... property ... just ... everything. It all felt so insignificant without Emily.” It takes a few moments of silence, silence for Emily, before I can look at Serena.

She quickly wipes her eyes.

Was she crying?

“Then my dad died. And I gambled away that pain too. I kept going until I lost everything.”

“And your mom never knew?” she whispers.

I shake my head. “Fate stepped in, and she moved to Germany before I lost the house. I think it would have

destroyed her. Emily ... my dad ... then the house that had been in our family for generations.”

Resting her hands on the side of the desk, Serena’s gaze drops to her feet. “My husband died three years ago. He was my publicist. My lover. My best friend. He was the good morning kiss I miss more than anything. He was the warm embrace that lulled me into a peaceful slumber.” Glancing up, she offers a sad smile. “He died on Christmas. It destroyed me. We buried him, and days later I brought in the New Year with a lot of alcohol. In fact, I spent the following year drowning in alcohol. I ran my husband’s golf cart into the swimming pool. I was *so* intoxicated. My seventy-three-year-old neighbor saved my life.”

“Numb is good,” I whisper.

She shakes her head. “No. It’s awful. What’s the point of being here if we don’t feel anything? I sobered up, and I let the pain in. Then I was diagnosed with narcolepsy which one doctor thought might have been triggered by my husband’s death and the alcoholism that ensued. My publisher threatened to drop me after the golf cart incident. Then I wrecked my car, completely sober, because I fell asleep at the wheel at three in the afternoon. I hit a tree. There were some pictures of it that got out and rumors of me falling off the wagon. My blood test came back negative for alcohol, but my publisher was not in the mood to believe me. Without proof, they had to give me one more chance. So now, I have to stay out of trouble. They couldn’t care less if I’m driving drunk or driving asleep.”

“No police reports,” I say.

“No police reports.” She returns a sharp nod.

“I’m a dick. Staying here. Wrapping the whole damn house in decorations which must cause you more pain—”

Serena shakes her head. “I’m not triggered by the holidays. I’m just not in the mood for them. I don’t know ... it feels disrespectful to him to enjoy this time of year. Is that weird?”

“No. I mean ... you’re asking the guy who’s pretending this is still his house so he can lie to his mom. Oh ... and he’s

told her you're his girlfriend."

A beautiful, although hesitant, smile graces her face. "I'm sure there's worse things in the world than being your girlfriend."

It gives me a moment of pause. Is she ... flirting with me? Have I been right this whole time?

"So what do you do to escape the pain if you don't drink?"

She glances over her shoulder at the window and the picturesque view of the swirling snow above the river. "I write," she whispers before turning back toward me. "What do you do to escape the pain if you don't gamble?"

"Drink." I give her a sheepish grin and shrug a shoulder.

Her eyes widen for a second, lips parted, then she covers her mouth and snorts.

I smirk, scooting the chair closer to her. Why? I have no clue. It just feels necessary.

My invasion of her space sobers her humor rather quickly. She drops her head and clears her throat while squirming a bit in our now confined space. "Did you ever sit on Santa's lap at the mall?" she asks, scraping her teeth over her bottom lip. It's unexpected.

It's also sexy. Is she trying to be sexy? If so, it's working. Wetting her lips. Asking me ridiculous random questions. It's all working.

My socked feet slide next to hers. "Maybe. Have *you* ever sat on his lap?" I lift my gaze from our feet to her slow blinking eyes, her soft parted lips, and her long black hair pulled over one shoulder with a few strands falling in her face.

She eases her head side to side while pushing off the desk. I lift my hands, pausing a second before pressing them to the back of her legs, the thin material of her leggings soft against my calloused palms. I'm way out of my league. Lost in a forest without a compass. For once, I don't mind feeling lost.

It's been a shitty few years. Inches of snow barricade us in this house. And I can't help but touch my fake girlfriend.

“Is this how you would do it?” she asks, crawling onto my lap, hands sliding around my neck.

I return a nervous laugh. I’m not sure why since I was the brave one to make the first move. “I wouldn’t choose this exact position, but I’m one hundred percent certain Santa would be fine with you sitting on his lap like this.”

Serena grins, bending forward. Her lips brush my ear as she whispers, “Are you going to ask if I’ve been naughty or nice?”

I retract my earlier statement. If she did this to the old guy at the mall, she’d give him a heart attack. Granted, he’d die a happy man.

“I uh ... I think it would be nice if you just decided to be a little naughty ... with me.” My hands mold to the curve of her ass while she presses her palms to my cheeks and kisses me. An inferno of lust heats my face; her hands might burn. It’s hard to breathe. Suffocation has never felt so good.

Fuck, I hope I’m not the schmuck who has a heart attack.

Her tongue slides along mine, and she tastes sweet like cookies. I don’t know if it’s the massive amount of blood my dick is demanding, but for some reason I’m dizzy.

Lost.

Floating.

“My husband died three years ago ... My lover ... My best friend ... The good morning kiss I miss ... The warm embrace that lulled me into a peaceful slumber.”

Her words replay on a loop in my head. My fingers ghost up her back on the inside of her sweater only to find she’s not wearing a bra. This discovery sends another round of blood to my dick, making things really uncomfortable.

Standing on her knees, she discards her sweater, tossing it onto the floor. I lift my gaze to hers when she threads her fingers through my hair, her tits inches from my face. Keeping my gaze affixed to hers, I tease her nipple with my tongue.

And cup both breasts.

Squeeze them until her mouth falls open.

I'm dying here ...

Heavy breaths rush past her lips. Those dark eyes drift shut for a brief second before opening in a slow blink. A tiny, sharp inhale hisses through her teeth the second I switch to her other nipple. When her hips rock into my chest, I begin to unravel.

I lift her to the sofa where she fumbles with my pants. I stretch, tug, and peel her leggings down to her feet, and she kicks them off.

God ... where is her underwear?

It's as if she knew when she got dressed that I'd be ripping her clothes off, determined to put my dick inside of her.

I mumble a quick, "Condom?"

She strokes me a few times as both of our chins dip to watch her. It's sexy and mesmerizing. No joke ... this might kill me. My arms flex while I hover above her, and my hips slowly rock into her touch. Her warm ... soft ... touch.

"I don't care," she says.

Is that really an answer? She doesn't care if I wear one? She doesn't care if she gets pregnant? An STD?

I mull this over for all of ten seconds before my brain makes this quick calculation: she's an adult who knows how babies are made and STDs are spread. She's educated. So "I don't care" must mean she's already handled the birth control, and she thinks I'm an unlikely candidate for passing around STDs. That's all I need to know before I let her hand guide my dick between her legs.

She's reckless and I'm daring. The alcoholic and the gambler. What could go wrong?

"Fuck that feels good," she says when I push into her.

Her vulgarity is hot. Really hot. My thoughts go a hundred different places all at once.

Does she want me to go slow? Is she feeling as needful as I am, wanting nothing more than for me to pound into her over

and over? Is she good on the bottom? Would she rather be on top?

Her legs hug me to her while her lips peck at mine. Her rocking pelvis says fast.

I can do fast.

She digs her heel into my ass.

Hard.

I can do hard.

Her nails curl into my back, and I lose all control.

Unfettered need feels as good, maybe even better, than any high I've felt from gambling. This is messy, clumsy sex. We're not out to impress each other; we're in it for the endgame. The glorious release.

We kiss.

We lick and bite.

We claw and grab, looking for any sort of leverage to go faster and harder.

Animals. Yep. We're completely animalistic.

"Oof!" I hit my head on the floor when we fall off the sofa.

Serena grins without pausing a second to see if I'm okay. She tosses a leg over and rides me hard.

The room fills with tiny grunts, heavy breaths, and the rhythmic slapping of skin. I roll us so Serena's beneath me.

As I move inside her, my face hovering just above hers, she grins. It's the "what are we doing?" grin. I return the same grin, but I also feel a tiny stab in my chest. It's something new. I want to slow my pace because this unfamiliar feeling is one I kinda like. One I don't want to end. One I feel the need to explore.

When that feeling starts to distract me from the task at hand, I kiss her lips, her neck, her breasts. I close my eyes and think back to the last time I felt this way.

That's easy ... never.

She arches her back and stills, gripping me with her hands and her legs. I come so fucking hard I can't hold my head up, so I drop it next to hers, my lips at her ear.

“Damn. Just ... damn.” A slight shiver shakes me.

Her giggle spreads along my sweaty skin like she's touching me everywhere at once. “Damn indeed, Henry Bechtel.”

I should move. Remove myself from her. Face that awkward moment of deflated passion. We can't cuddle. That requires something more than jacked-up hormones on a snowy day.

But ... Serena's fingers feather along my back, and her legs remain firmly wrapped around me. I feel the pulsing of her heart next to mine. And I wonder if I'm the first man she's been with since her husband died.

Should I say something?

It was just sex. I think.

My lack of relationship experience is really messing with me right now. There's a low probability that my next move will be the right one. I definitely wouldn't bet on myself right now.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

You're welcome?

My pleasure?

Sure thing?

Anytime?

All terrible answers.

I lift my head, searching her eyes for the right one.

Nope. I don't have it.

I go for a tiny nod and a sincere smile, hoping less is more.

In the next breath, I step into my pants while Serena fishes her arms into her sweater.

“I’m uh...” I poke my head through my shirt “...I’m going to clear your driveway in case you need out. Then I’m going to help my mom with dinner. Then—”

Before I can list off the rest of my plans for the day, Serena lifts onto her toes and kisses me, ending with a smile before leaving my lips. “I’ll see you at dinner. I need to write.” She wraps the blanket from the sofa around her waist and disappears down the stairs.

I follow her, but I continue on to the main level when she disappears into the bathroom.

“Everything okay?” Mom asks while browning ground beef in a pan. The woman is always in the kitchen.

I run my hands through my hair and make sure my fly is zipped. “What do you mean?”

“I went upstairs to freshen up before making dinner and I...” she grins, redirecting her gaze to the pan “...heard something in the attic. Everything up there creaks with the slightest movement. I heard a lot of creaking.”

Nope. We are not having this conversation. Not ever.

I grab a glass of water. “I’m going to clear the snow from the driveway.”

“She’s sweet, Henry. And she loves everything about this house. And she looks at you like you’re her world. I think it’s a sign.” Mom continues to stir the meat. I nab another cookie from the cooling rack. Serena *should* love the house since she owns it. As for the way she looks at me? I have no clue.



CHAPTER 9

SERENA

I avoid Henry for days and days. I mean ... we pass each other in the hallway, but all I can do is give him a quick smile and chirp, “Lots of writing to do.”

Carolers stop at the house every night, and every night Martha serves them hot drinks and the cookies we made. I think of Jack and the day he died, but in the next breath I think of Henry ... and Afina and Hermann. My grandma used to tell me her mom’s love story with Hermann, and she always ended it with “*Maybe there’s a young Hermann Bechtel out there who will build you a house and help you fill it with children.*”

In the early morning hours of Christmas Eve day, while Henry and Martha are still asleep, I search the main floor for the hidden spot—the letters and photos I know are in this house. It’s only a matter of time before I find them. They hold the other side of the story I’m writing. I need my grandmother’s words. The ones she wrote to Hermann.

When the drawn shades begin to glow from the first rays of the morning, I give up. My socked feet climb three steps.

I stop.

Then I retreat to the wider first step that’s always creaked a little more. It’s always had a little wiggle to it.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

It sings a different tune than the rest of the stairs.

My eyes dart around the foyer, looking for something to use on the stair. I search the kitchen, the bathroom, then the

living room.

“Perfect,” I whisper, plucking the matte black poker from the rack of fireplace tools in front of the hearth.

Wedging the pointed end under the loose stair, I lever it until the first plank of old wood lifts with a snap. Cringing, I stop and listen for any movement upstairs. Then I carefully pry it back some more, each inch releasing a tight whine. My hand fishes into the tiny gap, and I feel around, hoping something like a rat doesn’t bite my finger. Just beyond the loose debris, like dirt and saw dust, I feel something softer.

I try to retrieve it, but I can’t. The opening is not big enough. I know I’ve found the letters and photos. I just ... know. Adrenaline takes over. I no longer ease the wood planks from the bottom stair; I use the poker to rip them apart and retrieve the cloth covered bundle of history.

“Serena! What have you done?”

Glancing up at the stairs, I see Martha in her robe and slippers, shock distorting her beautiful features while she grabs the railing and navigates the stairs. “You’ve ruined that step. What are you doing?”

I stare at the splintered pieces of wood surrounding me, but my gaze quickly returns to the treasure on my lap. “I’ve been looking for this since the day I moved in here,” I whisper, tugging at the twine around the cloth-wrapped package.

“What the hell is going on?” Henry’s voice drifts from the top of the stairs.

I lift my head, eyeing both of their pained expressions. “I found it,” I say with so much relief and an unavoidable smile.

“Found what?” Martha sidesteps my mess and bends to pick up the broken pieces of wood.

“Serena ...” Henry says my name slowly, just as slowly as he descends the stairs.

A small stack of black and white photos rests on top of the brittle, yellowed folded pieces of paper. His photos are

different than the ones Afina had, but they tell the same story. They were in love.

“What is all that?” Martha asks.

Henry squats beside me, taking one of the photos. Hermann is hugging Afina from behind, kissing her cheek while she smiles. I bet it was a giggle.

“Afina wasn’t a cat. Afina was the woman Great Grandfather Bechtel built this house for,” he murmurs with a slightly defeated tone.

“That’s not true,” Martha says, clearly flustered.

“It’s true.” Henry stands and hands the photo to her while I open one of the letters, instantly recognizing the handwriting from Afina’s journal.

“This is why I bought the house. To find these letters.”

And just like that ... I let the truth slip.

“What are you talking about?” Martha asks.

I glance up at Henry from my cross-legged position on the floor.

He frowns. “I lost the house.” Henry proceeds to tell his mom everything.

There are tears, not just from her. There’re smeared along my cheeks as well.

Emily.

The expensive treatment.

Debt.

His father dying.

The addiction.

The pride and need to protect his mom.

“So ... you ... what? Just happened to start dating the woman who stole our house?” Martha’s desperation bleeds with each word.

“She didn’t steal it. And the opportunity to keep this from you for a little longer just sort of arose, and I took it because I felt so much shame and regret.”

“Well, when you get married, the house will be back in the family. I mean ... you’re going to marry her, right?”

My heart constricts as I stand, brushing off my legs; Martha’s so desperate for this to be true—and it constricts because I’m emotionally invested in his answer. *Really* invested in it.

Truth? I think I fell a little in love with Henry before I ever met him. I’d built up this idea of a Hermann Bechtel heir in my head, and when we came face to face, he didn’t disappoint.

Mesmerizing blue eyes.

A boyish smile.

An irresistible personality.

“I’m not marrying Serena. She’s not my real girlfriend. This has all been a terribly cruel farce to save face.”

I’m not his girlfriend. Okay. That’s fair. Sex doesn’t equal a relationship.

“You lost it *all*? Everything?” Martha says. Her words barely audible.

Henry nods.

Martha shakes her head, and her expression morphs into a harder one, anger ... resentment. Hate? She aims it at me. “You can’t have this house. I don’t care what you think this Afina woman meant to Hermann. This was Marian’s house. This is where she raised her children and her children raised their children and ...” She swallows hard and clenches her jaw. “This is where I raised *my* children. My Emily died in th —” A sob rips from her chest. “T-this house. And my husband ...”

“Shh ...” Henry pulls her into his arms and strokes her hair.

I wipe a tear from my cheek. I feel her pain. But my family's life hasn't been without tragedy either. I have no words. I choke on every single one that tries to find life past my lips while watching Henry collect his and his mother's personal belongings and load them into his van. After Martha heads toward the driveway, Henry stands at the front door.

He can't even look me in the eye. "The night you hit my mailbox, were you *researching* me?"

"Yes," I whisper.

"For your fucking book?" His gaze finds mine. It's no longer soft and endearing. It's stony. Angry.

"No. I wanted to—"

"Save it. Just save it for someone who cares. Enjoy the house and your pile of letters and photos. You can go back to your life as a recluse."

The door clicks shut.

I wait ... I ponder ... for a full thirty seconds before running outside in my socked feet and no jacket. As Henry backs out of my driveway, I bang on the passenger window.

He stops.

Martha won't even look at me.

I open her door and slap the pile of letters and photos onto her lap. "*You* read them. *You* look at all the photos. I don't need them. I already know. I know Hermann was a good man who loved Afina. I know he built this house for her. And I know he moved on to love another woman and have a family with her. I know that generations of Bechtels have lived here. But now, it's my time. It's my time to live in this house ... that he built for *my* great grandmother. This house is ready to tell a different story."

I slam the door shut and run into the house, freezing, and shaking right to my bones.



CHAPTER 10

HENRY

“Hey,” I say the next morning, emerging from the bathroom, showered and dressed, hair wet and in need of a trim, along with my scruffy face.

Mom gives me a sad smile. Last night she refused to take the bedroom. From the looks of the bags under her eyes, I don’t think she did much sleeping last night. The photos and letters are scattered all over the sofa beside her.

She looks ... defeated.

I did this.

“Merry Christmas,” she says with very little merriment to her greeting. “It’s a beautiful love story.”

I run my hands through my messy hair and take a seat in my recliner, resting my elbows on my knees. “I’m sorry I lied to you. I’m sorry I let things get so out of hand. I just wanted to save Emily. I just wanted to—”

“Don’t.” She shakes her head. “Don’t do this, Henry. I’m not angry. I’m grateful for everything you did. And I’m sad.” She pulls in a shaky breath. “I’m sad that I didn’t see it. What kind of mother doesn’t see that her child is struggling? I was so focused on Emily that I just ...”

“I’m fine.” I nod several times. “I’m fine. This trailer is all I need. We both know it’s unlikely I’ll ever need more than this.”

She grunts a little laugh and shakes her head. “You had me fooled. Both of you. I thought I felt the chemistry between you. I thought I *heard* it.” She rolls her eyes at herself. “I thought I saw something in the way you looked at her and the way she looked at you.” She nods toward the scattered letters. “When I read these letters, I could hear Serena’s voice. And I could imagine it was the two of you falling in love. The kind that takes you by surprise. Something undeniable. Do you know what I mean?”

I take a minute.

Mom laughs again before I can answer her. “Of course you don’t. But I wish you did, Henry. I wish you could experience that indescribable feeling of love. That connection that just ... happens when you least expect it.”

Okay, Dad ... I hear you.

I stand, slowly gathering the letters and photos.

When I set them on the counter and grab my jacket, Mom gives me a narrow-eyed gaze. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to see if there are grandkids in your future.”

It takes her a few seconds. Then she gets teary-eyed and presses her hand to her chest. “It was real,” she whispers.

I pull on a beanie and grab the pile of letters and photos. Then I wink at her. “Frighteningly real.”

On my way to the Afina house, I wonder how this works. I’d seen my dad do it on countless occasions.

Groveling.

What are the chances I nail it the first time?

I knock several times on the wreath-less door. Then it hits me.

It’s not just Christmas. It’s the anniversary of her husband’s death. What am I thinking?

I turn to head back to the van. Then I turn and take several steps back toward the house. And again, I retreat toward the van. “Fuck!” I kick a pile of snow and nearly fall on my ass. In

the process of keeping my balance, the letters and photos scatter all over the ground. “You’re an idiot, Henry,” I scold myself, dropping to my hands and knees to pick everything up. “Two weeks,” I continue talking to myself. “You fell in love in two fucking weeks? How ridiculous. It’s not love. It’s just that your dick was caught off guard.” I continue to gather the letters and photos, just ... mumbling away at myself. “But your dick isn’t in your chest, and that’s where you feel her. What’s that supposed to mean? Have you thought about that?” My third-person conversation reaches an all-time low.

“It means you love me, Henry Bechtel.”

I freeze, glancing up at the porch while easing my butt onto my heels.

Serena smiles. The snow-melting kind of smile.

“I shouldn’t be here.” I shake my head. “I’m an asshole. What I said ... it was terrible. And your husband died—”

“On Christmas.” She walks down the porch steps in her fluffy boots, leggings, and red sweater. “I had to let him go on Christmas.” Her hand reaches toward me. “Take it.”

I stare at her hand, then I take it, lumbering to my feet with most of the photos and letters clutched in my other hand.

Serena’s dark hair falls behind her shoulders when she gazes up at me.

“What now?” I say.

She lifts onto her toes until her lips are a breath away from mine. “Now ... don’t let go.” Her lips bend into a grin as they touch mine.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jewel is a free-spirited romance junkie with a quirky sense of humor.

With 10 years of flossing lectures under her belt, she took early retirement from her dental hygiene career to stay home with her three awesome boys and manage the family business.

After her best friend of nearly 30 years suggested a few books from the Contemporary Romance genre, Jewel was hooked. Devouring two and three books a week but still craving more, she decided to practice sustainable reading, AKA writing.

When she's not donning her cape and saving the planet one tree at a time, she enjoys yoga with friends, good food with family, rock climbing with her kids, watching How I Met Your Mother reruns, and of course...heart-wrenching, tear-jerking, panty-scorching novels.

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THE LUCKY ONE



SARINA BOWEN

A Brooklyn Hockey story



CHAPTER 1

AUGUST

My third practice in Brooklyn, New York, is just as brutal as the first two had been. It's not just that I'm disoriented in a new city, and surrounded by people who don't know me. But the language barrier makes everything worse.

At least when I was skating for Minnesota, they had a Finnish goalie. When I got into a real bind, I could always ask him to translate.

Not so lucky in Brooklyn. Today the assistant coach wanted to give me a specific note, so he spoke it into Google Translate.

What came back on his phone, in Finnish, said: *Two left feet to hockey go fast.*

Fucking apps. I'd only nodded, as if I could understand.

My teammates are nice enough. The captain always tries to give me an encouraging smile. But I feel like a dunce, and it's exhausting.

If only I'd been a better student. My siblings are all brilliant English speakers. But I'd been a stubborn young man, caring only for hockey.

Lesson learned.

After practice, it's tempting to throw myself down on the hotel bed and take a midday nap. The traffic noise outside my hotel has kept me awake at night. It's not that the noise is so

loud, but it reminds me how far from Finland I am. 6600 kilometers, to put a number on it.

I checked.

Sleep beckons, except I'm starving. So I throw my gym bag down and remove my sweatshirt. Then I tuck my phone and my wallet back into my shorts and head back out to find some lunch.

Outside, the sidewalk is crowded with pedestrians crossing in every direction. People in New York walk fast—like they're all late for something.

I don't know where I'm going, but I choose a direction and commit. I'm rewarded a few minutes later when the buildings get shorter and the sidewalk less crowded. There are small shops and bars.

This neighborhood near my hotel is lively. It would be nice to live here, except it's too far from the rink. I'm supposed to call a real estate professional and ask him to help me find an apartment. But I have yet to do so. Most of my waking hours are devoted to hockey. And after practice, I'm too tired to call a stranger and try to string more English sentences together.

Speaking English with the team feels like running down the gas in a car. After several hours, there's nothing left in the tank. By noon every day, my brain has done all the English it can, and I'm just done.

That's why I keep turning down my teammates' invitations to lunch. I know they're just being polite, anyway. Talking to me is a lot of work.

As I reach a tree-lined corner, I slow down and examine the restaurant on the other side of the street. The neon sign which reads *Romano & Bianchi* is both hip and inviting. The building has garage-style doors that roll up to admit the late summer sunshine. A couple is visible in the open air, with a mostly-eaten pizza in front of them on the table.

The pizza looks fantastic, and I'm so hungry that my stomach rumbles on cue. As I cross the street, I have the worst urge to snatch their leftovers and eat them like a hungry dog.

Yes, I know that's frowned upon in polite society. So I point my feet toward the open front door instead.

Luckily, I love pizza, and I can also *say* pizza, because the word is the same in Finnish.

I stride through the front door before I can change my mind. There are a dozen or so tables which are mostly empty by now. It's a little late for lunch. In fact, there's a sign on the podium inside the door which says LUNCH 12-3, DINNER 5-10.

A quick glance at my watch makes my heart drop. It's 2:52.

Oh no.

A woman is already striding purposefully toward me, though. Her shiny, dark ponytail bounces as she turns her face in my direction. Suddenly, the dread of having to speak to strangers notches down a couple of clicks. For one thing, she's exquisitely beautiful, with a heart-shaped face and warm-toned, deeply tanned skin.

Even better—there's a warmth to her dark brown eyes that calms me right down, even as she begins speaking words that I don't understand. Except one of those words was *lunch*.

"Please," I say. "Lunch."

She spins elegantly around, heading for a table at the window on the empty side of the room. She moves with casual, feminine confidence that is appealing.

Okay, *very* appealing. And if I'm honest, I enjoy the sway of her ass in her short black skirt.

When she reaches the table, she turns around. I raise my chin to a respectable angle just in time. Although I'm still taking in every last detail—her high cheekbones, and the way her dark blue blouse compliments her rich coloring. Her lipstick is shiny and perfect in a way that makes me want to kiss it off her. She's wearing a name tag reading *Chiara*, and I wonder if that's a common name in America, or not.

She sets the menu down and says something quickly that I miss. But context is everything, and by the gesture she makes toward the kitchen, and toward the smart watch on her wrist, I'm positive she told me to hurry up and choose something.

I squint at the menu, quickly locating the pizza section. Then I pull out my phone and begin translating the toppings. "Prosciutto" is some kind of ham. The thought of it just makes me hungrier. "Basil" is easy because the Finnish word is *basilikka*. But "mushroom" requires me to tap in the word, because we call those *herkkusieniä* in Finnish.

And the waitress is already back, smiling at me and asking the only sentence I've understood so far. "Would you like pizza?"

"Yes, please," I say.

"What do you like on top?" Her smile is so pretty that it wrecks me a little. Everything I've just translated dives right out of my head. "Uh, you..." I say.

She blinks.

"Sorry. I..." I bury my face in my hands. "Have little English. I mean—please you tell me what is like on pizza."

Ugh. Even I know that's a horrible sentence. I want to die of embarrassment.

But she doesn't laugh. She reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder, and the warmth of it calms me down a notch. "I have an idea, okay?" She reaches down and plucks my phone off the table. I see her tap something into my translation app. Then she hands it back.

She's translated: *Is there anything you DON'T like on pizza?*

I like a woman who cuts to the chase. I type *ananas* into the Finnish side of the app, and press translate. Then I hand her the phone.

When she reads it, she gives a warm chuckle that I feel in my belly. "Okay then. Can I just bring you my favorite pizza?"

I nod, more confident in the appealing gleam of her gaze than I am in my ability to understand what she just said.

“Great.” She grabs my phone again and taps something quickly. Then she sets it down, trots off toward the kitchen and calls out— “One more, Uncle Rico! A medium pie, the Chiara Special!”

A grumble sounds from the kitchen, and I pick up my phone to read what she wrote. *Maybe we should form a club, because I agree with you. Pineapple has no business on pizza.*

When I catch her eye, she winks at me. And I fall a little further in love. Although I wish we could have a real conversation.

I watch her cash out the couple at the far table, smiling and speaking easily with them. And the week’s exhaustion settles into my chest like a heavy weight. It’s so much effort to communicate the smallest things.

Maybe food will help. It’s the only idea I’ve got.



Chiara brings me a tall glass of cold water, plus bread in a basket, with olive oil for dipping. And then she brings me a small green salad which I demolish instantly.

When the pizza finally arrives, it’s gorgeous. A crisp crust blackened in spots by the wood-fired oven. The cheese bubbles. The scent of garlic washes up to my nose. But it’s a funny pizza—one half green, one red. I’ve never seen that before.

“Here you have the pesto, feta and vegetables,” she says, pointing at one half. “That’s the healthy side. I like artichokes and peppers and onions. But over here are all the meats—you’ve got your prosciutto, pepperoni, and olives on a margherita base.” She pats me on the shoulder. “Enjoy!”

And I do. In fact, I eat the whole pie. Every slice. It’s delicious, and I haven’t felt so well cared-for in months.

“Could I have coffee?” I ask, because I know how to pronounce it, and I’m not quite ready to leave this perfect moment.

She brings me dark espresso in a dainty white cup. And then she brings out a tray with three things on it—a slice of cheesecake, a tiny plate of little cookies, and an ice cream scoop, which I understand to be a clue as to what their other dessert would be.

I point at the small cookies, and she places them on the table with a smile. “Take your time, hon,” she says. Then she gives me a patient smile.

That smile could break a man.

Specifically this man.

It’s been a long week, and maybe I didn’t handle it all that well. But I know one thing with absolute certainty: I need to learn English.

Or else this perfect woman won’t want to date me.



CHAPTER 2

OCTOBER

“Fuck this noise!” one of my teammates shouts when practice is over. “You D-men have got to get your shit together.”

The fact that I can understand him means that my English is improving. But it’s cold comfort.

Six weeks in, my life in Brooklyn is a slog. I’m still living out of a hotel, because I can’t find an apartment close to the rink that’s also in my price range. My paycheck is not small, but I don’t have any job security. If I sign an expensive lease, and then I’m traded again, I’ll blow up my budget on months of promised rent.

Also, my team is on a losing streak. The other new defenseman—the veteran player who’s supposed to become Brooklyn’s latest star—is also having a difficult time settling in.

On the one hand, at least I know I’m not the cause of all our woes. On the other hand, we could use a break. Things are tense in the locker room.

But we have a saying in Finnish, and I can almost hear my youth coach saying it in my ear: *Työ tekijäänsä neuvoo*. Work teaches the worker. He would remind me to dig in and keep trying. So that’s what I do.

And to shore myself up, I make frequent trips to Romano & Bianchi for pizza. Not only is it close to my hotel, but I

have memorized Chiara's work schedule. Today is Tuesday, and she works the lunch shift. If I hurry, I can get there by two o'clock, with plenty of time to linger over lunch, and chat her up.

So I hurry through the locker room and claim a shower before they're all taken.

"If only you showed that same hustle on the ice today," Castro grumbles.

"Don't take shots at the new guy," our captain says. "Our issues aren't as simple as that."

He's almost certainly right. But if we don't pull it together, I won't need to find an apartment after all.



Forty minutes later I stride into Romano & Bianchi. My eyes sweep the place and land on Chiara right away. She's making someone's dessert just inside the kitchen.

I linger a moment, because there are two waiters during the lunch rush. Today it's her, and the man who does not like me. I'd made the mistake of sitting in his section one time, and he was so surly to me that I'd wondered how he kept his job. But then I'd heard the cook call "Hey, Bianchi!" and I'd realized he's the son of one of the owners.

Chiara is a niece of the other owner—she is a Romano. Two families own this place, which is a thing I have learned over time, along with Chiara's schedule, and her thoughts about pizza toppings.

I have also memorized the precise shape of her smile, and the way she lifts her chin when she laughs.

Now Chiara comes out of the kitchen and spots me. Her smile is enormous. She juts her chin toward an empty table at the front, indicating that I should sit there.

I do, and she arrives at my side just a couple of minutes later. “Ivo! How’s your week going?”

“Okay. And yours?” My English is so much more functional than the first time I came in here. I make an effort to speak to Chiara, and it gets a little less awkward each time.

Actually, I asked her to help me with that, and she said yes.

I still haven’t asked her out for a date, though.

“Can’t complain,” she says, setting an ice cold glass of sparkling water with lemon down in front of me. “I had an idea for your English lessons,” she says, crossing her arms over her perfect chest. There is a little gold cross on a delicate chain around her neck, and I often fantasize about kissing here there, where her pulse flutters at her throat. “A game.”

I’m a little distracted by this image, so it takes me a moment to respond. “A game?”

She pulls a phone out of her apron pocket. “I know how much you like the almond cookies. Get four English words right, and I’ll bring them to you for free.”

“That is very...” I pause to find the right word. “Motivating.”

She laughs, and I feel it in my nuts. Another new word, this one learned in the locker room. I know a lot of dirty English words these days. It’s the company I keep.

“Okay, here you go. I made the first round easy.” She holds up her phone and shows me a picture that makes me laugh.

“You are kinder than any of my teachers in school.”

“It’s a warm-up round. Don’t get cocky.” Her smile almost blinds me.

“Fine. That is a hockey puck.”

She flips to another picture. It’s a *jääkiekkomaila*, or hockey stick, and I tell her so. “I am a super genius, no?”

“Didn’t I tell you not to get cocky?” She flips to a picture of a *herkkusienestä*. It’s one of the words I had to look up the

first day I came here.

“Uh oh. Starts with *M*. Mush...thing?”

To her credit, she doesn't burst out laughing. “Close. Mushroom. I'll give it to you this time. Last picture.”

“Tomato,” I say quickly. “That one is almost the same in Finnish.”

She flashes me a smile. “The cookies are all yours, big guy. Want your usual lunch?”

“You know it.”

She pauses before she turns away. “It's nice to see you again. I missed you on Tuesday. Were you out of town?”

I nod. “L.A. and Dallas.” I haven't told her what I do for work, because it is not nice to brag. But I can tell she is curious.

She pats me on the shoulder and then hurries off to order my pizza from the kitchen.



The food is magic, as always. Walking into this place was the best decision I ever made.

There is another Finnish saying that I am repeating to myself today as I polish off my pizza. It means: *the brave eats the soup*.

Romano & Bianchi is a haven for me, and I don't want to ruin it with awkwardness. But if you want to eat the soup, as they say, sometimes a man must take a risk. If I want to have a real date with Chiara, I'll have to ask for it.

My English will never be good enough, so I don't think I should wait for that. Besides, there is something between us—I can feel it when she smiles at me. It's there, whether I know the right words or not.

The next time I see her, she brings the salad.

“Chiara, I have a question for you,” I say. “It’s about the weekend. How do you feel about sports?”

She shrugs, giving me an amused look. “I like sports, but I’m better at watching them than playing.”

“That is fine. I wondered if...”

I do not even get the sentence out when the surly man—his name tag says Stefano—arrives at Chiara’s side. To my horror, he clamps an arm around her waist and kisses her on the mouth. “Honey, table twelve is sat.”

The expression flickering across her face is pure annoyance. “Territorial much?” she snaps, and I make a mental note to look up that word later. “Sorry,” she says to me, sidestepping Stefano. “I’ll be back with your pizza in a few minutes.” She hustles away.

And as he turns to follow her, Stefano gives me a smug look over his shoulder.

That bastard. He’s dating my girl. I want to punch him, I really do.

If she were dating a nice man, would I be so annoyed? No.

Okay, I would still be annoyed. Just a little less. Because I was *wrong*. I thought there was an attraction between us.

I saw something that was not there.

Fuck. Another useful English word.

I have the worst urge to put money on the table and leave the restaurant before I eat my lunch. Except I don’t want to give him the satisfaction. And I don’t want Chiara to know that I’m upset.

It takes me a couple minutes to calm down. But after a while I realize that the jerk did me a favor. He put on his arrogant little show before I actually made a fool of myself by asking her out.

At least there’s that.

When she returns with my pizza, she asks, “I’m sorry. What were you asking me? About sports?”

“I do not remember,” I say. “Sorry.”

She looks disappointed, or maybe it is my imagination.

When she brings me the almond cookies at the end of my meal, they don't taste as good as usual, either.



CHAPTER 3

NOVEMBER

When I leave my new apartment and get into the elevator, I meet our goalie, Silas.

“Hey, man,” he says. “Good game last night.”

“Thank you.” It *was* a great game, too. I played well against Minnesota, my old team. So well that afterwards, a journalist stuck a microphone in my face and asked me how I felt about the game. “Good” is all I managed to say.

My hockey is coming along, but speaking English to strangers still makes me nervous.

The elevator drops us both in the lobby, and we head for the front door. “Do you like pizza?” Silas asks suddenly.

“I love pizza.” It’s like he read my mind.

“Then come to dinner with me. My girlfriend is out of town, so I’m looking for a date.” He grins.

I hesitate. On one hand, I shouldn’t keep turning down requests to socialize. After all, I moved into this building to be nearer to my teammates.

But it’s Wednesday night, and Chiara is working the dinner shift. I’ve never made it in there for dinner before, and that’s where I’m headed now. “Can we go to my...” I search for the word. “...Favorite pizza place?”

“You have a favorite? You’ve only lived here for a few months!” Silas pats his chest. “You should let the master show you where the best Brooklyn pizza is.”

“Sorry. That is the drill.” It’s one of the few English phrases I know. “I am in the mood for their special.”

“Okay, man.” He slaps my back. “I hope you have good taste. How’s the pizza in Finland?”

“I thought it was good. And then I moved here.”

Silas cracks up.

I raise my hand for a taxi.



When we reach Romano & Bianchi, I search out Chiara immediately. When I give her a wave, she points at a table near the back. So I grab a menu off the podium for Silas, and head right back there.

“Wouldn’t you rather sit up front?” Silas asks as we take our seats.

“No. I need to be in her section.”

“Okay, this does look good,” Silas says after we sit down, and he has a chance to peruse the menu. “Did you say something about a special?”

“It’s just the pizza I always order,” I tell him. “They make me what I like.”

“Ah,” he says. “I think I’ll try the pesto primavera. Have you had that one?”

I shake my head. “I get the same one every time.” In spite of my heartbreak, this is still my favorite place in Brooklyn. No—it’s my favorite place outside Finland.

Chiara’s heels click towards us, and I already feel better. I take her in, and my heart lifts as a smile curves across her face. “Ivo! So you do have friends.”

“One friend,” I say as my face reddens. “He likes pizza a lot.”

“You have that in common, then.” She pulls her phone out. “Okay, are you ready to play?”

I nod my head. “Let’s do it.”

She holds up a picture on her phone. The deal is that I get four questions—each one something I might see in New York. If I get them all correct, my dessert is free.

I always tip a lot, so the money is not really the point. But I do enjoy the game. And the first picture is one I can do. It’s a *koira*. “Dog,” I say in English.

“Good! Next one.” She swipes.

“Train.”

“Yep. Although I also would have accepted *subway*.” She flips to the next picture, and it’s easy.

“Taxi! We say it the same in Finnish.”

“Good to know in case I ever visit Helsinki.”

That is, of course, my dream. But she can’t know that.

“Okay, last one?”

She flips and I see... Oof. “We call it *sateenvarjo*. I don’t know the English for that.”

“Oh, ouch. It’s an *umbrella*.” She gives me a big smile, and her eyes grow warm. “Better luck next time. It’s a damn shame, too, because the special dessert is lava cake.”

I make a pouting face. “I’ll pay double.”

She laughs, and clicks her pen. “You want your usual?”

“Of course.”

“And you, sir?” she turns to Silas.

“No quiz for me?” he chuckles, handing over the menu. “I’ll have whatever Ivo is getting. He has big opinions, and my gut says to trust him on this.”

“Suit yourself, dude. Drinks?”

We order a couple of beers, and she trots off toward the kitchen, while I try not to stare at her ass.

Silas chuckles, sitting back in his chair. “That is more English than I’ve ever heard you speak in an entire day before. Actually, I think I know why you like this restaurant so much.”

“The pizza is very good.”

Silas laughs harder.



The pizza *is* very good, though, and after our salads, Silas is forced to admit it. “I had my doubts, but this crust is terrific,” he says. “She brings you this half-and-half pie every time?”

I nod, but I have a question. “If you are the master of pizza, why have you not tried this place before?”

“I like the little old school joints,” Silas says. “The uglier the better. Di Fara, for example. Or Jo and Pat’s on Staten Island. I’m a purist.”

Then Silas tells me about all his favorite pizza restaurants all over the country. I like hearing about them, and it’s probably good for my English.

Even though I am a loner, I can admit that this is more fun than going home alone and watching Finnish TV, which is what I often do.

And the restaurant is lovely tonight, with little candles on every table. Chiara is more beautiful than ever.

In a perfect world, I would like to take her out to a restaurant like this sometime. Not this one, of course. Somewhere else, just the two of us.

“Why don’t you ask her out?” Silas says in a low voice as I watch her open a bottle of wine for another table.

My chin snaps back in his direction. “Sorry?”

“You should ask her out,” he says. “On a date.”

“No,” I say in response.

“Why not?” he asks with an irritating smile. “Why wait? I asked my girl out practically the day we met.”

“She said yes?” I ask.

“Nope. She said no for weeks.” He shrugs. “But you can’t hear a yes unless you ask.”

“I will not hear a yes at all.” I shake my head. “That chain around her neck now holds a diamond ring. She does not wear it on her finger while she works.”

His face falls. “Really? She’s engaged?”

“Yes sir.”

He sits back in his chair, as if shocked. “You missed your window! How did this happen?”

I shrug. “He got there first. I wanted to learn the language before I asked her out...”

“Why? You two could just speak the language of loooooove.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “But in all seriousness, I don’t get it. It’s mutual, my dude.”

“It’s...what?” I don’t understand that word.

“You like *each other*. It’s not my imagination. She wants you.”

“Not when she has his ring around her neck.”

Silas looks like he’s about to argue. But Chiara is approaching our table with a sway of hips, a toss of hair, and two dessert plates. “Gentlemen, two chocolate lava cakes.”

When she sets them down in front of us, the scent of warm chocolate rushes up to meet me. It’s wonderful.

“Marry me,” Silas says, looking up at Chiara and batting his eyelashes.

She gives a sniff. “Your pop star girlfriend would have a few things to say about that, wouldn’t she?”

“Probably,” he says with a smile. “But you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

I have the worst urge to kick him under the table. Just because I never got the chance to flirt with Chiara doesn't mean he should get to.

“Enjoy,” she says. Then she sets down the bill folder. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

When she walks away, Silas gives me a grin. “Okay, I notice a couple of things. First, she knows you're a professional hockey player.”

“Yes? And also you.”

“Well, chicks dig hockey players.”

I snort, because it's barely true here in Brooklyn. In Helsinki, I'd be a celebrity. But not here. I'm just a rookie who can barely speak the language.

“Also, our lava cakes are not the same.”

“What?” I pick up my fork and examine my dessert. The cake is as dark as midnight. There are halved strawberries waiting on the side, in a pillow of whipped cream. And chocolate sauce has been swirled artfully over the plate. I look at Silas's, too. “It is just the same. Except mine will be gone soon.”

I drop my fork to take a bite, but Silas catches my wrist before I can do it. “Look at the sauce,” he says. “Look at mine.” He holds up the plate, where the sauce makes a random swirl. “Now yours.”

Looking down one more time, I think I see what he means. The chocolate is shaped into a heart. “That is just nothing,” I say, brutalizing the English language again. “It is without meaning.”

“No way, man.” He lets go of my wrist and plunges his fork into his cake. “Where women are concerned, nothing is without meaning. Trust me on this.”

Hmm. Silas is a good friend, and a great teammate, but he is seeing what is not really there.

I eat the cake. Every bite. And the heart disappears into my gullet, where my real one beats a lonely rhythm.



CHAPTER 4

ONE YEAR LATER

“GREAT GAME, IVO,” Leo Trevi shouts over the win song that’s blasting in the locker room.

“YES, IT WAS,” I agree as I straighten my tie. We just crushed Tampa in an early season game.

It felt great, too. I shut down every bad idea their left wing had tonight. That guy is going to have some bruises with my name on them, too.

Someone turns down the music, so when Leo says, “Coming to the tavern? We’re leaving soon.” I can actually hear him.

“Good idea.”

He checks his watch. “Meet us outside in five minutes?”

The music starts up again, so I just nod and grab my shoes.

After a year on the team, it’s fair to say that I’ve settled in for real. I socialize with my teammates. My English is improved. My passes are connecting. My apartment has some art on the walls.

Yet, if I’m honest with myself, I’m often lonely, even if I’m rarely alone. My teammates will be in a fun mood tonight. There will be women at the bar to flirt with and drink with. And, if I want, to take home.

But there's only been one woman in Brooklyn who truly caught my interest. And last I heard, she was planning a spring wedding to the wrong man.

My hollow mood will probably pass, though, but not until after the holidays. It's December twenty-third, and I have three days off in a row. It would go by quickly any other time of year. But Christmas without my family? It will be the longest three days of my life. Just like last year.



But first, drinks.

I ride with three of my teammates in a taxi, which makes the taxi driver roll his eyes. We are loud and take up every inch of his car. It's a short trip, though, and my teammates are soon shoving against me playfully as we storm through the entrance of the tavern.

"Hurry," Leo says, pushing on my back. "We have to start a game of darts before Heidi Jo gets here to crush us all."

"That's your strategy?" Castro asks. "Start the game before my wife can defend her title?"

"It's the only way I can win."

"I'll buy the first round," says O'Doul, our captain.

A cheer rises up, and Leo forgets about darts, because he's too busy goading O'Doul into paying for top shelf liquor.

Millionaires like free drinks. That is a funny thing I have learned as my hockey career progresses.

I remove my tie and shove it in my pocket.

"Ivo, the darts?" Leo prompts. "I wasn't kidding about being in a hurry."

A glance toward the front of the bar confirms that Heidi Jo hasn't arrived yet, though, and I have half a mind to stall, just to fuck with Leo.

I'm about to tease him, when my gaze snags on a beautiful woman at the bar. She's holding a book in one hand and a martini glass in the other. I can't see her face. But everything inside me goes quiet. Maybe it's the tilt of her head that's so familiar. Or the particular shine of her glossy black hair.

But that *has* to be Chiara at the bar. I just know it.

The front door swings open, admitting a blast of chilly air, plus three or four more of my teammates. The one in front is Silas, though. He glances at the woman at the bar, and does a slight double take, like I just did. Then he lengthens his stride toward me.

"Dude," he says when he arrives. "Your girl is at the bar."

"She is not my girl," I say automatically.

"But you have to go over there."

I want to. But I'm not sure it would be welcome. "She looks like someone who wants to be left alone."

We both take a second glance at Chiara, whose chin is down, her nose practically buried in that book.

"Nah," Silas whispers. "This is *our* bar, on a night after a home game. That's why she's here."

"You think?" I mean—I *wish* it were true. But she's never come in here before.

"Dude. You always go to *her* restaurant when you want to see her."

"Yes." It's true. Although I do not do so very often anymore. I do not like to see the happy couple together. For a while I only went on Tuesdays at lunch, when he would not be there. But even that eventually made me feel pathetic.

I miss the pizza, but I miss her more.

"She came here for a reason," Silas presses. "I mean, it's theoretically possible she didn't know you would be here. But once she stepped inside and saw all the Hockey paraphernalia on every surface..." He laughs. "She'd have to get a clue you know?"

I laugh, too, but I can't stop staring. I haven't seen Chiara's smile in way too long. But her face is still hidden from me. "Take my game of darts."

"Go on." He claps me on the shoulder. "You've got this."

It's nice, but I don't need the encouragement. I'm not afraid to talk to her. I am not afraid of anything much these days. Once you move 6000 kilometers away from home, to a country where you don't speak the language, and face down every major league hockey competitor in the world, not much can scare a guy.

But I don't head straight for Chiara. Instead, I duck under the bar instead and grab two glasses. "Evening, Pete."

"Evening," he says without even blinking at this strange turn of events. Nothing rattles that man. He should play hockey.

I fill both glasses with ice. Then I use the gun to squirt seltzer inside. I add two lemon wedges, perching them on the edge. Then I carry them back around to the customers' side of the bar, where I take the empty seat next to Chiara.

She looks up at me, and there's no surprise in her expression. "Hi," she says quietly. And the tone is a little sheepish.

Sheepish is a fun English word. It makes me think of fuzzy sheep. And even as I get my first good look at Chiara's beautiful dark eyes, I feel a pang of longing for the language game she used to make me play. "Hi," I echo. "I brought you my favorite drink, because I don't know yours. Want to play a game?"

"Okay," she whispers.

"Answer four questions, and I will provide cookies."

Her smile forms slowly. "All right. I'll play."

"Question number one—is something wrong?"

Her eyes narrow slightly. "How does this game work, exactly? I don't know how you're going to figure out my score."

“This is a game you cannot fail.” I shrug. “Is something wrong?”

She looks away. “That is more complicated than you’d think. It will sound like yes. But actually no.”

“I’m not sure that answer makes sense,” I tell her. “But I’ll give you a point anyway.”

She swallows hard, and that’s when I notice that the delicate chain around her neck no longer holds a ring. My gaze drops to her hands, and they are free of jewelry.

My heart gives a kick. “Question two—did you lose your engagement ring?”

“Sort of.” One shoulder lifts half-heartedly. “In a manner of speaking. Actually, I gave it back last month.”

I suppose it would be rude to cheer and do somersaults. So I ask another question instead. “Number three—is that why you are sad?”

She winces. “I’m not very sad. Just kind of confused, pretty angry, and a whole lot embarrassed.”

“Question four—Do you want to take a walk with me and talk about it?”

She gives me a sly, teasing glance. “I don’t know. Will there really be cookies?”

“There could be. There is a package waiting for me at home, and I suspect it contains cookies.”

She pushes her stool back from the bar. “I would love to take a walk with you. But aren’t you supposed to be celebrating with your teammates?”

“Nah,” I shrug. Then I use a couple of English phrases that show off my new capabilities. “I spend every waking moment with those psychos. They can party one night without me.”

“Listen to you! Your English has come a long way. But you still have a cute accent.”

Cute. Hmm. Puppies are cute. Hockey players not so much.

“...Okay, let me settle up here and visit the ladies room.”

“I will settle up with Pete. You go ahead,” I say.

I am just paying the bill when Heidi Jo comes through the door. “Hey, Ivo! Those idiots are playing darts without me, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they fear you.”

She gives me a hug. “What are you doing up here all alone?”

“I am not really alone, but I do have a question. If a woman says my accent is *cute*, is that a bad thing or a good thing?”

“Oh, that is definitely a *good* thing.” She pats me on the shoulder, then takes her hand away as Chiara walks purposefully towards us. “I can see why you’re skipping the darts tonight.” She giggles. “Night, Ivo! See you at the Christmas Eve party tomorrow!”



CHAPTER 5

The storefronts on Hicks Street are decorated for the holidays. Even the tavern has little lights ringing the window. We are only fifteen paces away when I give in and ask the question I'm so desperate to ask. "So what happened with Stefano?"

"It's kind of a long story."

"Well, I have all night."

She smiles ruefully. "Okay, but brace yourself to hear how stupid I am."

"You are not stupid," I say immediately. "Not possible. You are the best woman I have met in New York."

Her smile turns soft. Then she takes a deep breath. "When I was in high school, Stefano was twenty. I had a big crush on the older man." She rolls her eyes. "It wasn't just me, though. Everybody loves Stefano—except my aunt Teresa. But that's another story. Anyway—he's charming. He's a party boy. He has a wicked sense of humor that I used to enjoy, until I realized his jokes were often at my expense. He seemed so *sophisticated* to poor little me, with his girlfriends and his cigarettes. Oof. It was just a dumb teenage crush."

"I had those too," I assure her. "Janna Koskinen stole my heart in year nine. I am over it now."

She cackles. "What I wouldn't give to see a photo of you in grade nine. Anyway, I mostly forgot about Stefano when I went off to college."

"To study business," I prompt.

She gives me a sideways glance. “Yeah, I can’t believe I told you that. Well, I probably also told you that it was a mistake. I hated the school, hated the classes, but I finally had a boyfriend. Too bad he turned out to be a controlling turd.”

“Hmm. What is a turd?” I never feel stupid asking Chiara a language question. She never judges me.

“Sorry. It’s a word for shit.”

“Ah, well, if we’re describing one of your exes as a *turd*, I think I like this new word.”

She smiles. “It took me way too long to leave him, and the school. But my Uncle Rico—you remember my uncle raised me?”

I put a hand on her arm, just casually. “I remember all the things you tell me, Chiara. He is your grandfather’s brother. Really a great-uncle.”

“Right. He stepped up after my mother died, and he didn’t have children of his own. I love him. I really do. Actually—tonight I’m mad at him...”

“What did he do?” I demand.

“We’re getting to that.” She waves a hand. “Anyway, I agreed to come back and work at the café. This was a few months before I met you. It made Uncle Rico happy, even if I felt like a loser for landing back here with my waitress apron on instead of conquering the world of business. My self esteem was not the greatest. I was in a weird place when suddenly Stefano wants to date me, after all those years of never noticing me.”

We stop for a light, and I take her arm. She holds on tight, her brown eyes flashing toward mine. “Are you sure you want to hear this?”

“Yes.” The light changes and I guide her across the street.

“Okay. So I’m dating Stefano. Honestly, at the beginning, it wasn’t even dating. He wanted hookups after work, and I knew I was just the most convenient girl in the room, but my

inner high school girl was vindicated. I mean—what would you do if Janna Whatsername suddenly wanted a date?”

I laugh suddenly. “Maybe I would not recognize her anymore. She was really cute at fifteen though.”

“Well, that’s where my head was—age fifteen. So I dated Stefano, and it went on longer than even I expected. And then—at a big family party—he gets down on one knee and proposes to me.”

“And you say yes,” I prompt. We are almost to my apartment now, and the Christmas decorations are thick on every corner. But suddenly I’m not dreading Christmas like I was a few hours ago. I don’t feel nearly as lonely, even if nothing much has changed. “Did you want to get married? And have children with him?”

“I was confused. I said yes because he asked me in a room full of people. But there were so many things wrong. I knew that he didn’t want kids, and I do. And here I had this ring on my finger and I’m trying to figure out how to feel about it. Part of me knew it was all a bad idea. But another part of me wondered why I couldn’t just be happy for once. It was good to be chosen, you know?”

“I do,” I admit.

“My Aunt Teresa had big thoughts about it. She kept saying Stefano knew that Uncle Rico would leave me his half of that restaurant when he died, and that he was playing a long con. But I didn’t believe her. Who actually marries somebody just to shore up his inheritance?”

I wince. Because there are lots of assholes in the world. It is not so hard to picture.

“And then one night at work—when I thought Stefano was outside smoking during his shift—I stuck my head out there. And found him making out with someone I had never seen before. Turns out he had another girlfriend the whole time he was dating me. Aunt Teresa was right.”

“Oh, I am sorry.”

She shakes her head quickly. “No, it’s a good thing. I was having trouble sorting out my feelings until I saw the two of them together. I broke up with him the next day, and then everything got easier. That was right before Thanksgiving. Of course, work is really awkward right now.”

We both laugh, and then I point to the elegant building ahead on Water Street. “This is it. I live here.” It’s a hundred year old brick warehouse converted into luxury condos. “I rent my unit from the team captain.”

“Nice digs, Ivo. Wow.”

“I was lucky to get it.” Still, I feel a sense of pride as we climb the red-carpeted steps up to the door, which is swept open by the doorman.

“Evening, Mr. Halla. Good game tonight.”

“Thank you.” It’s funny, but I’d forgotten all about the game.

“We kept that package cold for you.”

“Thank you. I’ll take it off your hands.”

Chiara knocks me in the hip with hers. “Good use of idiom.”

I laugh, because I cannot believe she’s standing here next to me in the lobby of my building. *Keep cool, Ivo. Don’t mess this up.*

Miguel hands me *two* boxes. My mother has gone crazy this year. One of them is ice cold from the refrigerator, one is not. “Thank you!” I say from underneath them.

“Can I carry something?” Chiara asks.

“No, you may not wait on me tonight. Just ring for the elevator?”

She hurries ahead. “Nice lobby. Very swanky.”

“Do not be too impressed. My place is a studio.”

A few minutes later, when I unlock the door and let her in, she lets out a hoot of surprise. “Ivo, this is *technically* a studio.

But it's bigger than some two bedroom apartments.”

“It is nice,” I agree, stepping inside. To the right—but beyond a translucent partition—you can see the outline of my king-sized bed against the far wall.

The space is vast, though. To the left is a generous living area, where the big sofa faces a TV that's suspended from the ceiling. And straight ahead is a glorious kitchen that I rarely use, because cooking for one man is not very much fun.

I carry both boxes over to the counter. I shrug off my suit jacket. “May I hang your coat?” I ask.

“Let me do it,” Chiara says, taking my suit jacket and carrying it over to the coat rack on the wall. “You'd better open those boxes.”

I find a knife and cut through the packing tape. Then I start pulling things out of the cold box. Mist rises into the air from the piece of dry ice in the bottom. “Mama wanted me to have a Finnish Christmas. She knows I miss my family over the holidays.”

Chiara makes a soft noise. “Three brothers, two sisters.”

“That is right.” She was wrong when she said we didn't know each other very well.

From the cold box, I pull out a small ham and a container of cooked beets. Two cheeses. And a container of my mother's mashed potatoes. “I do not even want to guess how much it costs to send mashed potatoes overnight across the sea.”

“Speaking as someone who knows, people enjoy feeding you.” She touches my arm. “You do like your food.”

“The food was only part of why I always went to Romano and Bianchi,” I point out. “Not to put you on the spot, but it's true.”

Her dark eyes dip toward her hands. “I *did* know that. We used to fight about you.”

My hands go still on the next box. “You did? You and Stefano?”

“Oh yeah.” She shrugs. “He would always accuse me of flirting with you.”

“You didn’t,” I say. “You were just friendly.”

“True,” she says, lifting her chin. “But I cared for you in a way that I didn’t for any other customers. He knew that. It must have been very obvious.”

“It is not a crime to care for someone,” I say. Then I open the other box and find what I am looking for. “Ah! The cookies. There are two kinds. We had better sample them both.” I am already pulling down a couple of small plates, and putting the kettle on. “Tea?”

“I would love some tea,” she says. “But what is this?” She pulls a bag of rice out of the box.

“In Finland, Christmas Eve is the day we celebrate, and this rice is for the morning, when we make our rice porridge. We make it with milk, and topped with cinnamon and sugar, or berry compote. You are supposed to put a single almond into the pot.”

“Here it is!” she cries, extracting a single blanched almond, wrapped in plastic, from the box. “Is this for luck? Whomever gets the almond in their bowl has a lucky year?”

“Exactly. Last year I made the porridge and put the almond in and felt very unlucky. I was sitting here by myself for hours before it was time to go upstairs for the team party. It is easy to feel sorry for yourself when you are away from your family. I have gotten very good at it.”

She tilts her head and gives me a soft smile. “I know that you don’t want to hear this, but missing your family is lovely. It means they’re worth it.”

“I suppose this is true.”

She touches my hand briefly. “By the way, Christmas Eve is also the big party day for us. And it’s why I’m so annoyed at my uncle—it is our turn to host the big day for all the Romanos and Bianchis. And I wanted to cancel, but he says he can’t break with tradition.”

“So...” I do the math. “Stefano will be at your house all day?”

“That’s right. I’d prefer not to see his little weasel face on Christmas Eve. He might even bring his girlfriend.” She rolls her eyes.

The kettle is hot, so I pour water into two mugs. “I am going to make a suggestion, but you should feel no pressure. You are welcome to spend Christmas Eve with me. You can see that my mother has sent all this food. And my team has a party in this building. It is very casual—players and their families. Some card games. Catered food that I do not have to cook. And Rebecca has said she is making her famous margaritas.”

“Rebecca Rowley Kattenberger?” Chiara’s eyes grow wide. “And the whole team will be there?”

I shrug. “I do not know which players. Do you need to see a list?”

She laughs wickedly. “Of course not. Just got a little intimidated there for a second. Are you sure I should go? I don’t want to be a gatecrasher.”

“Gatecrasher. That is a fun expression.”

“Isn’t it? But not so fun to actually be one.”

“I promise you will crash no gates. But I would be honored to have you as my guest.”

She laughs. “You are too good to be true, Ivo.”

“Then say yes. If you need convincing, try the Finnish spoon cookies.” I fix a tray and carry it over to the sofa.

But inside, I am doing cartwheels.

Which is another excellent English expression.



“I *love* Finnish spoon cookies,” she says after we’ve eaten several. “Is that raspberry jam?”

“Yes. There’s also apple.” I push the plate closer to her.

She takes a sip of tea and smiles at me. “Do you really mean it about spending Christmas Eve here?”

“I really meant it.” Our eyes meet, and I feel the same way I did my first week in Brooklyn—like I could look at those pretty brown eyes forever. “I have never been more sure of anything. It’s you who should think it over. You will have to put up with me and my rowdy friends.”

She puts a hand on my knee. “That doesn’t sound like a hardship.”

“One more warning, then. There might also be more of this.”

“More of what?” she asks.

I lean in and kiss her sweet mouth, very slowly. Just once. But it’s a good one. And then I make myself retreat. “More of that.”

She blinks at me with unfocused eyes. “I see. Well.” She blinks again. “That doesn’t seem like a hardship.”

I cup her smooth face, as I’ve been wanting to do for so long. “It would be my pleasure to have your company for the holiday, *hani*.” It means *honey*. “But no pressure.”

“Ivo, I don’t deserve you,” she whispers. “I’ve wanted to spend more time with you since the first month we met. And I didn’t follow my instincts.”

I stroke a thumb over her soft cheek. “You’re here now. It is enough.”

She leans her head against my shoulder for a half second, and then sighs. “I should get home now. It’s late. You’re probably exhausted from your game.”

I should be. But it’s hard to be exhausted when your wishes are coming true. “Let me ask the doorman to get you a taxi.”

“What time should I come over tomorrow?” she asks, rising from the sofa.

“The party starts at midday. But come early—we will have breakfast porridge. Someone has to find the lucky almond.”

“All right.” She dons her coat. “Maybe we can watch a Christmas movie before the party.”

“Good plan.”

I ride downstairs with her to make sure the taxi is there. And I give her only a kiss on the cheek as she goes.

I’m a patient man. And my Christmas wishes are already coming true.



CHAPTER 6

CHRISTMAS EVE

I am up at nine on Christmas Eve, video-chatting with my family overseas, and stirring the rice porridge. This recipe is made with milk and butter, but no sugar. The jarred fruit compote—helpfully provided by Mama—gives it sweetness.

There is Christmas music playing in my kitchen, and I am in a very festive mood, even if it breaks my heart a little to see my entire family all together in a place I am not.

“Do not forget the almond!” my mother says in Finnish. “I want you to have another lucky year.”

“I’m not sure it works that way, Mama.” My porridge is thickening, and I toss the almond in. “How lucky could the almond be if I’m the only one who might find it?”

“Luck is luck,” she says crisply. As if that makes any sense at all. But you don’t argue with a mother of six kids. She will fight you. “You made a big pot of porridge, Ivo. It could take you days to be lucky.”

“I can wait.” The buzzer suddenly rings—the one the doorman uses to speak to me. “I have to go, Mama. A friend is here.”

“What kind of friend comes to visit on Christmas Eve morning?” my little sister asks.

“A nice friend. *Hyvää joulua ja nähdään!* Later!” I wave at the screen, and then hit the *END* button even as my sister

starts to ask another question. I grab the house phone and tell the doorman to let Chiara come upstairs.

To be fair, I thought she might change her mind. But I'm glad she did not.

I know it's unusual to spend the biggest holiday of the year with the woman you have loved from afar. But I'd rather have an awkward day with her than no day with her.

When Chiara comes to my door a moment later, she wears a shy smile. "Morning. I brought coffee." She holds out two takeaway cups from the chic place on the corner. "I also brought a bottle of wine for later. Thank you for making this day easier for me."

"I don't think you understand that you are doing exactly the same thing for me." I kiss her on the cheek, inhaling her sweet scent. "And Happy Christmas. Come in and make yourself at home."

She takes off her winter coat to reveal a winter dress. It's like a big sweater, comfortable looking, but also pretty. The dark red color is perfect against her dark, shiny hair.

I have it so bad for her.

"Breakfast is ready," I announce. "If you are not a lover of porridge, there is also toast and cheese."

"I'm sure I'll like it. Is there anything I can do to help?"

I shake my head. "Today you are not the waitress." So it's me who pours the juice and scoops out two bowls of porridge. I put a generous dollop of compote into each bowl.

"Did you see where the almond landed?" she asks as I set the bowls on the table.

"Just in case I might have, you should choose your seat."

Laughing, she sits down and gingerly tastes the porridge. "Delicious. Tell me more about Finland. What else do you do on Christmas?"

"Movies and the sauna. But not at the same time."

She cackles. “The sauna, for real? I thought that was just a cliché.”

“No, it is real. The Finns love their saunas. Sometimes we jump from the sauna into the ice cold lake, and then back again. There is also vodka involved.”

She laughs. “What kind of berries are these?”

“Lingonberry and blueberry, I think.”

“It’s deli...” I hear a crunch, and her eyebrows fly upwards.

“You found it!” I exclaim. “The lucky almond. Congratulations.”

She covers her smile with one hand. “I hope you weren’t counting on it.”

“No.” *I am already lucky.* “Maybe you need it more.”

“Maybe.” She makes a face. “Although it would be fair to argue that luck isn’t what held me back last year. I think stupidity was the problem.”

“Hey—take it easy on yourself for Christmas?” I suggest. “I am trying to have a lucky meal here. What movie are we watching?”

“Have you seen *Home Alone*?”

“No, I do not think so.”

“Then we have to fix that right away,” she announces.



It is a very funny movie about a little boy who does not have his family with him for Christmas. I know the feeling. But today I do not mind.

After the movie, we go upstairs, carrying the ham that I’ve baked and Chiara’s bottle of wine. There is a big room on one end of the topmost floor, and the team has rented it out for our party.

“Ivo!” our captain yells as I step into the room. “You cooked a ham? And who is your lovely date?”

A dozen heads swivel in our direction. “Dude, Ivo has a date?” someone asks. And someone else makes a cat call sound.

“I told you it was casual,” I grumble. “Guys, this is Chiara. She was responsible for helping my English go from miserable to only very bad last year.”

There is a round of laughter, but then Heidi Jo skips forward and offers Chiara a glass of champagne. “Are you an English teacher?” she asks.

“No,” Chiara says with a shy smile. “I was his favorite waitress at my family’s café, and he used to come in for lunch three times a week.”

“The food must be excellent there,” Heidi Jo says with a wink. “It’s lovely to meet you. How do you feel about playing poker?”

“I love poker,” Chiara says.

“Be careful, she is a *shark*,” I insist.

After that, the party is easy. There are games and there is a giant amount of food and drink. “It’s nice meeting your teammates,” she says as Heidi Jo shuffles the deck with the flair of a dealer in Las Vegas. “Who knew Tank would wear a baby carrier on his days off?”

“Right?” Georgia, our publicist exclaims. “Men look extra hot wearing babies on their chests.”

“I will bear that in mind,” I say, and everyone laughs.

“Your English really *did* get better last year,” Castro says. “How’d you do that, Chiara?”

“I quizzed him every time I saw him,” she says with a shrug. “He is motivated by desserts.”

Another laugh. And the time just flies by. This party is twice as fun for me this year as it was last year. Having Chiara at my side is a big part of it.

Being able to understand what my teammates say doesn't hurt, either.

The party ends before I'm ready. Suddenly it is time to help stack the plates and cups. I'm filled with a new kind of anticipation, though, as Chiara collects her handbag. We say our goodnights, and then we walk down the building's stairwell together to reach my floor.

I realize we've fallen silent as I unlock my apartment. "What else do Finns do on Christmas Eve?" Chiara asks.

"Oh, a great many things. Now I must pour you a small glass of Finnish brandy flavored with cloudberry. And then we wait for the Christmas Goat."

"The...sorry?"

I smile at the look on her face. "It's true. Our word for Santa Claus really means Christmas Goat. Don't ask." I follow her into the apartment, acutely aware that we're alone again. "Chiara, I haven't had this much fun in a long time. Thank you for today."

"Today was the best," she says softly. She lifts her dark eyes to mine. "Seeing you again has made me so happy."

"Come and taste the cloudberry brandy," I say, taking her by the hand. "We will end the night with a toast." At the kitchen counter, I find two little glasses and pour a modest amount of liquor into each one. "What shall we toast?"

"To our lucky new year," she says, raising her glass. "Both of us."

We drink, and I hold her dark eyes. "But you found the almond," I remind her. "All the luck belongs to you."

"Not in English," she says firmly. She sets her glass down, and puts a hand in the center of my chest. "Maybe you've heard this idiom—getting lucky?"

I chuckle, as my skin heats beneath her hand. "I do know that one. Yes. The boys speak of this a lot."

"See, that takes *two* people." She gives an exaggerated shrug. "Sorry. I don't make the rules."

I clasp a hand over hers. “You are a very smart girl. I knew it the first time I saw you.”

“That’s what you were thinking about?” she asks with a soft smile. “My intelligence quotient? I could have sworn you were staring at my ass.”

“I can do many things at once,” I whisper, lowering my head slowly towards hers. “I speak poor English, but I am multitalented.”

Her eyes fill with heat as I claim her mouth for my own. Her lips soften immediately beneath mine. I set my glass on the counter as I hasten to pull her body against mine. As I kiss her again, her hands are already full of my short hair.

Last night I was gentle. There are moments for caution, and moments for certainty.

This is the second kind. I bend my knees and scoop her up into my arms, lifting her to the counter. It is better now—she doesn’t have to lift her chin to kiss me. I brace a hand at her knee and deepen our kisses.

Her dark eyes flash, and she whimpers for me. And now we are speaking the same language. Her knees are clamped at my hips, and her hands are working the buttons of my shirt. She works fast. As the two halves of the shirt separate, warm hands find my chest.

This is wonderful. This is everything. But I do not want to get naked in my kitchen. If we are doing this, I want to do it right. “You know what is good about a studio?” I ask between kisses. “The bed is very near.”

“Brilliant,” she pants. “Take me there.” She holds out a hand, as if I might pluck her down. But I pick her up instead. She gives a squeal as I carry her around the kitchen counter toward the back of my flat.

The bed is a big, soft expanse for me to toss her into the center. She laughs, lying back on the quilt, and I run my hands up her thighs, under her dress, as I climb up to join her.

“Let’s not waste any more time,” she says.

“If you say so.” I tug her dress right over her head, and she laughs in surprise as she kicks off her tights.

Then I’m not laughing, though. One look at Chiara’s red lace lingerie, and I’m letting out a string of Finnish curses. “This is much better than Santa Goat,” I whisper, dipping down to lick my way across her chest, just above the see-through bra. But I need more, so I tip the cups down and begin sucking eagerly on her dark nipples.

Chiara makes the most delicious noises. “Ahh. You. Yessss. Naked more.”

She isn’t speaking English either now. I take it as a good sign. I kiss my way down her belly, part her bare thighs. I stop to part her legs and place a hot kiss right over the lace panties.

“*Oh*, Ivo. Yes.” Her body undulates with excitement. “But I was talking about you. Too many clothes.”

But I’m not listening. I kiss the skin of her inner thighs, and tease my thumb over her hot center. I take my time with this sweet torture.

“Naughty, naughty man,” she pants as I draw it out.

“Some things cannot be rushed. Pizza, and this.” She laughs, and I use the distraction to draw her panties off.

And then I finally get the best Christmas treat of all. When I lean in again to pleasure her, she tugs on my short hair and sobs my name.

Lucky indeed.

Best Christmas ever.



THE END

Thank you for reading Sarina's story! If you enjoyed your visit with the men and women of Brooklyn Hockey, you can find the whole series of standalones [right here](#).

Or download another free Bruisers story, *Training Camp*, on [Sarina's Website](#).

A special thank you to Janna Vanhanen for proofing the Finnish aspects of this story, and to Claudia Fosca Stahl for her editing!

FIRST HOLIDAY



KATEE ROBERT



CHAPTER 1

Holidays have always been my favorite time of year. For all the obvious reasons, in that the snow makes Olympus feel like another world entirely, and there's something almost out of time about the little rituals and customs we indulge in as a people, but for the subtler reasons as well.

It's the only time of year my mother can be coaxed into taking time off. Even after she became Demeter and everything else changed, the quiet time with our family in the country during the holidays didn't. That week at the end of the year when time ceases to have meaning and there's nowhere to be... It's magic.

I want to gift that magic to my husband.

The man in question stands at the window overlooking the grounds, his hands clasped loosely at his back. He's got that distant expression on his face that he seems to wear so often since we found out I was pregnant. It's only gotten stronger now that we know it's twins.

We've been married less than a year, and have already gone through so much. If the last few months are anything to go by, there's more on the horizon.

Worse.

I shake my head. I already spend so much time strategizing and planning. I want to do it for a fun reason for once. The world will keep on spinning, regardless of what happens in Olympus, but I refuse to miss this time with my family. With Hades.

He turns as I approach and pulls me easily into his arms. Or as easily as possible with my giant belly in the way. As if sensing their father's proximity, our children start shifting and kicking in my stomach.

"Hey."

"Hello, little siren." He presses a kiss to my temple. "You have a scheming look about you."

"I'm thinking about the holidays." Going to the country is out of the question with everything going on in the city, just like leaving Olympus is also impossible for a number of reasons. I wish that weren't the case. "Are you sure we can't convince your father to—"

"I'm sure." He says it gently but firmly. "Even if you could convince *him*, he won't come alone, and Hercules has already vowed not to return."

I know Hades and Meg think that the reason Hercules avoids Olympus is for his own sake, but I highly suspect it's partially to save Hades from having to make that call. He's a fearsome man, but his partners are just as fierce when it comes to protecting him. "Things will be calmer next year. We'll arrange something with him then." I hope I'm not being naive when I say it. Things haven't been calm for a very long time.

"Of course." He says it so neutrally, I can't tell if he's trying to appease me or not.

I don't ask about Andres. When Hades found out that the man who'd been a stand-in father for him had lied about his biological father's death, he'd sent the old man away. Because he's Hades, he didn't cast him out with nothing to his name. He ensures Andres is taken care of, first with an apartment of his own, and then when his health declined, in a home where he receives the best care money can buy. Hades hasn't gone to visit him, but Charon goes every week.

It's one of the few things we don't speak of. An old wound that was just starting to heal when it was ripped open again. He'll talk to me when he's ready. In the meantime, I don't push.

I smile up at him, determined to keep this light. “I would like to do some decorating. Will you come to Winter Market with me?”

“I wish I could.” He sounds like he means it, regret lacing every word. “I have a meeting with Zeus, and I can’t reschedule.”

I search his face. This Zeus is not the last one, but so many wounds of the past go deep. Especially what recent events have brought... “Do you want me to come with you?”

“That’s not necessary.” He gives me one last squeeze and releases me. “Take Medusa with you to the market. It’s still not safe.”

I don’t argue with him about the necessity of having a guard. I’ve learned the hard way that it’s entirely needed, even in the lower city. “Okay.” I hesitate. “Do you want to know my plans?”

The first and only time I surprised Hades, I learned the hard way that my husband hates surprises. I sent a leading text and arranged myself artfully in a set of brand new lingerie that Juliette had designed especially for me. Suffice to say both Hades and I scared about ten years off each others’ lives when he burst in, guns drawn and his people at his back.

Not quite the romantic interlude I had been hoping for.

After that, we developed a compromise. If I want to plan something special for Hades, I give him a heads’ up. In return, he allows me to “surprise” him whenever I like. It works for us.

Hades smiles. “I know what the holidays mean to you, little siren. Don’t hold back on my account.”

“You say that, but...”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.” He presses one last kiss to my temple. “Have fun.”

“Call me when you’re done with the meeting?” I won’t fully relax until he’s back in the lower city, and we both know it. The first year of our marriage has been tumultuous to say

the least. Not between me and my husband, but between the rest of the city and, well...

No. No use thinking about that. It's behind us, and if we have to deal with implications of the greater events at a later date. We promised each other that these holidays were a chance for normalcy.

"I will. I promise."



I meet Medusa in the foyer. She's been working for Hades for some time now. Like me, she found refuge in the lower city. It's a kinder place than the upper city in so many ways.

"Hey, Persephone."

"Medusa." I smile as our trio of dogs course around me to greet her. She's an imposing white woman who's as tall as Hades and built like she used to, well, kill people for a living. Which she did, all at Athena's behest.

She crouches down and takes the time to greet each dog, her strong features relaxed in a grin. "Hello there, loves. Who's a good baby? You are. All of you are."

I smile. "You spoil them."

"All dogs deserve to be spoiled." Medusa gives them one last pet and then rises. "Are you ready to go?"

"I am. I just have to grab my coat." It's been a milder winter than normal, and pregnancy makes me overheat quickly, but it will worry Hades if he finds out I've left without at least a jacket. And he will find out. If there's one thing people will do, it's gossip, and Hades's overprotectiveness has extended through everyone I encounter in the lower city. Most of the time, it's nice to know they're looking out for me.

We leave a few minutes later and head down the sidewalk toward the Winter Market.

“We’ll have Charon pick us up.” Medusa easily matches her pace to mine without seeming like she’s doing it. I’m nowhere near as fast as I used to be, not when I’m lugging around this belly.

“You know, walking is good for me. I even have a note from the doctor saying so.” Hades has been a bit... overprotective since we found out I’m pregnant. He tries his hardest not to smother me, but there’s no changing the fact that this is bringing up a lot of baggage for him.

I understand where he’s coming from, but that doesn’t change the fact that I refuse to let him bottle me up in the house, surrounded by a small army. I know it would make him feel better, but I can’t live like that.

Another compromise.

Life seems to be a series of them, but isn’t that always the way?

“Are you and Calypso doing anything particular for the holidays?” I tuck my hair behind my ears. “You’re more than welcome at the house to celebrate with us.”

“Oh, I know.” She grins. “Both Hades and Charon extended invitations this week.”

I laugh. “Never doubt that your presence is wanted.” Charon, in particular, has seemed to take personal responsibility for Medusa and Calypso settling in. Though I don’t know if they’re still technically “settling in” well over a year after moving here to work for Hades.

Or, rather, fleeing for their lives.

It’s nowhere near as uncommon as I’d thought when I first crossed the River Styx all those months ago. The lower city has been refuge for so many people. Ironic, when up until a year ago, Hades was considered a myth and the boogeyman of Olympus. Instead, he’s the savior to those desperate enough to cross the river into his domain.

Medusa drags a hand through her short blond hair. “We appreciate the offer, but I think we’re going to do something private.”

“Well, the offer stands.”

“Like I said, we appreciate it.” It’s hard to tell with her scarf around her neck, but I think she’s blushing. “All of it.”

It takes us twice as long as normal to reach the winter market because we keep getting stopped on the street. Hades and I don’t get out as much as we used to, not since the attacks... Another thing I refuse to think about.

It’s over. That’s enough. I’m not naive; I know our lives are never going to be completely free of danger, but with the changes in Olympus, at least there’s hope. There’s always hope.

Medusa does her best to have patience, but by the time we reach the winter market, she’s practically fidgeting. She’s not one to stand still, so it must be agonizing to move so slowly.

I shrug out of my coat as we step inside. It’s not technically heated by anything other than the bodies of people shopping in this space, but it’s inside so no one can fret that I’m not warm enough. Medusa eyes the coat of my arm, but when I tense, ready for an argument, she just says, “I’ll carry that for you.”

“That’s not necessary.” I smile. “I’m more than capable of hauling around a jacket for a time.” And there’s the problem of her needing her hands to be a proper bodyguard.

I hate that I even have the thought.

To distract myself, I look around the winter market. On one hand, I can’t believe it’s been an entire year since I was here last. On the other, it feels like several lifetimes.

“Where to first?”

“Let’s see what they have for decorations.” I spent a particularly sneezy afternoon in the attic, searching for anything of that nature, but if it ever existed in the Hades household, it was lost in the fire of Hades’s youth like so much else.

And so we begin again. Symbolic in so many ways.

I take my time meandering the stalls with Medusa looming at my side. Everything is so festive, garlands strung from various booths, a wild variety of smells hitting me at every turn. I take a moment to be grateful that my morning sickness has long since passed, but I do work to pass one stall serving fish as quickly as possible, shooting the woman there an apologetic smile.

“Look at that.”

I follow Medusa’s motion to a stall housing a shelf of brightly colored cookies. I wander closer and get the spiced scent of gingerbread. My mouth waters, but what truly catches my interest is that some of the cookies are little black dogs with jaunty bows around their necks.

I think they would make Hades smile in that indulgent way of his.

“Do you see something you like?”

I smile at the Latina woman with her cute, frilly apron. “Do you by chance accept orders? I would love to have a selection of these for the holidays, but I know it’s not much time.” Less than a week, all said and done.

In my mother’s house, holiday planning starts in November—and sometimes even sooner when she’s feeling inspired. My sisters and I often plan out our gifts for each other through the summer. Ever since we were little, the unspoken rule is that we don’t buy for each other. Our gifts are often small and handmade or thoughtful in some way.

Hades and I aren’t doing gifts. We talked about it, but he’s barely onboard with a full holiday experience, let alone the pressure of gifts. I don’t see it as a pressure, but he’s so intentional about everything he does, it will take him a solid year to decide on the proper gift.

Next year. We promised each other next year there would be time and energy for gifts. This year is only for the celebration.

The baker is very accommodating and we arrange for one of my people to pick up the order the day before everything

closes down. She has to assure me several times that it's no hardship and there is plenty of time and that the order isn't really that large.

She's right. It's not as if we're entertaining. My mother and sisters have other obligations this year, but we decided to have the family gathering the day after instead of trying to make all the moving parts work.

And, selfishly, I want the quiet moments with my husband and household.

A phone rings, and Medusa motions for me not to go anywhere as she pulls it out of her cargo pants and answers. "Medusa, here. Yes, we're still in the market." Her gaze flicks to me. "What do you think we're doing, Charon? We're shopping. I think we're wrapping up." It's not quite a question, but she's obviously directing this bit at me.

"Just a few more things," I say sweetly. I may technically be queen or co-ruler of the lower city, but it seems like every single person, from Matthew who runs the greenhouse my husband loves so much, to Charon and everyone else on the staff, has made it their personal mission to babysit me.

I know it's done out of caring, but there are times when it's all a bit overwhelming.

"I am going to finish hopping," I continue. "Only a little more now."

Medusa snorts, but conveys that to Charon. Whatever he says makes her roll her eyes. "You know, you could just meet us at the house." She doesn't say it strongly, though. The events of the last year have left marks on us all. The danger may technically be passed—as much as it ever is—but that doesn't mean we've let our guard down. Not really. Maybe not ever again.

Medusa hangs up and slips the phone into her pocket again. "He'll be here in fifteen, and he's not happy."

Of course. He was just visiting with Andres, which means he's full of conflicting emotions. He's too much a professional and loves Hades far too much to ever let that overflow...at

least most of the time. He knows what Andres did was wrong, but that's still his uncle, and still the man who raised him.

Family is endlessly complicated.

We wrap up shopping relatively quickly after that. Truth be told, I am already tired. My stamina isn't what it used to be, and my feet swell as the smallest insult. They're aching something fierce currently, even with the comfortable boots Hades bought me, half a size larger than I normally wear.

Just one more change in a long line of them.

Medusa gives me a look that's obviously trying to be casual, but there's nothing casual about it. "Does Eurydice plan to attend the holiday stuff with Charon?"

I have to concentrate not to grimace. It's not Charon who's the problem with that relationship. It's Orpheus. Where Charon and my sister go, Orpheus always follows. I will be happy for my sister because she's happy, but if she's forgiven her ex—now partner—for what he did to her...

I haven't.

"I believe so," I say finally. If I dislike Orpheus, the rest of my family would see him dead. Even now. But if the choice is losing Eurydice or finding a way to stomach being around the man who hurt her... It's no choice at all.

I love my sister. I'll do anything for her. Even this.

Charon meets us outside the market. He's a broad-shouldered white man with dark hair and blue. Normally, he's got a calm energy that all people of incredible competence share. Today, his shoulders are too tight and he's looking around as if he expects someone to attack at any moment.

He catches sight of me and nods. "I think it's best we head back now. Hades will be crossing the river soon."

"Yes, of course." I want to be home before Hades is. He's never in a good mood after meeting with Zeus, and if he arrives to an empty house, he might worry.

Medusa clears her throat. "I need to make some calls to have one of our people pick up what was ordered today."

“Go ahead.” He looks at me. “Do you want to walk, or should I call a car?”

Pride says walk, but if I’ve learned one thing in the last year, it’s that pride is often enough to get me into trouble. My feet hurt, and there’s an ache starting in the small of my back that will become excruciating if I’m not careful. I know what my husband would say, and another time, I might play the part of the brat to entice a response, but these days his “punishments” are things like rubbing my feet or cocooning me with blankets on the couch in his study while he works... which invariably leads to me napping despite my best efforts.

“A car would be wonderful.”

He motions to the black sedan idling at the curb. Cheeky asshole.

It takes time to get home, and more time to direct where I want my purchases to go once they start arriving at the house. I’m tempted to start decorating, but exhaustion wins out.

Not a moment too soon, either.

Hades stalks through the door, his black jacket sweeping behind him. Anyone looking might assume him a villain in a movie, but I know better. I’ve always known better.

His shoulders drop when he sees me, his expression relaxing into a smile. “There you are.”

“Did you think I’d run off?” I start to rise, but the belly gets in the way. My center of gravity is off these days, and it’s never more apparent than moments like this, when I flounder like a turtle on its back.

Hades is at my side in an instant. “Don’t rise on my account.” He kisses me lightly. “Or at least ask for help.”

I place my hand in his, and let him leverage me carefully off the couch. He looks tired; significantly more so than when he left this morning. “It went badly?”

“Quite the opposite.” His hand drops to the small of my back, his fingers unerringly finding the spot that started aching about an hour ago and has now reached screaming intensity.

I rest my head against his shoulder. “Tell me about it?”

“Tomorrow. It’s late. Come to bed.”

“When I have these babies, I’m going to stop being so tired all the time.”

“When you have those babies, I suspect tired is all we’ll be.” He says it fondly.

We make our way up to our bedroom, and I don’t miss Hades watching me struggle up the stairs. He mutters something about installing an elevator, but I pointedly ignore that.

It’s only when we close the door to our rooms that he speaks again. “He’s talking about rebuilding. He’s got a lot of good ideas.”

I don’t remind Hades that he said he didn’t want to talk about this until tomorrow. I also don’t say that this Zeus is hardly his father. The truth is that he’s worse in some ways, because at least the last Zeus was only motivated by selfish desires. He was a monster, but a monster firmly entranced in his seat of power.

This Zeus is a monster who’s been threatened. Who’s flirted with the very real reality that he might lose everything. He’s far more vicious than his father...and far more dangerous.

“The situation isn’t the same as last time,” I say gently. “Even if he’s not an ally, he knows how vital you are to the lower city—and that he has no hope of ruling here. He won’t attack us.”

If he tried, my mother and sisters would do something horrendous. It might be too late to save me and the ones I love, but they wouldn’t stand for an attack like the last time.

I don’t tell him that. He knows. He’s thought through this five thousand times, and he’ll do it another five thousand times before I give birth, to say nothing of after.

Hades doesn’t need me to reassure him. He just needs me to be here while he works through it himself. “What did you

say in response?”

“I told him that historically, the lower city sees to its own first...but that maybe it’s time for things to change there, too.” His gaze goes distant. “We’re one city. We should start acting like it.”

I don’t even know what that would look like. It feels like the River Styx separating the upper city and the lower city has been a fact of life since the beginning of time. It’s ingrained right into the DNA of Olympus. Except... A *lot* of things have changed that I thought would be impossible.

Maybe this can, too.

“So we rebuild together?”

He shrugs, the move a study of nonchalance even though it’s clearly a lie. “I’m thinking about it.”

Despite everything, I grin. “You’ve already decided. You knew what you’d do even before you took that meeting. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Hades makes a face. “You see right through me.”

“I hate to tell you this, husband...” I lean in. “Everyone who knows you sees right through the cold, ‘I am the Darkness’ act. It’s not fooling anyone.”

“At least give me my illusions.”

Maybe someday my husband will finally acknowledge the fact that he is almost universally beloved by those who know him, but today’s in that day. I know better than to push them on this. Instead, I change the subject.” Would you like to help me decorate tomorrow? “

His slow smile is reward enough. It lights up his face causing his eyes to crinkle at the edges.” It will take US in an hour to decide that I’m underfoot and command me away. “

For all his jokes they are exactly that — jokes. We’re so busy these days, that I relish any time spent with him. If you help me decorate it will mean that he’s not surprised with a transformation when you get home, but that’s not a bad thing.

Maybe this can be the first of the new holiday traditions that we built together. “You don’t have to work?”

“I can make time.”

My heart feels so full, its warmth spreads through me in a shot of pure joy. “I would like that very much.”



I’ve gotten used to waking up most mornings without Hades still in bed with me. He tries very hard to ensure that we have time together on the weekends for the lazy mornings I cherish so much, but the world is not always cooperate. Especially these days.

As such, my day is instantly a thousand times better when I open my eyes to realize he’s lying next to me and tracing abstract patterns on my belly. He looks more relaxed in the morning light, the stress constantly a written across his expression nowhere in evidence. He smiles when he realizes I’m awake. “Morning. I have wondered if you’d sleep the day away.”

I glance over to the nightstand to find that it’s already nine. “Hades! You could’ve woken me.”

“You needed the sleep. You haven’t been getting enough of it lately.” He cups my face and presses a light kiss to my lips. “We’ll get everything done we need to today.”

He’s right. I haven’t been sleeping much at all lately. I know that won’t change after the babies are born, but I look forward to no longer being a constant bundle of aches and pains. My body hardly feels like my own these days. I don’t regret the choice we made it to keep the pregnancy. That doesn’t change the fact that has complicated things in a number of ways.

“Well, there’s no reason to waste any more time.”

“Persephone.”

I freeze in the midst of trying to rock my way out of the bed. I know that tone. It's his Dom tone. I thought onto my back and give him my best innocent look. "Yes, Sir?"

"I'm right here. There's absolutely no reason for you to struggle when you should be asking for help."

I know he's right, but that doesn't change the fact that I am hardily tired of asking for help. Some things never change. I could take his correction gracefully, but things are so much more fun when I don't. I let a little brattiness slip into my tone. "Why ask for help when I can do it myself?"

"Persephone."

I ignore him and go back to rolling myself out of bed. I stumble a little getting to my feet but catch myself on the edge of the bed easily. "See. No help needed."

I turn for the bathroom and silently count as I move away from him. At three, his voice stops me in my tracks. "Where do you think you're going, a little siren?"

"The shower. Obviously." I bite my bottom lip, wondering if I shouldn't have pulled this today of all days. We've been so damn serious lately; maybe we both need a little relief.

I hear him climb out of bed behind me and I have to fight down a shiver of anticipation. Now we're getting somewhere. Hades doesn't touch me. He simply moves around to stand before me, blocking my way to the bathroom. His expression has fallen into the familiar cold lines that a promise is a very, very good time.

"Tell me your safe word."

This time, I can't contain my shiver. Just like every other time that we enter a scene together, I have a moment of wondering if I pushed him too far. I don't fear my husband. He would rather cut off his hands before he use them to give me anything but pleasure... or a little consensual pain to spice things up. With that said, I never quite know where he'll take us and that little dash of unknown spices things up considerably.

"Pomegranate."

“Very good.” The words might be praise, but the tone isn’t. He says it like I’m performing the bare minimum. “Since you are so determined to ignore my wishes, and I suppose we’ll have to do things a different way.”

That little thread of excitement in my stomach gets stronger. I do my best to keep it for my face, though. To keep playing along. I raise my brows. “There’s no need to do anything differently, Hades. Like I said, I’m more than capable of handling things myself.”

“No, little siren, you’re not. In fact, you won’t be handling anything today.”

Just like that, my excitement snaps out. I prop my hands on my hips. “What do you mean? You just said that we’re going to decorate today.”

“We will. Or, rather, I will decorate and you will direct me.”

My jaw drops. “Don’t be ridiculous. What kind of punishment is this?”

His lips curve the smallest bit and I could kick myself for showing my hand. Hades has a knack for choosing the “punishments” that irk me the most. He’s rarely cruel these days, but he is effective. “Now you get the idea. In fact, why don’t we start now?” He turns and takes two steps towards the bathroom before us pausing and looking over his shoulder at me. He raises a brow. “Come along.”

I can’t decide if I’m irritated or excited as I follow him into the bathroom and watch him start the shower. It’s a healthy combination of both. He’s so damn good at figuring out exactly what will drive me up the wall... And then drive me out of my mind. Unfortunately, my pregnancy has made the latter impossible these days.

I reach down to grab the hem of my shirt, but pause when he shakes his head slowly. “Allow me.” The two words may sound like a request, but they are most certainly a command.

I heave out an exasperated breath. Hades, of course, ignores it. He takes his time ensuring the temperature of the

shower water is exactly where he wants it. It seems to take an eternity. Through it all, he never once looks over to ensure I'm still obeying. I both love and hate that he's that sure of me.

"There we go." He wipes his hand on one of the fluffy towels hanging nearby. I know better than to make a snarky comment and prolong this whole process. Instead, I stand there and am submissively and allow him to strip of me. I might be putting on a bratty for show, but the truth is that I love how he takes care of me in this moment. His hands are gentle as he tugs my shirt over my head and drops it in the dirty laundry bin.

My loose lounge pants, stolen from him several months ago, are eased down my legs. Hades sinks to his knees before me so that I can step out of the pants, and once again I'm struck by the fact that this positioning should feel like he's submissive and I'm Dominant. That couldn't be farther from the truth.

Once I'm naked, he strips efficiently and leads me into the shower. I duck beneath the spray and slick my hair back for my face. Unsurprisingly, the water is a perfect temperature. I used to prefer my showers to be a little hotter, but pregnancy has made my skin so sensitive that I can't stand that temperature any longer. Another thing I look forward to getting back to once I have these babies.

I reach for my shampoo out of sheer habit, but freeze when Hades taps my wrist. A silent reminder that I am not the one in charge right now. This time, I can't even dredge up an irritated huff. I love it when he washes my hair, and these days there's quite a bit of my body that it takes a whole lot of effort to get to for washing.

I almost forget to be irritated with him as he lathers the shampoo into my hair with steady movements. Just like the temperature of the water, he knows exactly how much pressure I can handle these days. I have to bite my lip to hold in a little moan as he works his thumbs into my scalp. He supports my back and guides me to lean into the water to rinse.

My body is next. He uses my pomegranate body wash and a washcloth to so me up all over. By the time he's done, I'm so relaxed I'm weaving on my feet. Tricky bastard. "I'm really looking forward to having sex with you again."

He gives a choked laugh. "While the feeling is entirely mutual, a little siren, don't think you can tempt me into going against doctors orders."

I curse a little at that. I didn't have much knowledge about what it takes to be pregnant with twins before actually, you know, being pregnant with twins. It turns out it's much more challenging across the board than a single baby. We had a scare earlier my pregnancy, and the doctor advised that sex wasn't a good idea. She was quick to assure us that it was *probably* fine, but there was a risk of it inciting preterm labor. Hades and I both decided that it wasn't worth the risk.

We've had plenty of regret about that decision since then.

He kisses my shoulder, and leans around me to turn off the water. Then I'm treated to being dried off and lotioned up. I try to help once more, mostly just to do it, and receive the same light tap on my wrist reminding me that he has it taken care of.

He's just finished up when there's a light knock on our bedroom door. I barely wait until he walks out of the bathroom to duck into the closet and pull on some clothes really quickly. We've played this game before, and it's not that I have a problem with him dressing me, but I'm impatient.

I comb my hair really quickly and step out into the bedroom to find him laying out a selection of breakfast food. A quick glance at the tray reveals that it's all of my current safe foods. There's entirely too much for me to eat, but he is accounted for whatever mood I might be in.

Hades looks up and gives me a severe frown. "You're testing boundaries, little siren."

"Just being efficient," I say sweetly.

"Come eat, and we'll discuss the plans for decorating today."

I'm pretty hungry, so I don't argue against the order. Unfortunately, these days there's not much room in my stomach for food so I satisfy myself with nibbling on a variety of the offerings. "I was thinking we'd start in the entranceway."

He pulls out his phone brings up his notes app. "What plans do you have for there?"

I had been planning to go on feel, but it's obviously that won't be acceptable. Oh well. This is probably the better route anyways; it's certainly more organized. "A wreath on the door, garlands on the banister of the stairs and in the entranceway table, and... mistletoe hanging from the doorway."

Hades pauses in the middle of typing. He speaks without looking up. "Are you planning on many kisses beneath that mistletoe?"

"Wou know the rules, husband." I completely fail at hiding my mischievous smile. "It's holiday tradition."

"I see." He narrows his eyes, but he's obviously fighting not to smile. "In that case, I'll just have to ensure that you're never in the entranceway with anyone but me. "

I roll my eyes. "Spoilsport."

Hades goes back to his notes. "Walk me through the rest of it."

I go through it slowly. I don't intend to transform every single room in this house; we don't use half of them at this point and so it would be a waste of time and effort. But I want to ensure that the rooms were we gather are filled with holiday spirit. By the time I finished eating, Hades has a plan.

We go downstairs and I find that he's been sneaky again. Not only is Charon waiting for us, but Medusa and Calypso are here as well, along with several more of his people. Hades gathers us in the study and starts directing each of them to a room. It's honestly impressive, even if I'm not entirely happy at being railroaded in this.

But, by the end of the day, everything is decorated and I'm not exhausted. It's really irritating when my husband's right.

We wind up in the library with another tray of food for me just as night falls. Hades arranges me on the couch to his satisfaction, pulls the side table close enough that I can reach easily, and sits on the other end of the couch.

I'm about to protest the distance between us when he lifts my feet into his lap and pulls off my shoes. "I admit, I'm surprised you didn't have a tree."

"It was delayed." My skin heats in a blush. "I ordered in from the country. I know it's extravagant, but I wanted a little piece of home in our, well, home." The truth is that I ordered three trees, but I'm not sure if now is the time to say as much. "They'll be here tomorrow."

He's peels off my socks and set his thumbs to the arch of my right foot. "I would like you to wait to begin decorating them until I get home."

It's not actually a command. At some point during the day we shifted from him "punishing" me and out of the scene completely. I had visions of him walking into find our home transformed as if by magic, but now that I have a little food in me and my feet are being rubbed, I can admit that doing things this way was better. Hades managed to include the entire household, even if he hasn't quite admitted that we have a household.

All throughout the day, the halls of this house were filled with laughter and jokes—and occasionally curses. It felt good and right. More, it's a testament of just how far we've come.

"I won't. I promise."

We spend the next week in a state of bliss. Hades wraps up the work that he needed to get done before the end of the year. Each evening, we spend a little more time transforming our house into a winter wonderland. I introduce him to some of my favorite holiday traditions, and he takes to them with a quiet joy that warms my heart.

By the time the holiday rolls around, I've never been happier. No one is arriving for a few hours yet, so we spend a lazy morning lounging around and watching the snow fall. At

least until Hades disappears for a few minutes and comes back with a small present in his hands.

I immediately straighten, horrified. “You said no presents. I took you at your word, and you said no presents.”

“This isn’t for you, a little siren.” He sinks down on the couch next to me. “I noticed that when our trees arrived, there was something extra with them.”

“My mother sent along my childhood ornaments. I told you that.” I’m still staring at the box as if he’s holding a snake. We are very careful to be honest with each other at all times, and this feels like I just walked into a trap. It’s probably not as big a deal as I’m feeling like it is, but there’s nothing quite as awful as your loved one getting you a gift and you haven’t gotten them anything in return.

“Yes.” He lifts one hand and catches my chin in a gentle grip. “I like that tradition. Both for the experience of you picking an ornament every year, and the knowledge that when you start your own household, she was able to send all that history to you for your first holiday away.”

Slowly, my brain starts to catch up with my emotions and I’m able to read between the lines of what he saying. I look at the box again. “That’s not for me.”

“I thought it would be nice to start that tradition with our children. I know this technically isn’t there first holiday, being as how they’re not in the world with us yet, but it still feels right.”

“Oh, Hades.” It *does* feel right. So many things have ended this year, but so many things have begun as well. He releases me and I reach out to lift the lid off the box. Inside, nestled in plenty of crinkle paper to keep them safe, are two ornaments. They are nearly identical perfect black starbursts, one lined with silver and one lined with gold. “They’re beautiful.”

“Shall we put them on the tree now?”

“Absolutely.” As I rise and follow Hades to the tree, I feel a little silly for jumping the gun and making assumptions about the gift. Of course he wouldn’t walk back on the

promises we made to each other. He never has before. He certainly wouldn't start now. We hang the delicate ornaments and step back to survey our work. The twins choose that moment to start doing cartwheels in my stomach. I wince and press my hand there. "I think they like the present."

Hades sinks to his knees next to me, and frames my stomach with his hands. "Calm down, little ones. We're excited to meet you too, but you're hurting your mother."

I manage a chuckle. "You keep trying to talk sense into them, but I don't think they're listening. There's just simply not enough room." We have a little less than three months left. It seems like no time at all and yet an eternity. But then, my chances of making it to full-term with twins are significantly worse than I'd like. I push the thought away. There's no room for worries today.

I cover Hades's hands with mine. He raises his gaze to me and smiles, all of the stress and worry from last year seeming to fall away. "I'm still having a hard time believing this is real. I keep expecting to wake up one morning and find that it's all been a dream. I don't deserve you, and I don't deserve this happiness."

"Yes, you do." I shift my grips to his wrists and tug him up to his feet. "You deserve all the happiness in the world. Only good things, husband, only good things." I don't promise that everything's going to be okay. Life is life, and if there's one thing I've learned is that there are no guarantees. But that doesn't mean we have to live in fear. We have right now. "I love you."

"I love you too, Persephone. Every time I think I can't love you more, you go and prove me wrong." He kisses me, long and sweet. "Now, let's get ready for guests. They should be here soon."



Thank you so much for reading First Holiday! If you enjoyed this little slice of life novella and want to spend more time in Olympus, please be sure to check out Neon Gods, which is the story of how Hades and Persephone fell in love.

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A CLOVERLEAF FARMS CHRISTMAS



MELANIE HARLOW



A NOTE...

Once upon a time, John and Daphne Sawyer moved to northern Michigan—the Leelanau peninsula to be exact—and purchased a rambling old farmhouse set amid acres of neglected vineyards, hilly fruit orchards, and peaceful pasture. Together, they worked hard to transform the place into a working farm and winery as well as a small but elegant inn and wedding venue. They also raised five daughters, whose love stories are told in the Cloverleigh Farms Series:

Sylvia Sawyer, 40, married to Henry DeSantis

Her children Whitney (16) and Keaton (13), from a previous marriage

Their son Steffan (2)

Her book: UNBREAKABLE, (Cloverleigh Farms #4)

April Sawyer, 38, married to Tyler Shaw

Their daughter Frankie (4 months)

Her book: UNFORGETTABLE, (Cloverleigh Farms #5)

Meg Sawyer, 37, married to Noah McCormick

Their baby boy (1 week overdue)

Her book: INSATIABLE, (Cloverleigh Farms #3)

Chloe Sawyer, 35, married to Oliver Pemberton

Their son Sawyer (6 months)

Her book: UNDENIABLE, (Cloverleigh Farms #2)

Frannie Sawyer, 31, married to Declan “Mack” MacAllister

Mack’s daughters Millie (15), Felicity (11), Winnie (8) from
previous marriage

Their twins, Audrey and Emmeline (7 months)

Her book: IRRESISTIBLE, (Cloverleigh Farms #1)

If you’re a Cloverleigh Farms fanatic already (welcome back!), you’ve probably read the next generation series, starring Mack’s daughters. This holiday story takes place well BEFORE that series begins. I have no idea what year it is—best I can tell, it is about 3 years AFTER the original series concluded, and I’ve listed everyone’s ages for you above.

I beg you not to do any math.

For those of you new to this world, welcome!

Our current story begins on a snowy Christmas Eve in northern Michigan as the Sawyer clan gathers at the Cloverleigh Farms Inn for their annual holiday party.

It is December 24th, and the clock has just struck six...



CHAPTER 1

MEG SAWYER MCCORMICK

“I can’t go.” I gave up trying to get off the couch and relaxed back into the cushions, although “relaxed” was not really a thing for someone as pregnant as I was. Forty-one weeks, to be exact.

“Sawyer, it’s Christmas.” Noah still called me Sawyer just like he always had when we were friends, despite the fact that we’d been married for a year. “Your family is expecting us. And you need to get out of the house.”

“Then I hope you have a forklift, because without one, I don’t see how I’m going to get on my feet. I can’t even *see* my feet. Am I wearing shoes?”

Noah chuckled. “No. You have to wear snow boots outside because there’s already a ton of snow on the ground, but we can pack your shoes. I’ll get them.”

“Thank you. Just bring my slippers. The fuzzy pink ones.”

He looked confused. “With your nice outfit, you want fuzzy pink slippers?”

“Yes.” I looked down at the black maternity dress I wore. “This isn’t exactly a nice outfit. It’s more like a tent.”

“Only you could make a tent look so good.” Smiling, he glanced at my bare legs. “It’s cold outside. Do you want some socks or something?”

“No. I was going to attempt tights but lost interest. And I’m always hot anyway.” I sighed and put two hands on my stomach, trying to jiggle it. “Why are you still in there? You were supposed to be out by now! We could be enjoying our first Christmas Eve here at home if you’d understood the assignment.”

Laughing as he headed for the stairs, Noah said, “I don’t think shaming him is the right strategy.”

“Then you try, Officer McCormick. I’m sure you have some sort of fancy hostage negotiation tactics.” I glanced over at Noah’s K-9, who was lying on the floor watching me. “It’s not fair, Renzo. I’m a very punctual person. I meet my deadlines. I am a go-getter. Why did the universe give me a lackadaisical baby?”

Renzo cocked his head, like he was considering the question. Then he got up and came over to me, placing one paw on my leg. I pet his head. “You’re a good boy, Renzo. Always do what you’re told. Unlike some people,” I said, aiming the last part at my stomach. In response, the baby gave me a hard kick to the pancreas or some other internal organ. “See? It’s crowded in there! If you just came out, you could stretch those legs all the way.”

But even as I tried to coax the human inside me to make his entrance, my heart quickened with trepidation.

What if I couldn’t do it? What if bringing a life into this world was not on the list of things I was good at? I’d always been a high-achiever, but all those goals I’d achieved in life were within my control. It terrified me to think that the most amazing and important thing I would ever do was this scary, painful, unpredictable event. I couldn’t study or practice my way to expertise.

Thankfully, I trusted my doctor completely. Not only had she delivered over a thousand babies (when I’d requested the exact number, she’d just smiled and said she wasn’t entirely sure, but it was definitely over a hundred per year and she’d been doing this for more than ten years), but she had three kids herself, so I figured she knew what she was doing.

Noah would be right there at my side of course, but he'd promised to remain up by my head—I was a little nervous he wouldn't look at my lady parts the same way after witnessing the whole birthing process, although he claimed that was total nonsense.

A moment later, he came down the steps carrying my pink slippers and a pair of socks. "Here," he said, kneeling at my feet. "I'll help you get these on."

I watched him maneuver the socks over my swollen feet and push them up toward my knees. "Nice. Nothing says Happy Birthday Jesus like tube socks. Are these yours?"

"Yeah. I wanted to keep your legs warm and you don't have any tall socks."

My heart fluttered. "Thanks, babe. Sorry to be such a complainer."

He rose to his feet, his joints cracking. "You've earned the right. I'd bitch too if I was carrying around a bowling ball in my belly."

"With legs that kick," I reminded him as he brought my fur-lined, rubber-soled winter boots over and stuck them on my feet. "And a head that's wedged against my bladder."

"That does not sound pleasant." He reached for both my hands. "Ready?"

"Don't forget the heartburn and the nausea and the backaches and the sweating," I said, placing my palms in his. "Ready."

"Okay, here we go." He pulled and I pushed, and it took some grunting on my part, but I managed to stand. "Good job."

"Thanks." Placing my hands on my lower back, I tried for a deep breath, but expanding my lungs was tough. My abdomen tightened and I winced.

"What's wrong?" Noah asked, his brow furrowing with concern.

"Nothing. Just more Braxton Hicks."

“Do you want to call the doctor?”

“No! It’s Christmas, and I’ve already embarrassed myself twice by going to the ER with these fake labor pains.” I waddled toward the door. “I’ll get my coat.”

“I’ve got it.” Noah rushed ahead of me to the closet—would I ever move that quickly again?—and took out the wool maternity coat my mom had given me this fall. I slipped my arms in the sleeves, and he buttoned it up for me, then reached around me for the ribbon belt and tied a bow on top of the giant mound of my belly. “There. Just like a gift.”

“The only Christmas gift I want is to *have* this baby.” I looked out the window at the sky. “Are you listening, Santa?”

Noah leaned in and kissed my forehead. “Hang in there, Sawyer.” He wrapped his arms around me and I snuggled into his burly embrace as well as I could, hugging his waist and pressing my face to his chest. Being close to him was comforting—I knew how lucky I was, and how lucky our baby boy was going to be.

“You know what? Maybe we should stay home,” said Noah. “It’s cold out there, and—”

“No, let’s go,” I said, making up my mind to have a more positive attitude.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.” Letting go of him, I shrugged. “Maybe if I party hard enough, I’ll shake him loose.”

Noah laughed. “Do you want me to grab the hospital suitcase from the bedroom?”

I thought for a second, then dismissed the idea with a wave of my hand. “Nah. If I bring it, I’ll probably jinx myself and it’ll be another week.”

He nodded. “I’m going to back the car out, and then I’ll come back for you. Don’t try to go down those steps by yourself.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Laughing, he gave me another quick kiss before heading out the back door. “Guess I have to get used to that.”



“Wow. This *is* a lot of snow. It’s coming down fast.” I peered out the windshield as Noah carefully navigated the roads to Cloverleigh Farms, where I’d grown up, and where my parents threw a big Christmas party every December 24th. The inn was always closed to guests the week of Christmas, and every year we looked forward to celebrating with staff and their families. However, due to the predicted blizzard, my parents had canceled the usual large, extravagant gathering, and only my four sisters and I (plus our husbands and kids) would be attending.

“Yeah.” Noah’s voice sounded concerned. “Visibility is terrible with this wind blowing the snow everywhere. And the roads are bad. There’s bound to be accidents tonight.”

I reached over and rubbed his leg. Because of his job, Noah knew firsthand how dangerous winter weather conditions were for drivers. “I know it’s selfish, but I’m glad you have tonight off. I wouldn’t want you out there in this.”

The drive to Cloverleigh took nearly double the time it normally did. It was close to seven when Noah pulled up to the inn’s main door and came around to the passenger side to help me to my feet. Icy wind gusts flattened my hair and snow swirled all around us as we made our way into the lobby.

“You good?” Noah said once we’d made it inside. “I’ll park and be right back.”

“I’m good.” I looked around and couldn’t help smiling. The inn at Cloverleigh Farms was always beautiful, but there was no time I liked better than Christmas. A huge fire roared in the massive stone fireplace opposite the reception desk, which was set up as a bar tonight. A towering, silvery-green Fraser fir tree dominated one corner, decorated with white lights, ribbons, berries, and ornaments in red and gold, and a

shining star at the top. Beneath the tree, gifts were piled high, and carols played through the stereo system, adding to the joyful noise of laughter, conversation, and clinking plates and glasses. I inhaled, and the savory scent of my mom's traditional Christmas Eve tenderloin mingled with the cinnamon-sweet aroma of mulling spices.

"Meg, you made it!" My mother hurried over, kissed my cheek, and helped me out of my coat. "How are you feeling?"

"Big," I said. "But okay." Another Braxton Hicks contraction hit me, and I grimaced through it.

My mom's face grew worried. "You don't look okay."

"I'm fine. Seriously." I rolled my eyes and rubbed my belly. "I'm just getting those phony contractions. I've learned not to get excited about them."

"Meggie!" my father boomed, coming toward me with a cocktail in his hand. He pressed his lips to my forehead. "How's my little girl?"

"She's big as Santa Claus."

"Let's find you somewhere to sit," he said.

My mom looked at my feet. "Should we take your boots off first?"

"Yeah. Noah has shoes for me in a bag. He'll bring them in."

She handed my coat to my dad, who hung it on a Victorian clothes tree near the door, and bent down to remove my boots. "Awful out there, isn't it? Dad and I were so worried about you all driving here, we almost canceled. But everyone made it."

"Good." I put my hands on my lower back, which was aching worse than usual. Must have been the car ride.

"Come sit down." My mom led me over to the leather couches and wide easy chairs near the fireplace, where some of my family had gathered. "Can I get you anything? Are you hungry? There's plenty of food."

“Not really. Even if I was, there’s no room in there for anything.” I lowered myself onto the end of one sofa with a considerable lack of grace. “But maybe some water?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll get it!” Little Winnie MacAllister popped to her feet from where she’d been sitting on the floor eating from a bowl of red and green M&M’s on the coffee table.

“Thanks, Winnie.” I smiled at her. She and her two older sisters were my “bonus nieces,” acquired when my youngest sibling, Frannie, married their dad, Mack. The other two, Millie and Felicity, were sitting opposite me on another sofa, holding their new twin sisters—seven-month-old Emmeline and Audrey—under the watchful eyes of Mack and Frannie, who stood behind them.

They weren’t the only new additions in the family. The Sawyer sisters had been popping out the next generation like it was their job in the last couple years.

My oldest sister Sylvia had a two-year-old, Steffan, with her second husband, Henry, who was the winemaker here at Cloverleigh Farms, in addition to two kids from her first marriage. I looked around and spotted teenage Whitney making sure Steffan didn’t pull any ornaments off the tree, and her younger brother Keaton eyeing all the presents. Sylvia and Henry were over by the food, which was laid out on a long rectangular table covered with a white tablecloth.

April, the second oldest, had given birth to a girl called Frankie four months ago. Her husband Tyler, a former MLB pitcher, held Frankie in one arm and a beer in the other hand as he and April chatted with my dad near the bar.

Between Frannie and me on the couch was Chloe, who had six-month-old Sawyer on her lap, feeding him a bottle. Her husband Oliver brought over a glass of wine, and she gestured for him to place it on the coffee table.

I sighed as I looked at it. “I totally thought I’d be toasting the holiday with the rest of you guys tonight. At this rate, I won’t even be able to have champagne on New Year’s Eve.”

Chloe laughed. “Stop it. You’ll have the baby soon.”

I grimaced with another tightening of my belly. “Easy for you to say. Your baby came early.”

“Did you try eating pineapple?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “And acupuncture, and exercise, and spicy food, and—” I stopped myself before I said sex, since Felicity and Millie were listening, and Winnie was just returning with my cup of water. “Other methods.”

“Frannie was yelling at Millie when she went into labor,” said Felicity. “Maybe you should try yelling at someone.”

“I’d start with your stylist,” Frannie said with a laugh. “What’s with the tube socks?”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “Noah wanted my legs to stay warm.”

“Very considerate,” said Chloe, tipping Sawyer up to burp him.

“Thank you, Winnie.” I took the water from her and sipped cautiously. My stomach really was acting strange. I was leaning forward to set the glass on the table when the lights flickered.

“Uh oh.” Sylvia, who’d just wandered over with Steffan on her hip, stopped in her tracks. “I hope we don’t lose power tonight.”

“Me too,” I said. “My heating pad plugs in and I can’t fall asleep without it on my back.”

Noah approached then, carrying my pink fuzzy slippers. He greeted everyone, then knelt down to stick them on my feet. “You doing okay, babe?”

“Yeah. My back hurts pretty bad, but what else is new?” I ruffled his dark hair, which had snow in it. He was so handsome—my heart still beat faster when he entered a room. I hoped that feeling would last forever.

“I saw the lights flicker as I was walking in from the parking lot,” Noah said, straightening up. “The wind is bad out

there. I hope we don't have a power outage."

"That's what I just said too." Sylvia looked concerned. "I wonder if we should head home early."

"No!" Frowning, I grit my teeth and tried shifting into a more comfortable position. "I dragged my bum all the way here, I'm not going home early!"

"How about I get you some food?" Noah suggested.

"I made crab cakes," said Sylvia.

"I made parmesan-bacon bubble bread," offered Frannie.

"I made Oliver go to the store." Chloe laughed as she reached for her wine. "He came back with frozen mini-quiches, but they're actually pretty good."

"I'll make you a plate," Noah offered.

"Are there Twinkies?" I asked, only partly joking. Twinkies were my weakness.

He smiled. "I don't think so."

I shook my head. Everything sounded good, and I hadn't eaten much today, but I wasn't that hungry. "Maybe just some hot tea," I said. "You might have to ask my mom to use her kitchen."

"You got it." He dropped a kiss on the top of my head and went over to where my mother was standing at the food table. She hugged him hello and pointed toward the back hallway that led from the public part of the inn to the home where I'd grown up. I watched as he disappeared behind the door we'd always kept closed to prevent hotel guests from wandering into our private family space.

All of a sudden, I felt a strange longing for my childhood home, the pretty bedroom I'd slept in every night for eighteen years, the view of the vineyards and woods out my window. It looked different now, since my mother had re-carpeted the floor and repainted the walls, but my old bed was still there, and at that moment, I wanted nothing more than to crawl into it, pull my comforter up to my shoulders, and feel safe, warm, protected.

Which was so weird. Not just because I was perfectly safe, warm, and protected every night in Noah's arms, but because I'd never been all that nostalgic about *home*. Growing up, I'd been busting at the seams with the desire to get out of the house, move away from this small town, take the world by storm. And while I'd done everything I'd set out to do—college, law school, high-paying job for a high-powered firm—leaving had also created a hole in my heart, one I don't even think I realized was there until I came home for Frannie's wedding and fell in love with Noah. It was then I realized where I belonged. What home meant to me.

A sense of contentment eased the tension in my muscles for a moment. I was right where I belonged—in life, in the world, in spirit—and the realization came with a feeling of peace. It was Christmas, I was surrounded by everyone I loved—three generations of family—and I was on the precipice of bringing new life into the world. What could be more beautiful than that?

Then the power went out.

And my water broke.



CHAPTER 2

NOAH MCCORMICK

In the Sawyer family kitchen, I located the light switch and flipped it on. The room was large and homey, with white-painted cupboards, butcher block counters, and a wide farmhouse sink. I knew way more about kitchen decor than I ever wanted to because Meg and I had redone the one in our house after moving in. Meg was one of those people who researched every possible option, compared prices, listed pros and cons, and wanted to discuss them all. I humored her, but seriously, as long as a counter was flat, a cupboard door opened without squeaking, and an appliance worked properly, I really didn't care what color or style it was.

Spotting the kettle on the stove, I grabbed it and began filling it with water from the sink. As I stood there, the wind howled, whistling at the kitchen windows. I made a mental note to check the exterior caulk next time I was here during the day.

While I waited for the water to boil, I opened several cupboard doors searching for a mug. On my third try I found the right one and perused the selection, wondering which one would make her smile.

There was one that said Best Dad Ever. There was one with a photo of Sylvia's kids Whitney and Keaton on it, taken maybe ten years ago, that said #1 Grandma. There were several Cloverleigh Farms mugs, and then there was one that said, *I had my patience tested. I'm negative.*

It made me smile, since patience was not generally one of my adorable wife's virtues. She went at everything with gusto, because if a thing was worth doing or a cause was worth fighting for—and there was nothing Meg loved more than a cause—then it was worth every ounce of passion she had. I admired that about her. I always had.

Daphne, Meg's mom, had told me the tea bags were in the pantry, so I went in there and hunted around for a flavor I thought Meg would like. Her favorite flavor was Twinkie, of course, but since there wasn't any Twinkie tea, I pulled a bag from the box that said Calming Lavender Rose. Meg could use a little calming, poor thing. I was used to wearing a lot of heavy gear on the job, but I couldn't imagine what it must be like to carry an eight-pound human being in my belly at all times.

The kettle was whistling by then, so I turned off the gas, stuck the tea bag in the mug, and poured water over it. I was just replacing the kettle on the stove when the lights flickered, and then went out.

“Shit,” I said. Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I turned on the flashlight. Using the small beam to guide me, I grabbed the mug of tea and made my way back from the Sawyer home to the inn. It was eerily silent in the hallway, and a strange prickle of worry was making the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

But it was just a power outage. Not that big a deal. And the Sawyers probably had a generator somewhere. Still, I hurried along the corridor, anxious to get back to Meg. Maybe we should have stayed home, I thought, praying that tonight would not bring any surprises. Cloverleigh Farms was a lot farther from the hospital than our house in town. And the roads were awful. A sweat broke out on my back beneath my clothes.

Stop worrying, I scolded myself. It wasn't like me to panic. But as I entered the inn, I decided that Meg and I should probably head home before the storm got worse.

The music had gone off, but I could hear agitated voices, and the fire gave the only light. Everyone appeared to be over by the couch near the fireplace. My heart started to pound.

“Meg?” I called out, starting to move faster. Hot tea sloshed over the edge of the mug, but I hardly felt the sting. As I got closer to the crowd, I spotted Meg on her hands and knees near the coffee table. Frannie was on one side of her, rubbing her back, and Daphne was wiping off the leather couch with a white towel.

“Meg!” I set the mug down hard and dropped down next to her, panic seizing my chest. “Honey, are you okay?”

She was panting hard. “My water. It broke.”

I could actually feel the blood rushing away from my brain. My vision blurred for a second. “Okay,” I said, surprised at how calm my voice sounded. “Okay. So you’re in labor.”

“You think?”

I swallowed. “Sorry. Uh, okay I’ll get the car.”

“No! Don’t leave me!” Her eyes flashed with panic in the firelight.

“Okay, baby.” I brushed her hair off her face. “I won’t leave. I’ll stay right here.”

“I can go get the car,” Mack offered. “I’ll get mine. It has a nice big backseat. You can ride together back there.”

She shook her head. “I can’t ride in the car right now. No way.”

“But Meg,” I protested. “We have to get you to—”

“Just give me a few minutes, okay? This will pass.” She continued to breathe through her teeth. “It has to pass. And then I’ll be able to move.”

“My labors took hours,” offered Sylvia, who stood nearby with her toddler on her hip.

“Mine too,” said Chloe from the couch. She stood up and handed her baby to Oliver. “Mom, why don’t we find some

candles? That will be relaxing and give us a little more light.”

“I’ll get them,” said April. “I know where they are. Whit and Keaton, want to help me?”

Sylvia’s kids followed April and Chloe toward the back hallway leading to the house, their voices chattering with excitement.

“I brought you the tea,” I said, desperate to be useful. “Would you like a sip?”

Meg shook her head, then glanced back at her mom. “Sorry . . . about . . . the couch. I got . . . it wet.”

“Oh honey, don’t even think about it,” Daphne soothed. “But I wish you’d let Noah take you to the hospital. The drive could be long with this weather. I want you to make it there in plenty of time.”

“In a minute.” Meg closed her eyes and her breathing seemed to slow. “Okay. Okay. I think I can stand.”

Frannie and I jumped to our feet and slowly helped Meg rise. “Easy now,” I told her, although I was feeling incredibly *uneasy* about this sudden turn of events.

“I think I’ll just move around a bit,” said Meg, swaying from side to side as she slowly made a circle around the sofa. I stayed with her, holding her by the elbow, worried she might bump into something in the dark, or lose her balance. I was sweating profusely, and the snow gathering in the corners of the inn’s large front windows was not reassuring.

Meg’s father, John, came over to her other side, and the two of us helped Meg stay upright as she took wide, plodding steps.

“Are you having contractions, Meg?” Frannie asked.

“Yes,” Meg said. “I’ve been having them all day, but I thought they were those fake ones. Suddenly they’re coming so fast.”

John and I exchanged a look. “Um, how far apart are they coming now?” I asked.

“It’s—hard to say.” Meg stiffened, her fingers digging into my arm. “They haven’t been consistent, and they weren’t that bad until a few minutes ago.”

“Let’s time the next few,” said Chloe.

Meg nodded and took two more steps. Then she grabbed her belly and moaned. While she breathed through it, April, Chloe, and the kids returned with candles and lit them. We had a little more light as Meg resumed her walking, heading over toward the tree.

“So if the baby is born on Christmas, he’ll have the same birthday as Jesus!” said Winnie, her face aglow with excitement. “Maybe you can call him that! Jesus McCormick is a cool name.”

“We’re—calling him—Fletcher,” Meg managed. A sweat had broken out on her forehead.

Winnie considered it and shrugged. “That’s cool too.”

“If you don’t make it to the hospital,” said Felicity eagerly, “who will deliver the baby? On TV, people always say, ‘Is there a doctor in the house?’ And then usually, there’s a doctor.” She looked around. “But we don’t have one here.”

“Felicity, hush,” Mack scolded.

“Well, we *don’t*,” the middle schooler said.

“She’ll make it to the hospital,” April said confidently. “First labors take *hours*.”

“Meg, honey,” I said in my calmest but most authoritative voice. “I think we should let Mack drive us—”

But just then, she doubled over and groaned in agony.

“Four minutes,” said Chloe, her voice cracking. “That’s—um—that’s close together.”

Alarmed, I wrapped my arms around my wife and made frantic eye contact with Mack.

“I’ll get the car,” he said, already heading for the door.

“No!” Meg shouted, grabbing on to the back of the couch. “No car! The baby is coming too fast!”

“Meg,” Frannie said, panic lacing her voice. “That’s why you need to get to the hospital right away.”

“It’s too late.” Meg gasped, sending a jolt of terror up my spine. “I’m telling you, it’s too late. It’s happening now.”

“*Now?*” at least four people in the room chorused.

“Call nine-one-one,” I ordered Frannie, recovering my wits. “We need an ambulance.”

“I’ll do it,” said Henry. Within seconds, he was talking to dispatch, explaining the situation and giving the location. After he hung up, he looked at me. “It’s, uh, not a great night to need a quick response. But they’re going to get here as fast as possible.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, cursing myself for insisting that we go out tonight. But I knew EMS would do their best to arrive quickly. “Okay.”

Meg moaned in agony. “Oh God, this pain—the books weren’t lying! I’m not sure I can handle it.”

“Yes, you can.” Sylvia went into oldest sister mode, handing Steffan to Henry before coming over to where Meg clung to the sofa. “Listen, Meg. All the Sawyer sisters have been where you are. We’ve all doubted our ability to do this thing, and that’s because it hurts and it’s hard. But you can do it.”

“Maybe in a hospital I could.” Meg struggled to speak through the pain. “Like, with drugs. Many drugs. But not here.”

“Shhhh,” I said, rubbing her back. “Don’t say that. We’ll get you to the hospital.”

“Noah,” said John quietly. “Maybe we should prepare just in case.”

I met the older man’s eyes and knew a fear like I’d never known before—and I’d been in some harrowing situations,

both in the Army and on the job. But I tamped it down.
“Okay.”

“I’ll google ‘How to deliver a baby!’” shouted Felicity.
“Millie, give me your phone!”

“Let’s get her upstairs,” Daphne said. “Into one of the guest rooms.”

“I’ll grab a key!” yelled Frannie, racing toward the reception desk.

Meg’s legs were not working well, and her father and I slowly helped get her up the steps and into the closest guest room. April, Chloe, and Sylvia led the way holding candles, Frannie opened the door, and we laid Meg on the bed. Daphne followed us in, and together we managed to get clean towels beneath her.

“Mom.” Meg’s voice cracked as she reached for Daphne’s hand. “I’m scared.”

“I know, baby.” Daphne’s voice was remarkably steady. “But everything is going to be just fine. Help is on the way.”

Meg only wept and shook her head. “There’s no time for help.”

“On a scale of one to a hundred, where is your pain?” I asked, trying to recall what the doctor had told us about the pain scale and the timing of the labor. Maybe if she was at eighty or something, the EMTs could arrive in time.

“A hundred,” Meg said. “Maybe two hundred. Noah?”

“Yes. I’m here.” But I was lightheaded with panic.

Meg’s eyes were wild and she struggled to focus on me. “I’m having this baby here and now. Do you believe me?”

She was serious.

“Yes. Just—just give me one second.” I switched my phone flashlight on and raced out of the room, taking the stairs down at least four at a time and leaping from the landing to the ground. I spotted my brothers-in-law all standing near the tree and ran toward them.

“You guys, I need help,” I said frantically. “Who knows how to deliver a baby?”

Even in the dark, I could see their terrified expressions.

Oliver took a step back. “Don’t look at me, I’m just a businessman.”

“I’m just a ball player,” said Tyler.

“I’m a winemaker,” said Henry.

Mack was my last hope, but he shook his head. “Sorry, man. I’ve seen it happen, but I’ve never had to supervise.”

“Fuck.” I closed my eyes, my heart jackhammering in my chest. “I think I have to do it.”

“It’s really happening that fast?” Henry asked.

“She says it is. I have to believe her.”

Tyler clamped a hand on my shoulder. “You’ve got this, McCormick.”

“Absolutely,” said Oliver. “You’re a police officer, so you’ve probably had some first emergency medical training, right?”

“I should have paid more attention to it,” I said weakly.

“Listen,” said Mack. “If I had to choose one of us to deliver a child of mine, I’d choose you, Noah. You can do this.”

I met his eyes and swallowed hard. “Thanks.”

From upstairs, we heard loud screams, and I took off running.

Back in the room, Meg was nearly incoherent with pain. Her eyes were full of tears when she saw me. “Noah?”

“I’m here, baby. I’m right here.” I leaned over her, brushing her hair from her forehead.

“Is the ambulance here yet?”

“No. But it’s okay. If the baby comes too fast, I can deliver it.”

“You can?”

“Yes.”

“You never told me—you know how to—deliver a baby,” she panted.

“Well, I do,” I lied. “It was part of my police training.”

The relief on her face was evident and made me feel better about the fib. I rolled up my sleeves. “I’m just going to wash my hands.”

“I’ll give you some light,” said Chloe, following me into the bathroom with a lighted candle.

At the sink, I scrubbed my hands from fingertips to elbows. When I met Chloe’s eyes in the mirror, I could see the question there. “Don’t ask,” I begged.

“I wasn’t going to.”

I dried my hands, taking deep breaths. I could do this, couldn’t I? I looked at my reflection and willed myself to find the confidence and skill somewhere. Then I took a second to close my eyes and talk with God.

Okay, I get it, I shouldn’t have tempted fate by braving this storm. I’m an asshole. But please don’t punish Meg for it. She deserves a real doctor to deliver our baby. Or the EMTs. If you’ll just let the ambulance get here, I promise to be a much better person. I’ll donate to charity. I’ll stop letting Renzo pee on Mrs. Koslowski’s lawn. I’ll even call my mother more often. But please let my son be brought into this world by a qualified professional.

I gave it five seconds, praying to hear someone yell, “EMS is here!”

But it didn’t happen.

I turned to Chloe. “This is fucked up,” I told her.

“I know,” she said nervously. “But you can do it, right?”

Meg cried out again from the bed, and I shouldered around her sister. “Right.”



CHAPTER 3

MEG

This couldn't be happening.

I wanted the baby out, yes, but not like this!

“Everything is going to be okay, sweetheart.” My dad leaned over and kissed my sweaty forehead. “I’m going to go down and wait for the ambulance.”

I watched him leave, wishing more than anything I could be his little girl again, crying over a scraped knee. He’d bring me a Band-Aid and dry my tears, making everything better with a hug. Where had time gone? How was it possible I was now on the precipice of being the Band-Aid-getter and the tear-dryer? I wasn’t ready! I wasn’t qualified! This was some sort of time-warp mistake!

I closed my eyes as pain gripped me again, positive something was wrong because there was *no fucking way* people would have more than one baby if this was how it felt.

“Hang in there, honey.” My mom squeezed my hand.

“Okay if we stay with you?” Sylvia asked. “Whit is going to run up here when she sees the ambulance lights.”

“Where’s Noah?” I asked, desperate to know my husband was there.

“I’m here.” His deep, confident voice was reassuring. I picked up my head and saw him at the foot of the bed. The room was dim, and tears were blurring my vision—or maybe it

was the pain—but the silhouette of his wide shoulders and chest made me feel safer. Noah wouldn't let anything bad happen to me. He never had.

“I need to push,” I told him. “But I'm scared.”

“Don't be.” Noah removed my underwear and my mom helped him arrange a blanket over my lower body. Sylvia sat on one side of me and April on the other, each of them taking a hand. Frannie and Chloe stood to either side of the bed, each holding two candles.

“You've got this, Meg,” said Chloe. “There has never been *one* thing you couldn't do if you set your mind to it.”

“But this isn't like a track meet or the LSAT,” I whimpered. “This is literally a life or death thing.”

“Thousands of women give birth every single day,” April said. “Our bodies are *made* to do this.”

“But what if I'm the one woman who can't?” I cried. “What if I have the one vagina that's shaped wrong? Or not big enough? I don't think it's big enough!”

“Trust your body,” Sylvia said, squeezing my hand. “Trust yourself. You're stronger than you know.”

“Say it out loud, Meg,” Frannie suggested. “You can do this.”

“I can do this,” I said, although I was nearly delirious with the pain. “I can do this. I can do this. I'm stronger than I know.”

“Meg, baby, I think you should push,” Noah said from somewhere between my thighs. “I can see the head.”

That's when I remembered I didn't really want him seeing the whole thing. “Don't look!” I yelled, even as I began to bear down. “You'll never want me again!”

“Meg McCormick, I will always want you,” he said firmly. “You are the light of my life, the only woman I have ever loved, and every day I wake up knowing I'm the luckiest man in the world because you chose me. Now stop talking and push!”

Noah's words of love and encouragement plus my sisters' presence and support gave me a burst of energy. I listened as they cheered me on, breathed when they reminded me, relaxed between contractions, pushed when Noah asked, and found strength in knowing that the room was so full of love. Maybe this baby wouldn't be born in a brightly-lit hospital room with doctors and nurses in charge, but he'd be born into a family who knew how to be there for each other when times were tough.

In my delirium, memories of my childhood washed over me, vivid with colors and sound and smells and textures. I could feel the sun on my face as my sisters and I ran through the orchard on a summer day. I could taste the apples we'd pluck off the trees. I caught the fecund scent of the horse stalls as we mucked them out. I saw us as five giggling girls making snow angels in winter, then going inside for our mom's hot chocolate, begging our dad to play a board game with us—and he always did. I saw my parents slow dancing in the kitchen as they cooked dinner together, knowing that was the kind of marriage I wanted some day.

And I saw my brave, beautiful Noah—as a teenage lifeguard pulling me from the water when I'd gotten caught in a current, as a small town K-9 officer giving presentations at schools, as a devoted husband who was so emotional when he learned I was pregnant that he pulled me into his arms and cried on my shoulder.

Our little boy would know that kind of love, the kind that grows stronger every day, lasts forever, and gets passed down through the generations.

With one final effort, I felt my son enter the world, and I burst into tears with the sheer joy of it.

“It's a boy!” my mom cried. “Oh Meg, he's just perfect!”

A second later, I heard a newborn's high-pitched wail and felt a weight on my chest. My tears continued to fall as I touched my baby son for the first time.

That's when the door to the room burst open. “They're here!” a young, girlish voice yelled. “There coming up right

now!”

Instantly the room grew chaotic as EMTs burst into the room just steps behind Whitney. They immediately attended to me and the baby, and Noah knelt down next to the bed.

“You did it,” he said, drying his eyes on his shoulder.

“We did it,” I said, fully exhausted but happier than I’d ever been.

“I’m so proud of you.” Noah rested his lips on my damp forehead.

“Thank you.” I was still trying to catch my breath. “But tell me the truth. Were you lying about knowing how to deliver a baby?”

Noah looked me right in the eye. “One hundred percent. Are you mad?”

“No. It was what I needed to hear to trust in fate. And myself.”

“I’m sorry I lied. I’ll never do it again.” His eyes filled with tears once more. “I’m so proud of you, Meg. You amaze me.”

The EMTs brought our baby to us, wrapped in a warm blanket, his face pinched and wrinkled like an old man’s. But he blinked at us, as if in recognition, and we wept with happiness and relief.



CHAPTER 4

NOAH

“And then, Fletcher,” I said to my perfect baby boy, “I caught you with my own two hands.”

“You forgot the part where you put on the cape, Superdad.” From the hospital bed where she rested, Meg looked over at me with amused eyes the exact same deep caramel shade as our son’s.

“Hey, listen. I know you were the real superhero, but I can’t help it if I’m proud of the role I played. I know it wasn’t the starring role, but it was a very important supporting role.”

She laughed. “It was, and you *should* be proud. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

I bent down and gave her a kiss. “You will never have to worry about it. But next time, we’re going to the hospital *early*.”

“Knock, knock.” Frannie poked her head in the door. “How’s everybody?”

“Hey, we’re good. Come on in.” Meg waved her sister into the room, but it was Mack’s youngest daughter Winnie who scurried through the door and came racing over to me.

“Can I see him?” she asked eagerly, unzipping her winter jacket and dropping it on the floor.

“Sure.” I sat down in the rocking chair near the window so she could get a better look.

“Go wash your hands, Win,” Frannie directed before she went over to give Meg a hug. “I hope it’s okay I brought Winnie,” she said quietly. “I was just going to come alone, but she begged me to bring her. She says she has a present for Fletcher.”

Meg laughed. “It’s fine. It’s Christmas! There should be family around. Mom and Dad just left, and Noah’s mom was here this morning too.”

“How’s he doing?” Frannie glanced at the baby as she shrugged out of her coat.

“Good,” I said. “He eats, sleeps, cries, and poops, and the doctor said that’s all he needs to master right now.”

Frannie laughed as she scooped up Winnie’s coat from the floor and set it on a chair with hers. “I’ll wash my hands too, then I want to hold him.”

Winnie came hustling back into the room, eager to see her new cousin. “Hi, baby Fletcher,” she cooed. “I have something for you.”

“That’s so thoughtful of you, Win,” Meg said. “What is it?”

“It’s a letter I wrote.” Winnie pulled a folded sheet of notebook paper from her pocket. “My teacher said that we had to write a letter to someone describing something that happened over winter vacation. So after I opened my presents, I wrote to Fletcher to tell him about the night he was born.”

“What a good idea,” I said. “Want to read it aloud?”

“Yes.” Winnie looked glad I asked. She cleared her throat and then she began.

“Dear Fletcher,

’Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, the lights were off. That is because it snowed so much we lost power. I was eating M&Ms when it happened. First, your mom who is my Aunt Meg said you were coming. Next, we all said to wait for the ambulance—” Winnie paused and

looked up at us. “That’s a hard word, ambulance. I had to ask for help.”

“It is a hard word,” I agreed.

She looked at the page again. “Next, we all said to wait for the ambulance, but you did not want to wait. Aunt Meg went up the stairs. And then bam! You were born very fast. Uncle Noah had to be the doctor. He is your dad. Finally, Santa came and brought presents. But you were the best gift. Love, your cousin Winifred MacAllister.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet, Win,” Meg said, dabbing her eyes.

“There’s more,” said Winnie. She looked down again. “P.S. This is the best family in the whole world and Cloverleigh Farms is like a place under a magic spell, but a good spell not an evil spell, except for when the lights went out. But Millie said maybe you just wanted a dramatic entrance.” She looked up, shuffling her feet. “That’s the end.”

“I love it!” Meg opened her arms and Winnie flew into them for a hug. “Everything you said is true—Cloverleigh Farms is magical, Fletcher definitely wanted a dramatic entrance, and this family is absolutely the best in the whole world.”

“When I grow up, I want to stay right here,” Winnie announced, looking from Meg to Frannie to me. “Just like you guys did. So I need to fall in love with someone who lives close by.”

“Don’t you think you should finish second grade first?” asked Frannie wryly.

Winnie shrugged. “I guess. But there *is* a cute boy in the grade ahead of me. I’d marry him. But I’m not having any babies.”

“Why not?” Meg asked.

“Because I heard the way you screamed to get him out.” Shuddering, she shook her head. “Also, I know what you have to do to get one. I will *never*,” she said seriously.

“What do you mean?” Meg glanced at Frannie.

“My sister Felicity told me about it! I thought she was making it up, but turns out, she wasn’t. I’m not letting any boy get near me with his *thing*.” She wriggled like she had cooties and made a disgusted face. “Gross!”

The adults in the room laughed. “That’s probably the best plan for now,” said Meg. “But maybe when you’re grown, you’ll change your mind.”

I stood up so Winnie could sit down in the rocker. “Want to hold him?”

“Yes,” she said, shoving the letter back in her pocket and scrambling onto the chair.

I carefully placed Fletcher in her arms, and she smiled down at him, her feet swinging. “He’s so cute.”

“Isn’t he?” Meg sighed, looking pleased but exhausted. It still blew my mind, what she’d gone through last night, her bravery, her strength, her trust in me.

Frannie moved closer to Winnie and the baby, so I went over and sat beside my wife, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “You doing okay?”

“Just tired,” she said, tipping her head against my chest. “But happy. Maybe it didn’t go down exactly as planned, but he’s here, he’s perfect, and he’s the start of our little branch of the family.”

I pressed my lips to her head as my throat grew tight. “I love you, Sawyer.”

Her laughter was soft but joyful. “I love you too.”



THE END



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HAVE YOURSELF A GRUMPY LITTLE CHRISTMAS



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CHAPTER 1

TREVOR STAFFORD, AKA A MAN WITH AS MUCH CHRISTMAS SPIRIT AS A HOLEY SOCK

If a man's home is his castle, mine has apparently been turned into gingerbread.

And I hate gingerbread.

I stifle a snarl, but I can't stop my face from having a reaction of its own as the smell and the sounds hit me.

Christmas cookies. Christmas music. Christmas candles. Christmas *towels*? All over my modern kitchen. What the hell?

Right.

Meg is what the hell.

Meg O'Connell. My college best friend's dark-haired, blue-eyed little sister. A bundle of starlight perpetually wrapped in red clothing. North Pole Elf in a previous life. And my currently-outstaying-her-welcome temporary housemate who's shaking her hips along to that annoying Mariah Carey Christmas song while wrapped in an apron covered with reindeer and flour, rolling out cookie dough on the black granite countertop of my kitchen island.

And of course she notices that I'm home. And not in control of my face.

“Hi, Trevor! How was physical therapy? Should I get your —oh. Um, hi. Everything okay?”

“Fine,” I grunt as I navigate around the disaster she’s made of my kitchen.

It’s warm in here. Way warmer than the unseasonably cold weather outside in southern Virginia. I drop my jacket on the floor—*fuck*, that’s gonna be coated in flour too—grab the freezer handle of my side-by-side stainless fridge, then yank my hand back when it connects with something slick and not-supposed-to-be-there.

“Oh, sorry.” Meg drops her reindeer cookie cutter—side note, *why* are there reindeer cookie cutters in my kitchen?—and hustles to me, bringing with her the scent of hot chocolate and Christmas trees. She snags a towel and goes to town fisting her hand up and down over the freezer handle. “I must’ve had something on my hand when I opened it. Sorry. Should’ve wiped that down already. Here. Let me get your ice pack.”

She’s jerking off my freezer handle.

She’s jerking off my freezer handle with a reindeer towel, and now my dick’s taking notice, in the middle of a damn Christmas nightmare in my holiday-free-zone house.

And now she’s attacking me too, grabbing my wrist with one of her soft, warm, flour-covered hands while she flips my palm up and efficiently wipes the slime off my skin with a part of the towel that’s miraculously still clean.

Also, there’s a reindeer staring at me from that towel.

It knows what my dick is doing and it is judging me.

Shut the hell up, reindeer. Nobody asked you, and what are you doing staring at my dick anyway?

Also, I don’t need a reindeer judging me for an unexpected and unwelcome hard-on.

I’m judging myself for it enough.

Much like I have been every time I’ve gotten a hard-on when I’ve seen Meg in my house the past few weeks.

I blame the painkillers.

Safest that way.

Because I've spent the past too many years since college pretending like this doesn't happen *every* time I happen to cross paths with my best friend's little sister.

"Are you okay?" Meg, who clearly has *zero* reasons to care about the action behind my fly, asks. "Seriously? You look like you did that time when Jude hit that home run off of you the first time you faced each other in the majors. Oh. Sorry. Sore topic. Right. You struck him out *way* more times than he hit home runs off of you, if it helps. Here. Ice pack. Shoulder. Want a cookie? I just finished decorating the first batch. There's something about your house that's total magic. I've never had gingerbread cookies turn out this well."

I snatch my hand back and take the ice pack from her. "Why are you here?"

"The Bergers have so much family in town that I was relieved of duty until after the New Year. Accidental paid time off, but I'm on call just in case. Awesome, right? Although, I'll miss the babies." She winks at me. "Don't tell Zeus and Joey, but I'm totally making these for them as an excuse to give my little sweeties extra hugs and kisses since I'm not scheduled to see them again for so long."

My cheek is twitching in time with the pulsing ache in my pitching arm and in direct opposition to the way my dick is still lifting sleepy eyeballs at Meg like it's once again remembered we have a woman that we've been denying being attracted to for years living in the house with us.

It probably has.

She's not around a lot.

And there are rarely women in my house.

Plus, Meg isn't a *woman*. She's my best friend's little sister, which makes her *not a woman*.

Which is a message that my dick still hasn't received, no matter how many times I've told it as much over the years.

I grunt again and turn away. Physical therapy drains me dry these days, and my bedroom, which shares a wall with the kitchen, is too far away. “*So long* sounds like a good time to look for an apartment.”

She doesn’t answer.

She doesn’t start singing again.

The oven’s not beeping.

Nothing’s catching on fire and setting off the smoke alarms.

She definitely heard me.

Fuck.

Meg and I have known each other tangentially since Jude and I met playing ball together in college. See her—*saw* her occasionally whenever our teams faced off once we both hit the big league too.

And it’s my fault she’s here.

I ran into my buddy Zeus at the grocery store a while back. When he told me he and his wife had lost another nanny for their baby quadruplets, I remembered Jude saying Meg was temporarily without a job after some incident at the preschool where she’d been working.

Bad fit, Jude had said. *Meg’s a bit unfiltered sometimes, and the preschool was a little uppity.*

Zeus is a little unfiltered.

Okay, a *lot* unfiltered. His wife even more so.

And Meg?

She never sits still. So having her crash here temporarily while she gets her bearings in the city was supposed to be like having an old friend-of-a-friend for dinner once or twice a week. There’s always somewhere she has to flit off to or something she has to do, which is also helpful with my mental attitude that *she is not a woman in my house.*

Until today.

When my defenses are low and I'm pissed and she's desecrating my kitchen and *my dick still wants her*.

My dick should be glad for what she's doing in here.

Makes her far less attractive.

"Sorry," I mutter. "Arm hurts."

"Trevor! Of course it does. You had major surgery and physical therapy is hard. Did you get any painkillers at the clinic? Can I—"

"Why do you do that?" I spin, make my shoulder twitch, and barely stifle a grimace of pain as I readjust the ice pack. "Why do you make excuses for people who are assholes to you?"

Her blue eyes widen until they're practically round. Her lips part, and her pink tongue darts out to swipe them before she visibly swallows. "You're not being an asshole to me."

"Yes, I am."

"You're cranky, but I would be too if I were you."

And now I'm swallowing. Hard.

She thinks my attitude is all about my damn shoulder giving out and ending my baseball career. About spending my last year demoted to the minors and spending half of *that* in rehab. About knowing it was the Fireballs ownership taking pity on me and letting me decide for myself when I was done instead of forcing me out of my contract, and then, when they called me up to give me a ceremonial role in the final World Series games, I completely and totally blew my shoulder out on the very last pitch.

I got my ring.

Barely feel like I earned it.

And I ended my career, no ifs, ands, or buts about it this time.

She's not wrong.

The end of my baseball career has me inside out and upside down and pissy and lost. I don't like being upside down and pissy and lost, but it's where I'm at.

And the worst part?

She's so very, very far from *all* of what's wrong with me today.

"Christmas sucks." I manage to not snarl it, but just barely. Normal Christmas? Annoying. This Christmas? It's *hell*.

I have an off-limits woman living in my house, Christmas-ing it up, my career is over, and I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do with the rest of my life. "Clean up when you're done and try to keep it contained when I'm here."

She blinks twice, and this time, there's no patient, make-excuses-for-him Meg coming up with an instant answer.

This time, there's hurt.

Fuck.

I make another grunting noise and turn to head to my room again.

She doesn't speak.

She doesn't follow me.

The oven timer goes off, but I notice she turns down the Christmas music before she shuts off the beeping.

I shove away the guilt building at knowing I've just lobbed a flaming shitball at an otherwise happy and easy houseguest, and I stride as fast as I can go down the hall to my bedroom, which also smells like pine trees and sugar cookies.

It's all tinged with bad childhood memories made worse by the pissy mood I've been in for the past six weeks.

Meg's right.

I need painkillers.

Preferably the kind that'll put me in a stupor until mid-January.

Shouldn't have stopped at the ice pack in the kitchen.

I should've grabbed the whiskey too.



CHAPTER 2

MEG O'CONNELL, AKA A NORMALLY CHEERFUL SOUL TRYING HARD TO NOT LET THE SADNESS TAKE OVER THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

I'm streaming *Elf* on my laptop with my headphones on in the dark on the couch in the living room, mindlessly crocheting a baby blanket for the Berger quadruplets. I'm also wishing my brother wasn't spending the holidays exploring the Australian Outback and my parents weren't on a six-month retirement cruise around the world, no matter how happy I am for them to have these opportunities.

And now I'm freezing as I sense movement by the kitchen.

Trevor's out of his room.

For the most part, he's been really great. And I see him so little and make such an effort to always clean up after myself outside of my room that I was hoping I wasn't being an inconvenient houseguest.

Especially since he's always been one of my favorites of my brother's friends.

Clearly, I was wrong.

I'm debating if I should pause my movie and say something to him, or sit here in the dark with my face illuminated by my laptop screen.

Dark.

Definitely sit here in the dark.

Be invisible.

Don't think about how many times over the years that he's shown up at random family events, where he would inevitably smile at me and listen after he asks how I'm doing or offer to let me go first in food lines at picnics or pick me for his dodgeball team even if I'm the world's worst player.

Now, I hope he goes into the kitchen and tries a cookie and decides it's the most delicious thing he's had in his entire life, and that it makes his shoulder not hurt and his grumpies go away and then that he sits down next to me, casually loops an arm around my shoulders—his good arm, I mean—and asks if I want to go get a Christmas tree.

Shut up, Meg's brain.

That doesn't work.

Also, Trevor's not going into the kitchen.

He stands there in the arched doorway, the glow of the neighbor's Christmas lights coming in through the window and giving him a green tint, his body turned in my direction.

And then he sighs.

I don't hear it so much as I see the rise and fall of his shoulders and the shift in his strong jaw.

Yes, I'm watching, and yes, it's starting to hurt to keep staring at him with my eyes off to the side like that.

"Sorry I was an ass," he says.

I think.

My headphones cancel out a lot, but I have unfortunately always been tuned in to anything that Trevor Stafford says when he's in my vicinity.

Usually it was no big deal, because I've traveled the States trying to find my dream job while he's been here in Copper

Valley, Virginia, or other baseball towns that I've never been to.

But now—now, I think I've found where I fit, and even after I move out, Trevor and I will be living in the same town and I don't know how I'm going to handle that long-term.

I drop the baby blanket, pause the movie, and push my headphones off my ears. "There are extra cookies on the counter, but if you don't want sweets in the house, I can—"

"They're fine. Thanks."

"The rest of the kitchen—"

"I don't like Christmas."

"—is clean." I blink as I finish my sentence. "I mean, okay. Not everybody does. You don't have to."

I huddle deeper into the couch.

Probably *should* be looking for an apartment instead of watching a movie. Or making some new friends outside of work and the Bergers. I'm sure Zeus and Joey would let me crash at their place—oh my holy Santa Claus, I have *never* seen a house decorated so much, which really shouldn't surprise me after getting to know Zeus—but much as I love them and the babies, I'd constantly feel like I was at work, and living at my job doesn't really jive with my personality.

I'd never *stop* working, and then I'd get fired for trying to be a parent instead of a nanny, and I really don't want to be fired.

I love this job more than I've loved any job in my life.

Maybe I should ask them if they have friends who know anything about the apartment market right now.

Not that I expect they'd have friends who know anything about the apartment market in my price range. Zeus is a retired professional hockey player and Joey co-owns one of the most successful flight adventure-slash-zero gravity research companies in the world.

"You like the holidays," Trevor says.

He noticed! teenage me squeals in my head.

You literally barfed the whole holiday all over his kitchen, replies the part of me that likes to remind me I'm supposed to be an adult.

"I...might have an unhealthy obsession with twinkly lights and Christmas cookies."

He makes one of those weirdly endearing grunts that work on absolutely no other man in the entire world.

Also? It's not a sound I'd ever heard out of him until I got here a few weeks ago.

Jude says Trevor's taking the end of his career hard.

I never knew Trevor well enough to know if my *oh my god, he's hot* reaction was warranted every time I saw him—the outside doesn't always match the inside when it comes to hot sportsers, and good manners can fool a person—but he was Jude's best friend, which always earned him a point in the *good guy* column, and the two of them used to be so happy when they were together.

I can't resist happy.

And I thought I'd bring some *happy* into Trevor's life with the holidays.

Clearly, I miscalculated.

"I'll stop. It's just one Christmas," I say in response to his grunt, which probably means *if I'd known you loved Christmas when I hate it, I wouldn't have offered to let you stay here over the holidays*. "I can live for one year without a tree. Or I can just go see the quadruplets. They each have trees. And Zeus has a tree. And he put up three for Joey—don't ask how he themed them—or I can just go hang at any coffee shop in town. They're all decorated. I can get my fix there. And I'll start looking for an apartment, but there aren't exactly a ton of people moving around the holidays, so—"

"If you want a tree, get a tree."

"It's okay. I don't have any of my decorations, and there's no point in buying new lights all over again when you won't

want them—”

“Zeus will take them when you’re done.”

My lips twitch.

He’s not wrong.

My boss has more Christmas spirit in his admittedly large pinky finger than I do in my whole body.

And that’s ridiculously impressive considering how much I love the holidays.

“Why don’t you like Christmas?” See again, *shut up, Meg*.

Trevor scratches his chin, then leans in the doorway, tucking his thumbs into his pockets, taking me back to the first time I saw him, which was in baseball pants, and *shew*. Hot flash. *Why* are men so attractive when they stand like that?

And *why* do I keep forgetting that this man is my brother’s best friend? While it totally earns Trevor points for having good taste in friends—Jude is pretty awesome—I’m aware of the fact that he sees me as nothing more than an overly jolly pest.

“Never mind,” I mutter. I switch my attention back to my computer. “None of my business. Sorry.”

“My parents were—*are* party planners.”

I don’t immediately see the connection. I also don’t know what my face is saying while I try to find the link, but whatever it is, it’s apparently amusing. A ghost of a smile crosses his features in the dim light.

It’s a trick, I tell myself. Definitely a trick of the light.

“They made sure everyone else’s holidays were picture-perfect,” he explains with far more patience than he probably feels with me today, but that reminds me of the guy I always thought he was until I moved in here with him. “As soon as I was old enough to help, that’s what I did. Every year. Made sure strangers loved their parties, only to have Christmas day roll around and spend it watching my parents nap all day while

I played by myself with whatever last-minute gifts they found for Old Saint Nick to bring.”

“Oh, Trevor, I’m so sorry.”

He shrugs with more movement in his good shoulder than his pitching arm. “It’s all commercial bullshit, and I got more than a lot of kids. Doesn’t usually annoy me this much. Maybe I’m getting grinchy in my old age.”

Or maybe his injury and coming to terms with retirement from baseball is making the holidays worse for him this year. “Lots of people struggle with the holidays.”

“You don’t.”

“Jude says I was born with a candy cane in my mouth.”

“He failed to mention that part when he said you were a good roommate.”

I grimace despite recognizing that he’s trying to make a joke.

And then I start to wonder if my brother knew this would happen, and if he failed to mention to me that he wanted to make sure Trevor wasn’t alone *this* holiday season.

That’s totally something Jude would’ve done.

“Are you seeing your parents this year?” He’s from... somewhere in the Midwest? I can’t recall off the top of my head.

He shakes his head. “We don’t do the holidays.”

“*Never?*”

“Busy time of year for them.”

“They still work?”

“They were born with holiday party planner hats on their heads, and they will die with their holiday party planner hats on their heads. *They* still have a mission in life.”

Hello, bitterness.

But at least I kinda get it now. I force myself to sit still and not launch myself at him to hug his pain away. “So what do

you do on the big holidays?”

He shrugs again, the neighbor’s lights making him look like hunchbacked Grinch Trevor. “Just another day.”

I slouch deeper into the couch. “I guess it’s that for me too this year.”

He sighs.

I sigh.

And then I sit up. “What if we both do something different?”

He doesn’t sigh again, but I can see him holding it at the ready. Even his arms are twitching like he wants to scrub his hands over his face and wipe away this whole conversation.

“You hate Christmas. My family’s all busy this year, and no amount of trees or cookies or music will make up for missing them. So what if we do our own made-up holiday? Like...Dogmas. Or Game-ukah. Or Prankza.”

My computer screen times out and blinks off since I haven’t moved the mouse in too long, plunging the whole room into darkness.

I reach into my blanket and flick the switch to light it up, because yes, I have a light-up Christmas blanket.

I know.

I know.

Trevor’s cheek twitches. “Did you just say *Game-ukah* like Hannukah for games?”

“Yes.”

He gives in and scrubs a hand over his face.

Called it.

“Or we can pretend it’s summer. Camp out in here for a day at the beach while I read romance novels and you watch *Baywatch* and pretend you’re gawking at all the pretty ladies.”

He stares at me.

I don't know if that's a stare of *this is even worse*, or if it's a stare of *she wins, send her back to the kitchen to bake more*.

"Um, we could have ourselves a grumpy little Christmas? I can pretend to be super grinchy, and we can sing pop songs but all in grunts, like Zeus's brother did at the holiday party they had last weekend, and eat s'mores and pretend it's the middle of summer, and trade birthday presents that are all awful, terrible presents that our aunts and uncles who don't know us at all would've given us?"

"Lot of work when we could ignore it instead."

"What's your favorite thing to do?"

"Play baseball."

I know his biting tone isn't my fault, and even if he's trying to make me feel bad, I refuse to let him. "No, that was your *job*."

"I like my job."

"You like it more than playing D&D? You like it more than gummy bears? You like it more than the perfect cup of coffee and more than a fresh-baked peanut butter blossom and more than watching a rookie take your advice on how to handle the media and more than a big, juicy steak that's cooked to perfection and more than sex?"

When I say *sex*, his eyes connect with mine like I've finally hit on something, and *oh my god*, does my vagina notice.

I shiver.

My vagina throbs.

He visibly swallows.

My nipples get tight and a wave of heat washes over my entire chest.

"Get your coat," he finally says gruffly. "You're getting a damn tree."

I don't point out that it's past ten o'clock at night and all the tree farms are closed.

Or that I'm wearing onesie snowman pajamas without a bra.

Instead, I shove my laptop aside and leap to my feet. "If you insist."



CHAPTER 3

TREVOR

I have lost my mind.

All I meant to do was apologize for being a dick, and now, I'm trapped in a car with Meg, who brought *gummy bears*, while I cruise all over Copper Valley looking for a Christmas tree farm that's open until midnight.

"We're in a damn city," I mutter as we pass one more closed lot. "How are they going to sell the crappy trees to drunk people leaving the bars if they're not open?"

Meg shakes the bag of gummy bears in my direction.

I grab a handful and toss them all back.

No idea how she knew I loved them, or why she had a bulk-size bag hidden in her room, but I'm slowly finding my happy place and feeling more like myself. My *old* self.

The self who liked his life and himself and knew he made a difference on his team and for his teammates, and who believed he'd find his place again when his baseball career was over.

The self *I* liked to be.

I can feel him in there.

Even *with* all the annoying Christmas lights all over the city.

"I really don't need a tree," she says.

The fuck she doesn't.

I might dislike Christmas for my own reasons, but she loves it and she's miserable because her family abandoned her this year. Not like I can ever avoid Christmas, and it honestly hurts me more to think of giving someone else a grumpy Christmas than it does to just deal. So she brings in a damn tree. Won't change my life that much.

It'll make her happy.

And unfortunately, I know exactly where there are likely to be Christmas trees this time of night.

Wordlessly, I point my car back toward the heart of Copper Valley and the fanciest hotels.

"If we have to do this, I could settle for a Christmas coat rack instead of a tree. Or a lamp post. Oh! I know! I want a Christmas stoplight. Steal me a Christmas stoplight, Trevor."

"Those things are heavy."

"Because you're old, I shall not make any comments about your physical abilities."

I growl.

She laughs. "Too easy."

"And now I see why Jude didn't want you living with *him*."

"*Oooh*, snap. Nice one. Even though I couldn't nanny for the quadzeuslets from Australia and you know it." She snags the bag of gummy bears before I can reach in for another handful and props them on her opposite knee, out of my reach. "What else do you have? C'mon. Zing me."

Nothing.

I have nothing, because I don't like being that asshole.

Usually, I avoid people when I feel my asshole showing.

"Aww, you can do it, Mr. Terrible Taste in Bathroom Wallpaper. Surely, you have *some* kind of insult you can fling at me."

“I don’t have wallpaper in my bathrooms.”

“Exactly.”

She sounds extremely pleased with herself.

“At least I have more than one color in my wardrobe,” I say.

She laughs. “Okay, Mr. Shades of Gray.”

“I am *not* all—*fuck*.”

She’s right.

I have every shade of gray between white and black.

Even my Fireballs shirts are white, gray, or black with the logo stitched on as the only burst of color.

And she’s not in her usual red tonight. And even when she wears a red shirt, she’ll pair it with black or white pants, or she’ll accentuate with gold or silver, and why do I know so much about her wardrobe when I feel like I’ve barely seen her since she moved in a few weeks ago?

Because you’re only pretending you don’t see her, and we’re getting fucking tired of it, my dick answers for me.

“Shut up and give me more gummy bears,” I order. I’m talking to Meg, but I might as well be talking to my dick too.

Meg’s still laughing as she holds the bag where I can reach it. “I don’t understand your fascination with gummy bears when M&Ms are clearly the superior candy.”

I pull over. “That’s it. Get out.”

She cracks up again.

“Totally serious. Get out. This is it.”

“Over M&Ms?”

“No. There’s your tree.”

I point.

She follows my finger, chokes on another laugh, and then just as abruptly stops. “Wait. You’re serious.”

“We’re getting you a damn tree. That one’s homeless now.”

“That is *not* a tree.”

“Meg, if there is *one thing* I know in my life, it’s what a Christmas tree looks like when it’s been tossed in a dumpster after a corporate party. *That* is a lonely, sad, pathetic, broken, used and discarded Christmas tree.”

“Oh my god, you seriously know how to get me.” She flings open the car door and hops out, still clad in those footie pajamas, though she’s added house slippers to her feet. She leaves the gummy bears on her seat and walks straight to the dumpster where a live Christmas tree is poking over the top.

“Let me know when you’re on the way home with it,” I call through the open door. “I’ll leave a space by my trash cans.”

For a split second, she believes me. And Meg caught off-guard, spinning on her pajamaed feet with her hair all tied up, making that squeak of surprised protest?

It’s beautiful.

And for the first time in what feels like forever, I sit in the driver’s seat and crack myself up while she stares at me.

“Kidding,” I call to her.

She doesn’t answer.

Hell.

Did I push too far?

I rub my eyes, and then my cheeks, and I glance at her.

She’s lit from behind by the lone light over the back door outside the fancy downtown hotel’s staff exit, making her dark messy bun glow from behind and her white snowman pajama bodysuit look like a snowman ghost. My car’s interior light is illuminating her just enough for me to see her biting her lip while she stares hard at me.

Are her eyes extra dark, or is that a trick of the night?

Trick, I decide.

She wants to jump us, my dick declares.

He's all in.

And reminding him that Meg is my best friend's little sister and completely off-limits—just as I've been doing for *years*—doesn't help.

You don't fling with your best friend's little sister. *Date?* Fine, if you're serious. *Fling?* No.

"I'm not leaving you here," I tell her. "It was a joke."

"I know."

"I thought you liked jokes."

"I thought—never mind. Are we getting this tree or what? Poor tree. It's so sad and lonely. It was promised such grand things, and now it's here in a dumpster."

I climb out of my car and circle it. "You thought what?"

She goes up on her tiptoes, grabs the garland-wrapped tree by the top, and tugs it with a grunt. "Oof. This one's heavy."

"You thought *what?*" I press.

I want to know.

I want to know what she thinks about me.

"I thought you didn't like jokes, okay? With me, I mean. You joke with Jude all the time. Anytime you were on TV in the bullpen, you were joking with your teammates. But you don't joke with me. And it's fine. You don't have to joke with me. I'm not one of the guys and you're always polite. You're just doing me a favor, and I know you have a lot of things to work through with your shoulder and all. I'm nothing. I get it. I just—it surprised me. Can we *please* get this tree?"

Now I'm staring at *her*. "You're not *nothing*."

"I know I'm not *nothing*. But I get that I'm nothing *to you*. And that's fine. Like I said. You caught me off-guard. It's fine. Thank you for taking me to a dumpster to get a tree. That's very kind."

I stare at her a minute longer while she tries to tug on the tree again.

I made her feel like she's nothing, and then I snarled at her for trying to find some normalcy in a year when Jude made it clear she'd be lonely at the holidays.

And stuck with me.

I just didn't realize how big she does the holidays.

Generally, I fake holiday cheer when my friends ask me to do something and I'm game for hanging out. Otherwise, I do my best to avoid people this time of year instead of infecting them with my irritation over the whole holiday period. Meg's caught in the crosshairs of my bad mood, and it's not her fault. I need to do better.

I nudge her out of the way, feeling soft curves and getting a whiff of her cookie-scented shampoo, but it's not irritating the way it was earlier.

It's hot, idiot, my dick says.

You're in time-out, or I'm making you watch gingerbread porn, I tell it.

Thank fuck, that works.

"You're too short to have leverage. Here." I reach with my left arm—my pitching arm—and my shoulder reminds me why I'm not supposed to do that yet.

"Trevor. Do not hurt yourself for a Christmas tree."

"I'm fine." I reach up with my right arm, and nope.

I don't have leverage either.

So instead, I put one knee forward and pat my thigh. "C'mon. I'll give you a boost so you can grab it."

She quirks a brow at me. "You're going to toss me into that dumpster, aren't you?"

"If I do, you'll just be swimming in discarded Christmas ornaments and fruitcake, and what's more holiday spirit than that?"

There's a pause, and then she busts out laughing, but quickly slaps her hand over her mouth. "Sorry. We should really be quiet, shouldn't we? Is dumpster diving legal?"

"It's trash, Meg. You can't steal what someone else threw away, because they've already given it away."

"I can't risk my job—oh. Wait. Right. Zeus and Joey would bail me out for this, wouldn't they?"

I snort. "They'd give you a raise."

She giggles.

And then she puts one hand on my shoulder, one foot on my thigh, and she boosts herself up, her breast brushing my face, and *sweet baby reindeer*, how have I managed to ever convince myself before today that I could look at Meg and not see a sexy, attractive, hot-as-fuck woman?

She wobbles.

I grab her hips, my thumbs right on her ass.

And then I start to sweat.

It's twenty-five degrees out here. Flurries suddenly swirl around us. I forgot my jacket.

And grabbing Meg's hips and ass is making me sweat.

"Oooh, this poor thing," she says. "It's missing half the branches on one side. *Excellent* choice, Trevor. I—*ergh*—approve."

She tugs.

I adjust my stance and grip her hips tighter. Her ass is right in my face, and *good god*, does she have a nice ass. Firm and round, like two glorious peaches that I want to—

"Oh, it's stuck under another tree." She leans over and shuffles something inside the dumpster.

If I hold her any tighter, I'm gonna leave a mark.

She leans deeper in. "Just...a little...more..."

"Meg—"

“Almost—”

“*Meg—*” I’m losing my grip, and—

A door bangs behind us. “*Hey!* What are you doing?” someone barks.

Meg shrieks.

And dives.

She fucking *dives*, slipping right out of my grip and going headfirst into the dumpster.



CHAPTER 4

MEG

I smell like a sour Christmas elf. My elbow is probably bruised. My shoes are beyond hope. And I don't know what kind of eggnog was in the dumpster and that I don't think I've fully washed from my hair, but my Christmas tree is up in Trevor's living room, and it is *beautiful*.

"You turned the lights on!" I throw myself at Trevor and wrap him in a hug before I process the look on his face. But even his *I let a weirdo talk me into desecrating my safe space with a mutant alien tree that might try to kill me in my sleep* expression can't stop me from blabbering away my gratitude. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! I love it!"

"It has seven limbs." He doesn't hug me back, but he doesn't push me away either. "It has *only* seven limbs."

"And those seven limbs will have the *very best* rest of their life *ever*."

"It has seven limbs and *still* looks like a full tree from this angle."

He's not wrong.

Those are some bushy green limbs. And when the tree's trunk is pushed up into the corner, you can't tell it only has limbs on like one and a half sides.

"We should hang your bobbleheads on it so it doesn't look so much like a Christmas tree," I say.

He pulls out of my hug, his face doing some weird acrobatics while his arms hang like he suddenly doesn't know what to do with them. "The heads would pop off."

"That's rude of them. They don't make bobbleheads like they used to, do they?"

"You should go to bed."

"Psh. Who can sleep when the world is magic?" Or when you're worried that you're about to get a phone call from your parents or brother who will somehow subliminally know that you were convinced you were going to get arrested for swimming in you don't even want to know what inside that dumpster while on a mission to save a Christmas tree. "Utensils. We should hang utensils on the tree. Or—wait! I have a box of pasta shaped like lobsters that Zeus and Joey gave me. We can hang lobster pasta on it!"

"Why did they—never mind."

I beam at him.

That's basically the answer to anything that my employers do. *Why do they—never mind. It's them.*

I've been to a lot of places where I don't fit in over the years.

Here?

I've found my people.

I have a job where I can be *me* and not worry that someone's going to tell me I'm *not grown up enough* because I love to laugh too loudly and I still squeal with excitement when I see squirrels doing crazy things in the yard and when I just stop and stare at the sunrise or the sunset because it takes my breath away.

If I could find a *man* who loved that about me...well, my life would basically be the best life ever.

And I wouldn't take it for granted.

"They gave me this funny card game called *Exploding Kittens* too," I say. "Let me put the pasta on the tree, and then

we can pour some whiskey shots and check that out. Unless you want to go to bed. I can totally explode kittens on my own. Wait. That sounded wrong. I wouldn't do it for real. *Ever*. I love kittens. This is like, a satire game. At least, I think it is. Zeus doesn't strike me as the kitten-hating type."

Trevor stares at me, and I can't even begin to guess what he's thinking.

But he blinks once, turns, and disappears into the kitchen.

His bedroom's off the kitchen.

I sigh.

He's probably done with me and is heading to bed, and all of these little subliminal messages I've been reading into the past few weeks that say that *he likes me* are nothing more than my fanciful imagination.

My mom says I'm a lot sometimes.

She also says I should never apologize for that, and that it's a superpower, especially when it comes to relationships. She says it means when people stick with me, they are *seriously* with me, and I can count on them.

I've always thought that was a compliment, like *way to go, Meg! You have magic people-weeding skills*, but really, it's meant I've had times when I've been super lonely.

Like now.

When I wonder if my family is intentionally skipping Christmas so they don't have to do it the Meg-magnified way.

Trevor strolls back into the living room with a bag of—*oh my god*.

"Is that Baby Ash pasta?" I squeal, and then I hear myself, and then I remember that he probably doesn't want the reminder of the adorable new mascot of the team he just left behind.

But that pasta bag has the Copper Valley Fireballs mascots on it.

He nods. "It's all the mascots pasta."

I stifle another squeal of excitement, but I can't make my mouth shut up. "Don't tell Jude, but I was *totally* cheering for you and the Fireballs the last two years. The way you guys turned the team around and went from the worst to the best? It's like a fairy tale. I know it sucks that you can't play anymore, but *oh my god*, Trevor, you're a *legend*. You know that, right?"

His blue eyes waver as he studies me.

"I mean that in a good way," I whisper. "Not in a *you're done* way. There's still so much you can do. I saw Cooper Rock on *The Late Show* the other night and he was talking about how you were always such a great leader on the team, and how much he hopes you come back and work for the team with player development."

"Cooper never says a bad word about anyone."

"That doesn't mean he's wrong. If anything, it means he's *extra* right, because he takes the time to pay attention to *everyone's* superpowers. Also, Jude says the same thing. That you'd be the best coach to ever—"

I cut myself off as he stares at me, his lids lowering, his mouth setting in a grim line. "I don't want to coach, Meg. Stop trying to solve my problems."

He shoves the mascot pasta at me, and this time, when he leaves the room, I get the feeling he's not coming back.

And sure enough, there's the sound of his bedroom door clicking shut.

Nice, Meg.

Also, he doesn't like you.

And if he did—well.

I know how to kill a mood, don't I?



CHAPTER 5

TREVOR

Meg's at it again.

She's playing Christmas music, humming along, and my house smells like sweets. It's all subtle—I can't see her, because I'm still being a lazy-ass and haven't gotten up yet, but I can hear her, and I can smell her, and I can see a rotating glow of colored lights from the crack under my door.

It's not all that different from the dreams that plagued me all night, with one singular exception.

In my dreams, Meg was doing all of this naked, and I couldn't keep my hands off her.

And yeah, hello, morning wood. It is *not* nice to see you. We do not get to think about our best friend's sister, we do not get to dream about our best friend's sister, and we do not rub one out while imagining it's her hands all over us.

What we *do* get to do, though, is *get the fuck over ourselves*.

We've known and abided by these rules for *years*, and we are not going to change that now.

I wince through warming up my shoulder enough to comfortably roll out of bed, check my phone, and instantly feel my heart drop.

I texted Jude last night.

Fuck.

I texted Jude last night.

That was *not* part of my dream.

But I did.

I texted him a confession that I had to walk away from his sister last night before I kissed the ever-loving hell out of her.

And he hasn't replied.

He saw it.

That little message under the text clearly says *read*.

But he hasn't replied.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

I need to leave.

I need to go get a cabin in the woods for the rest of the Christmas season, possibly well into January, and stay the *hell* away from Meg.

And apologize to Jude.

Claim I was drunk, that someone else stole my phone, whatever it takes, no matter the lies I have to tell.

He's been the most constant friend in my life for my entire career.

And I just fucked it up.

Worse?

I still want to kiss Meg.

I do.

I want to kiss her.

Her insistence that I'd be great on the Fireballs' staff? Her belief in me when I've been nothing but an ass the past few weeks?

I believed her. She made me *want* to go back to baseball as a coach.

And I want to kiss her.

She's a grown-ass woman. I don't need her brother's permission. Neither does she.

But the fact that getting involved with her could ruin the longest friendship I've ever had if it doesn't work out—yeah, I'm sweating.

I take longer than necessary in the shower, and *not* because I'm jerking off.

That part doesn't take long.

And not taking long is a solid reminder why I shouldn't kiss Meg.

If I kiss her, and she kisses me back, and we end up in bed, and I come as fast as I did in the shower as soon as her face popped into my head, she'll be all *that's okay, I know it's been a while and you'd be better if we did it a second time, which I'm probably not in for, because this was just a pity fuck for both of us, but I won't say anything bad about you to anyone.*

That would basically destroy the little bit of ego I have left.

But if I kiss her and she kisses me back and then we both have the best sex of our lives with each other, and then I *want* to finish decorating a tree with her, and fantasize about fireplaces and hot chocolate and gingerbread men...

I shake my head, tweak my shoulder, stifle a grunt, and then I pull my head out of my ass and decide to be a grown man who owns this house and can handle having an attractive but off-limits, cheerful, holiday-loving woman making herself happy in my kitchen.

And now I'm imagining Meg naked, with her hands between her thighs, and didn't I just get rid of this boner?

“Head in the game, Stafford. Head. In. The. Game.”

I text Jude an apology—a very sincere, *I would never do anything to fuck up our friendship, and I promise not to make Meg uncomfortable and will probably just head up to visit some friends in the mountains for a few days to get my head*

back on straight apology. Then I make myself think about my career in the toilet. And follow it up with that one Christmas when I was little and unfortunately watched a snowman ice sculpture get taken down by an angry chef with a kitchen torch, and my junk gets itself under control.

Good thing too, because I think it would break if it was already hard when I walk out of my bedroom and down the short hall to the kitchen.

Meg has her back to me as she's bent over the counter, shaking her heart-shaped ass, which is wrapped in tight denim. She's still using the reindeer towels and the multi-colored light rays are coming from a miniature tree on the counter. Even from this angle, I can tell she covered her tight red sweater with an apron dotted with candy canes.

And she's making cinnamon rolls.

Cinnamon rolls.

"Hey, Trev! Happy morning. That's not a new baby Christmas tree in the corner. It's an unfortunate superstition that's necessary when I work with yeast. And these are *not* Christmas cinnamon rolls. They're birthday cinnamon rolls."

"It's your birthday?" *Dammit.* Why didn't someone tell me that?

"No, it's *someone's* birthday. I have no idea whose. I just know that I wanted them, they seemed Christmasy, but also, I'm respecting your Christmas boundaries, so we're celebrating a random stranger's birthday. Surely someone named Jennifer is turning some year older today. That's why it says *Happy Birthday, Jennifer* on that pan over there."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm not *avoiding* Christmas on your behalf. I'm *meeting you halfway.*"

I open my mouth to answer, and that's when I hear it.

"Carol of the Bells" is playing.

But those are *not* traditional words.

It sounds like—

No.

No way.

Meg is *not* playing corrupted Christmas tunes.

I lift a finger in the air. “Is that—”

“‘Penis of the Bells’? Yes. Yes, it is. If you stick around long enough, you’ll hear ‘Penis Bell Rock’ and ‘Joy to the Penis’ too. Also, I have all of the Avengers movies ready to run, so since you don’t have PT today, and I don’t have to be anywhere, we can watch bad guys try to annihilate the world by the light of our wimpy-ass but beautiful pasta tree while I build a fire in your fireplace.”

I rub my ear.

There’s no way I heard all of that right.

“Also, I found your Halloween lights, so I put those on the tree too,” she adds. “It’s a general-purpose festive eyesore.”

I glance into the living room.

Sure enough, there are jack-o-lanterns lit up all over the lopsided tree. And sure enough, the music just switched from “Penis of the Bells” to “Penis the Snowman.”

Or should I call it “Frosty the Penis”?

The *only* word anyone’s singing is *penis*, so it could go either way.

“Meg. You don’t have to ruin your Christmas on my behalf. Look, I was thinking I’d head up to—”

I cut myself off as her lush lips spread in a wide smile, and I swear I go light-headed at the beauty of it.

She literally made me forget how to talk because she *smiled*.

I have it bad. I’m pretty sure I always have. I’ve just been very good at denying it until this very minute.

And I don’t know what I’m going to do about this.

“I am *not* ruining my own Christmas,” she says. “I’m expanding into testing other ways of celebrating.”

“But tradition—”

“Can change. You want a birthday cinnamon roll? They’re best hot. Also, I think I need to take some to your neighbors. Or probably to Joey and Zeus, but Zeus could eat the entire pan himself, and that wouldn’t leave any for the rest of his family, so maybe not?”

“Do you always make cinnamon rolls for the holidays?”

“No, I’m a mood holidayer.”

“What does that mean?”

“Some years it’s cinnamon rolls, and some years it’s chocolate chip cookies for breakfast, and some years it’s honey puff pancakes, and some years it’s waffles, and this one year, Jude got an itch for breakfast soup.” She pauses and bites her lip, then adds in a rush, “But cinnamon rolls are my favorite.”

I swallow.

Hard.

They’re my favorite too.

Leave, I order myself. Do not sit and have cinnamon rolls with this woman who always believes the best of everyone.

But she makes me believe in myself in ways I haven’t in months. Maybe years, my heart whispers back.

Fuck.

Meg’s gaze wavers as she studies me. “You...don’t like cinnamon rolls either,” she says softly.

The *oh, god, I fucked up again* in her voice breaks me.

She hasn’t fucked up.

I have.

And I’m done fucking up.

“I want three.” Preferably served on her bare belly so I can feast on *everything* I’d like to devour at once. My voice goes a little hoarse. “Put them on a plate like they’re a snowman.”

She scratches her nose as she studies me like she’s trying to decide if I’m serious, leaving behind a smear of icing right at the tip.

I want to lick it.

I want to lick the icing off her nose, and then I want to kiss her until I can’t breathe, and then I want to feed her cinnamon rolls while I strip her naked and do things to her body that are probably illegal but that will make us both feel so, so good.

And she’s your best friend’s little sister, dummy.

Finally, she turns to the pan of cinnamon rolls with *Happy Birthday, Jennifer* scrawled across it in pink frosting. “If you’re doing this just for me, you really don’t have to. But if you’re doing it so that you can make some happy holiday memories and maybe one day look forward to them for yourself, I’m in.”

“You’re making this the best Christmas I’ve ever had.”

The raw honesty is hard.

But it’s necessary.

I’ve been a dick.

She deserves better, and more, I want to *be* better.

I want to be the kind of guy who deserves to date his best friend’s sister.

She’s gone totally, completely still.

Fuck.

She doesn’t believe me.

“This year’s sucked,” I say over the penis carol. “I don’t feel like I earned that World Series ring. My career’s over. I know there’s more to come, but I’m *not ready*. I will be. One day. But I’m not done mourning what I had. And now we’re heading into the time of year when I remember all the ways

the holidays never lived up to the hype and the expectation, and I wanted to hide from all of it, but you're here, meeting me halfway, making it *fun*, pushing me to get the hell outside of my own head and let it *be* fun. So thank you. And I'm sorry I've been a dick."

She slowly turns to face me, three stacked cinnamon rolls wobbling on my basic white plate. "I've had a crush on you since you gave me the last piece of fried chicken at Jude's college graduation picnic," she whispers.

"Meg—"

"It's okay. You don't have to crush on me back. I won't ever say anything about it again. I just wanted you to know, because people shouldn't hide it when they think other people are awesome. But you're down, and I'm trying too hard, so I'll stop. I promise. I'll see if Zeus and Joey will let me—*oh*."

Oh.

It's the last thing she gets out before my mouth crashes down on hers.

Something clatters to the floor. She makes a soft whimper, then she melts into me.

Into my body. Into the kiss.

Into *everything*.

I'll probably regret this later.

But right now?

Right now, I need this woman to know she's just as worthy as she thinks I am.

More worthy, in fact.

No matter what other relationships I might be putting in jeopardy.



CHAPTER 6

MEG

I thought the cinnamon rolls would be the best part of my day.

But they are not.

Not even close.

Trevor kissing me?

This is the best part of my day.

I don't know why his arms are wrapped around me and his warm, delicious lips are devouring me, and I don't care.

I just know it's everything I've wanted for days. Weeks. *Years.*

And I'll probably regret it in another thirty seconds, but for right now, I'm hanging on with everything I have, wrapping my own arms around his neck, testing the feel of his damp, thick hair, breathing in the scent of his aftershave and tasting mint on his tongue.

He breaks the kiss with a curse. "Jude is gonna kill me."

"Shut up. I'm a grown woman. Kiss me again."

"This mouth," he growls.

My clit tingles, and my nipples harden as the deep rumble of his words reverberates against my chest. "*Please* kiss me again," I whisper.

"Meg—"

I cut him off by going onto my toes and nipping at his lower lip.

He groans, and then he's gripping my hair, pulling my head back and sliding his tongue into my mouth as if he's been resisting this just as much as I have.

I squirm, trying to get closer, and the hard ridge of his erection presses into my belly. I want his shirt off. I want *my* shirt off. I want to feel his hands on my bare skin and lose myself in exploring his body.

Forget the cinnamon rolls.

Forget Christmas.

Just give me Trevor Stafford.

He pulls out of the kiss and shifts to pressing his lips along my jawline while I try to wrap my legs around his hips and totally fail.

"Oh my god, I want you," I gasp as he nibbles at my earlobe, finally saying out loud the words I've denied for so many years.

"Do you have any idea how much resisting you has driven me crazy the past few weeks?" he murmurs in my ear.

"N-no."

"You're sunshine." He licks that sensitive spot right between my ear as the music shifts to "Oh Holy Penis."

Yes.

Yes, please, I want his holy penis.

Inside me.

Right now.

I slide my hands under his shirt.

He groans again, arching into my touch, and nips at my collar bones. "You're infectious laughter."

I press kisses to the rough skin on his jaw. "I'm ridiculous."

He presses his hard-on into my belly and licks the hollow at the base of my neck. “You’re hope and light and courage and you are completely and totally irresistible.”

“*Trevor.*”

“I can’t resist you anymore, Meg. I’ve tried. I’ve lied to myself for weeks—*years*—but I can’t do it anymore. Jude’s gonna kill me, and I don’t care.”

I grab his cheeks. “This isn’t about my brother.”

Gah, those beautiful eyes.

Those heavy-lidded, smoky hazel eyes.

“I know,” he whispers.

“I want you to kiss me.”

“I want to kiss you and strip you naked and spend the entire holiday season with you in my bed.”

My vagina is throbbing, my skin is on fire and if he so much as caresses one of my breasts, I’m pretty sure I could come on the spot. “You want me.”

“I wanted to kiss you so badly last night, I could barely think straight.”

His hands roam my body, testing and squeezing and driving me crazy while I do the same to him. “So kiss me now.”

He does.

Oh, god, he does.

He kisses me slow and deep and thorough while he walks me backward into the living room, squeezing my ass, untying my apron and tossing it aside.

My shirt goes with my apron.

His shirt too.

I suck in a breath at the sight of the angry red scar on his shoulder, and he freezes.

“I’ll put my shirt back on,” he says.

“No.” I gingerly touch the raised skin. “Does it hurt?”

“Not there.”

I kiss it softly, my other arm wrapped around his waist. “You give your all. Every time. No matter the cost.”

“Meg—”

“That is *so* sexy.”

He drops his nose into my hair. “It’s—”

“Your story,” I finish before he can say something awful about his scar. “It’s your story. It’s your life. And it’s beautiful. And so are you.”

“Do you have any idea how hard it’s always been to resist you when you always see the best in everyone?” He keeps nudging me back until my calves hit the sofa.

“I’ve seen you at your best.”

“And my worst.”

“But I know what your best can be.”

“Oh, no. I don’t think you do. Not yet.” His beautiful eyes sparkle with amusement as he pulls away and looks down at me. Amusement, and heat, and desire.

My belly drops, putting a delicious pressure on my vagina.

He *wants* me.

He could hit any bar in the city with his World Series ring and pick up any woman he wanted.

But he’s *here*, and he wants *me*.

And I know how much he values my brother’s friendship.

He’s not acting on this because I’m easy. He’s acting on this because *he wants me*.

I’m not sure anything in my life has ever aroused me more.

“Why aren’t we in your bedroom?” I whisper as I brush a kiss to his jaw.

“Because I want to make love to you under an ugly Christmas tree decorated with pasta and Halloween lights.”

Oh my god.

He wants me, and he gets me, and nothing else matters.

I lunge for the button on his jeans, kissing him like he’s my lifeline. He slides his hands beneath my waistband and cradles my ass, kneading my cheeks while he presses his erection harder into my belly.

And after jerky motions to rip off the rest of our clothes, both of us laughing and panting and unable to keep our hands and our kisses to ourselves, we’re finally tumbling naked onto the floor beside our rescue tree, his mouth on all of me, my hands roaming his hot, bare skin.

“You feel even better than I imagined.”

“You imagined me?” I whisper.

“I tried so hard not to. *So* hard. For years. But I can’t resist you anymore.”

This is the best Christmas present ever.

Kissing Trevor. Licking his skin. Exploring his body. Giving in to the urge to let him have all of me, and to take everything that I want.

Have I had a crush on this man forever?

Yes.

But did I ever think he would not only notice me, but find me attractive enough to want to do what he’s doing to my breasts right now?

Never.

Never in a million years could I have dreamed that Trevor Stafford would be sucking on my nipples under a Christmas tree while his long, capable fingers tease my clit and my vagina, making me pant and want and writhe and twist and completely lose myself in the feel of him coaxing an orgasm out of me.

“Trevor,” I gasp.

“Jesus, you’re fucking amazing. So hot. So wet. Meg, you feel so good.”

I’m still coming, my vagina clenching around his fingers while he presses his thumb to my clit, my hips arching into his hand as sweet wave after sweet wave flows through my body until my shoulders collapse back onto the floor.

“Oh my god,” I whisper.

He kisses the hollow between my breasts. “Best workout I’ve had all week.”

“Poor baby, working so hard. You should lie back and let me take care of you now.”

“Meg... Jesus.” His cock twitches against my leg, and it takes effort, but I force him onto his back.

I’m not risking that shoulder of his.

And I’m not letting this man go without an orgasm of his own.

“Meg—” he starts when I straddle him.

I arch a brow and wait while he squeezes his eyes shut and takes three labored breaths.

Oh, wow.

Is he that close to coming?

I wiggle my hips against his erection.

He hisses out a short breath, grabs my hips, and holds me still.

“Am I driving you wild?” I whisper.

“So fucking much. And I just jerked off in the shower while fantasizing about you.”

Oh my holy gingerbread, that’s hot. “Maybe I should get some ice to cool you down.”

His eyes flare wide and connect with mine. “Fuck me, you’re a dirty, dirty girl, aren’t you?”

I scoot down his body, letting my stomach and my breasts brush his penis, loving the way his breathing goes even more ragged. When I lick him from root to tip, then suck his erection into my mouth, the heady *goddamn, Meg* that echoes through the room sets my satisfied vagina back to *I need this man deep inside me* mode.

But first, I suck him deeper, rubbing the underside of his cock with my tongue while he fists my hair and his hips buck beneath me.

Not hard—I can tell he’s holding back—but enough to know that I’m driving him wild.

I love driving him wild.

I love that *he wants me*.

I cannot believe we’re here, together, naked, exploring each other’s bodies and indulging in ultimate pleasure, and yet nothing has ever felt so *right*.

And I love that he’s suddenly wrenching me off of him, flipping me onto my back, and staring with very dark, very serious eyes straight into my soul.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” he says, “and I’m going to fuck you hard and deep for as long as I can, and then I’m going to carry you to bed, sleep for twenty minutes, because I’m an old bastard, and then I’m going to eat your pussy, and then I’m going to make love to you long and slow, and that’s everything I want to do for the rest of my life.”

Was I satiated a minute ago?

Because at the moment, my clit is throbbing again and I very much need this man inside me *now*.

“You are so hot when you talk about being old,” I gasp.

He laughs at that, ducking his face into my shoulder, and as I realize he’s supporting himself on both of his shoulders and very much shouldn’t be, he pushes the tip of his erection inside me.

“Oh god,” I gasp, shamelessly arching into him to take more.

He freezes. “Condom.”

“I’m on birth control, and it’s been a year.”

“Fuck, Meg.”

“You?” I whisper.

“Clear bill of health right before surgery, and I haven’t—just *fuck*, Meg.”

I wrap my legs tight around his hips and pull him deeper inside me.

We both groan as he fills and stretches me.

“Your shoulder—”

He silences me with a kiss as he pulls almost all the way out, then does a slow thrust back inside me, twisting his hips to hit my clit just right too, and *oh, sweet snowmen*.

Yes.

Yes, this is everything I want and more than I ever thought it would be.

Trevor, naked, making love to me under the glow of Halloween lights on a rescue tree, the air scented with cinnamon rolls, inappropriate Christmas music the background to our gasps and moans—how long have I wanted this?

And how much better is it than I ever dreamed?

“You shouldn’t be so fucking perfect.” His voice is strained as he hits that sensitive spot inside me with his erection.

“I am not—”

I cut myself off with a squeak as he dips his head and lightly bites my nipple, causing a roar of lust from my chest to my pussy like someone ignited gasoline inside me. “Margaret O’Connell, you are fucking perfect.”

He slams into me with each word, and before he’s finished *perfect*, I can’t hold back the spiral of utter need inside me anymore. My body explodes in a mass of holiday sprinkles

and I feel like I'm floating on a cloud of whipped cream over a pumpkin pie.

“Jesus, Meg,” he gasps, and then he's groaning as he comes inside me, holding his body over mine with his head flung back, the tendons in his neck straining, his eyes hooded and unfocused.

And the feel of his cock pulsing against my sensitive walls only makes my own orgasm deeper and better.

I did this.

I drove him wild.

I drove *Trevor Stafford* wild.

He wants me.

Tears prickle my eyes as the last spasms of my orgasm roll through me.

I can't remember the last time I felt this wanted. The last time someone was willing to put anything on the line *for me*.

My family does.

But a man?

Someone who owes me nothing and has so much to lose if —*when*—his best friend finds out?

I don't think Jude will be a dick.

And I hope this isn't a one-time thing.

Trevor collapses on top of me, and the grunt he makes isn't normal.

“Oh my god, your shoulder,” I gasp.

“Shh.” He presses a kiss to my neck, then freezes. “Meg? Are you—are you *crying*?”

“No.”

He shifts so he's putting his weight on his good arm and peers down at me. “Meg—”

“You like me,” I whisper.

His gaze is utter seriousness as he studies me. “I do.”

“Not very many people like me enough to risk—well—”

I don’t finish.

I can’t.

Because he’s pressing soft kisses to my lips and swiping away my tears with his thumb. “You’ve been hanging out with the wrong people.”

He’s not wrong.

My last jobs were terrible fits.

I’ve been happier here working for the Bergers, even *with* the awkward tension between Trevor and me until this morning, than I ever was in preschool settings.

I can *breathe* here.

And more—I feel loved here.

So loved.

And it’s not just my job.

It’s Trevor giving me a place to live so I could start right away. It’s him being honest with me about how much he hates the holidays, and why, and yet still going along with celebrating them anyway.

It’s him being willing to risk a solid friendship with my brother to tell me how much he likes me, and to hold me and kiss me and *love* me.

I’m not ready for those words.

I don’t think he is either.

But I wouldn’t be lying here with him still buried deep inside me while he kisses my tears and my fears away if I didn’t think that’s where this is going.

I tilt my head to his and run my fingers through his hair. “I haven’t showered yet this morning, and I think we might both have holiday glitter all over,” I whisper.

He studies me for a long moment again before a soft smile makes his eyes crinkle in the corners. “Pretty sure I can help you with that.”

“Before or after cinnamon rolls?”

“Both.”



CHAPTER 7

TREVOR

It's been three days since I couldn't deny my attraction to Meg any longer, and these three days have been the best days of my life.

It's almost like it's not even Christmastime.

Or possibly like it's *finally* the Christmastime I've always wanted.

Instead of feeling like the leftovers, I'm part of the main event. Meg ropes me into helping make more cookies than I've ever seen in my life, and when she confesses that she won't be able to look at a flour bag without puking for at least six months after her annual cookie extravaganza, I laugh so hard at her grimace that I almost pull something in my shoulder.

And then I apologize for laughing at her with my tongue between her thighs.

When she adds a terribly-wrapped present under our terribly-decorated tree with my name on it, I reciprocate with an even worse-wrapped present that doesn't fit under our tree.

Don't tell her, but it's a bent bicycle tire, and it's in honor of a story she told me about an incident with a bike when she was thirteen, and I'm looking forward to watching her laugh until she cries when she opens it.

We go to bed about six times a day.

Sometimes she sleeps after I challenge myself to give her an even better orgasm than the last one.

Most of the time I do.

Getting old sucks, but having Meg help me with my physical therapy and reward me for a job well-done with kisses and blow jobs does not.

I don't know how I never noticed what a refined sense of humor she has.

Or how she can be deadly with her aim when it comes to well-placed and well-deserved zingers.

Turns out we have a lot more in common when it comes to ideology and worldview than I thought.

And my best friend's little sister is pretty fucking brilliant when it comes to making me think about things in a new light when we disagree.

When I told her I didn't know what I wanted to do once I'm healed and officially off the payroll from the Fireballs—I don't want to go into coaching because it's *easy*, and I want to make sure what I'm doing is actually the right fit for me—she patted my leg, said, “Don't worry, I'll support you on my nanny salary,” and we both cracked up.

She knows even relief pitchers get paid enough that I can take a few years off, but I don't think she was talking about financially supporting me.

I think she was talking about helping me find my purpose. Whether it's coaching or something else.

“You got me my dream job,” she said another time. About forty minutes ago, in fact. “Why not let me help you find your next dream job?”

And that's how we ended up here, again, on a picnic blanket beneath the tree with a fire roaring in my fireplace, both of us naked, and both of us very, very satisfied now.

“Are you sure?” I ask her as I stroke a hand down her bare hip. “You're sure you don't need another?”

She laughs and kisses me. “I think another would kill me.”

“Just to be sure, another chocolate-covered pretzel, or another orgasm?”

“Both.”

“Your belly hurts? Does it need kisses?”

Her eyes are dancing with what I’ve come to think of as her joy face. “This is the you I missed when I first got here,” she whispers.

“What me?”

“The *happy* you. You used to be so happy, but then—”

I cut her off with a finger pressed to her lips. “And you used to be so sad, and I keep trying to make you sad, but—”

“*Trevor.*” She shrieks with laughter and rolls on top of me.

I’m cracking up too.

Meg was *never* sad.

But teasing her about it always gets me more kisses.

And despite the fact that my dick should basically be dead after how much sex we’ve had the past few days, having her straddle me is making me hard again.

Already.

This.

This is what I want to do with retirement.

Meg.

Every day.

“Just for that, I’m going to make you help me cook fudge,” she informs me.

“Not the fudge,” I gasp in mock horror.

“While we’re drinking hot chocolate. After we make homemade Christmas ornaments.”

“No. No more torture.”

“And then we’re having a snowball fight where you’ll knock me down, and I’ll pretend I’m hurt, and you’ll come running and realize that the way your heart stopped means that you care about me so much that this can’t just be a holiday fling.”

Okay, that one’s not funny.

I grip her by the chin and hold one of her hands right where it was, over my heart. “This is *not* a holiday fling.”

She blinks twice, chasing away the brief shine that, even before she moved in here with me, I could’ve identified.

She doesn’t like to let people see her vulnerable.

And who does?

“I knew that,” she says quietly.

“The first time I saw you, I didn’t know you were Jude’s sister. I was standing next to him in the dugout, and I looked out in the crowd and saw you, and everything stopped. Right up until he punched me in the arm and told me if I was drooling over his sister, he’d kill me.”

“Oh my god, Trevor, I was *sixteen*.”

“I was quickly informed, and for the record, you looked way older. But I put you in the *off-limits* category, and I didn’t let you out. Ever. Not when you were nineteen and we were graduating college, not when you were twenty-five and crashed that bachelor party we had for—fuck, I don’t even remember who. And not when—”

Something bangs on my front door, and then it swings open. “Merry Christmas, motherfu—*what?*”

Meg shrieks and dives off me, leaving my half-hard dick exposed for her brother to see.

Her brother.

Her brother, my best friend, who’s supposed to be in Australia, who hasn’t answered my text message, which I had started hoping just hadn’t gone through.

“What the *fuck?*” Jude says.

I'm scrambling for the blanket.

Meg's hovering behind the tree. "Oh my god, don't you know you *wait for people to answer the door?*" she shrieks.

Fuck the blanket for me.

I toss it to her behind the tree, leap to my feet, feel something shift wrong in my shoulder, and cover my junk. "This isn't—" I sputter.

"It's *exactly* what it looks like, and *get out!*" she yells.

Jude looks at her.

Then he looks at me.

My heart tries to climb out of my chest.

Fuck.

My friendship with him is one of the longest of my life.

And it's very, very obvious that I've been banging his sister.

His sister, who is the only person in the entire world who could've actually made Christmas not just bearable, but *awesome*. The only woman in the world that I want here with me, not just today, but tomorrow and the next day and the day after.

His sister, whom I very much want to seriously date.

"I—" I start.

"You serious about her?" he cuts me off.

I hold his gaze while I nod. "Yes."

He studies me right back.

And then the bastard grins like this is the best news of his life. "Awesome. You two wanna throw on some clothes and go ice skating? Australia was way too hot for Christmas. I need snow. Meg, betcha fifty bucks my fudge recipe's finally better than yours. If you're not ready in ten, you're paying for dinner too."

He turns around, walks out the door, and shuts it quietly.

Meg peers at me from between the branches of the tree.

I stare back at her.

“I knew he’d do that,” she whispers.

I blink.

She chokes on a laugh.

And then a tear slips down her cheek.

And then she chortles again.

“Are you—are you okay?” I ask.

“I *thought* he’d approve, but I—are *you* okay?”

I stare at her a beat too long before I nod.

“And you still—even if he approves—you still want me?”

That one takes a minute to sink in.

And when it hits, it hits *hard*. “You’ve dated douchebags who only wanted to date you to piss off your brother?”

She pinches her lips together, then slowly nods.

“I can be an asshole, but I am *not* that kind of asshole.”

“Promise?” she whispers. “Because I really, really, *really* like it here. And not just because it’s Christmas and we have an awful, wonderful tree and the best worst holiday music. I like you. A lot. And I want to stay as long as you’ll let me.”

I shove the tree out of the way, toppling it sideways onto the couch, because it’s the fastest way to reach her. “I want you to stay forever.”

She drops her head to my chest and wraps her arms around my waist. “For real?”

“We’re both a little lost.” I kiss her hair, wish I had the strength right now to pick her up and carry her to the bedroom, but settle for squeezing her tighter instead. “And there’s no one else I’d rather find myself again with than you.”

She laughs, but it sounds more like a sob. “This is like a dream come true.”

“It *is* a dream come true.”

The last thing I’ve ever believed in is Christmas miracles.

But I have my very own right here in my arms, and I’m never letting her go.

Jude bangs on the door. “Not kidding. I’m going ice skating without you if you don’t get your asses in gear, and I’m only buying funnel cake for people who are with me.”

Meg sucks in an outraged breath.

And I start laughing.

Of course she loves funnel cake.

Of course she does.

That’s so Meg.

And I love it.

“Alternatively, I could buy you your very own funnel cake maker for Christmas,” I murmur to her.

“How about we do both?” she replies.

God, this woman.

She’s brighter than all the holiday lights in the world put together.

And I can’t wait to spend the rest of my days deserving her.



EPILOGUE

MEG

If you'd told me a month ago that I'd be falling asleep on Christmas Eve in the arms of the man I've secretly crushed on for years, who's so much better as a boyfriend—yes, officially as my *boyfriend*—than I ever imagined he could be, I would've told you that you were crazy.

Yet here we are, with a small live tree in the corner of his bedroom, decorated with little mementos of the past few days that we've spent with my brother doing all of our favorite holiday traditions and some decidedly *not* holiday-ish activities that will *absolutely* become traditions. I set out cookies for Santa, knowing full well that Trevor will sneak out of bed in the middle of the night and make it look like the jolly old elf came, merely to make me happy.

Jude's been staying in a hotel nearby to give us privacy, but he's coming by for breakfast in the morning.

Provided it doesn't snow as much as the forecast is calling for, that is.

My belly is full of my favorite appetizers and wine, and everything is cozy and perfect.

I'm only half dozing, because I love the sound of Trevor's regular breathing, and I don't want to miss a moment of this absolutely perfect feeling.

And that's why I hear it.

Someone's opening the back door.

It's a subtle but familiar *click*, followed by soft footsteps, but those are *definitely* footsteps.

The gait isn't right for it to be Jude.

And I know Santa doesn't *actually* exist.

Am I hearing things?

Trevor hasn't moved. He's still passed out cold, which is good. He's made solid progress in physical therapy, and he needs his sleep to fully heal.

But there it is again.

Someone is *definitely* in the house.

I disentangle myself and crawl out of bed.

Trevor still doesn't move.

So I grab one of the baseball bats that he has in his closet—just in case it's *not* Jude—make a mental note to suggest Trevor get an alarm system here, and I creep to the bedroom door.

And then I barely stifle a gasp.

There's a *very* large man in red velvet walking into the living room.

I rub my eyes.

And I peer again.

Am I hallucinating, or is freaking *Santa Claus* here?

I look back at Trevor, who's now sitting up and blinking sleepy eyes at me in the dim light off of our tiny tree. He starts to speak, but I put my finger to my lips and give him the *what the hell is going on?* look.

He looks at the bat in my hand.

Then at my face.

And then he crawls out of bed too, wincing slightly when he moves his left arm.

Poor guy.

That's still gonna be stiff for months.

But more important—*Santa Claus* has broken into his house.

Trevor stops behind me, his hot bare skin touching my shoulder, and I feel his sharp intake of breath as he, too, spots Santa in the living room.

“Am I dreaming?” I whisper to him. “Or hallucinating?”

“No,” he whispers back.

“Did you do this?”

“No.”

The living room floor creaks under Santa's weight, and then Trevor snorts. “That fucker,” he whispers.

I look back at Santa, who is truly huge.

Massively huge.

Like—oh, hell.

Like *Zeus Berger* huge.

If that's not my boss, then it's his twin brother.

Trevor hands me a robe from behind his door, and I quickly wrap myself in it.

Much as Zeus has no boundaries, I really don't want him seeing me naked.

The two of us watch as discreetly as we can while Santa Zeus unpacks an entire giant bag of presents. He starts whistling, which is a dead giveaway that it truly is Zeus.

Not many other six-foot-seven guys would don Santa outfits, have the nerve to break into someone's house, and whistle Backstreet Boys tunes while they did it.

Trevor and I are both still staring when Santa Zeus abruptly spins, totally catches us, winks, and cocks a finger gun at us. “Merry Christmas from the quadzeuslets to their

nanny of wonder. Trev, be good to her. I know where you live. So does my brother. And if you think I'm terrifying—”

“I don't,” Trevor interrupts mildly.

I crack up.

Santa Zeus grins.

Then he giggles.

Then he plops down on the floor. “Fuck, I could fall asleep right here. Don't tell Joey. Can I take a ten-minute nap before I go hit a few other houses? Just ten minutes. That's all. Ten minutes.”

Trevor looks at me.

I stare back.

“Your brother Ares is terrifying...” Trevor prompts.

Zeus groans. “Shit. I got so tired, I didn't finish the threat.”

“You wanna drop the kids off here tomorrow for a bit?” Trevor says. “Maybe let your whole household sleep for a few hours?”

Zeus blinks at him.

I blink at him.

“What? I love kids.” Trevor grins at me. “Did I not mention that part?”

“You're fucking—farking—freaking—*shit*. Gotta watch my language around the kids. One of us has to, right? And no fucking way I'm asking Joey to do it. She's working so much harder than me, no matter how much I help. She gets to cuss her heart out. But you're serious? You'd—you'd watch my kids for a few hours? I love them. They're the best. They're *awesome*. They're—”

“Four babies, which is a lot,” I supply.

He giggles.

And then my giant boss half-sobs. “I have to be strong for Joey. She needs sleep even more than I do.”

“Merry Christmas, you big bastard,” Trevor says. “Drop them off here tomorrow. Go home. Sleep for eight hours. And then come get them.”

Zeus wipes his eyes. “That’s not why I brought presents.”

“We know,” I say quickly.

He eyeballs me, then Trevor, then me again. “Trev’s my friend. If you hurt him—”

“You’ll still pick me because I’m the best nanny you’ve ever had?”

Poor Zeus.

He sniffles. Wipes his eyes.

And he nods. “Yeah.”

“That’s really sweet of you to drop off presents,” I tell him. “Thank you.”

“They’re Zeus specials,” he sniffles.

Trevor tries to cover a snort of laughter and fails.

Goodness only knows what we’ll find when we open those presents in the morning.

“Can’t wait,” I tell him.

“The babies even wore out my mom,” he says. “You sure you can handle them for twelve hours?”

Twelve.

Oh, god.

They should’ve called me.

I miss the babies, and I love helping, even if I’ve loved what I’ve been spending my vacation time on even more.

But Trevor doesn’t hesitate. “Gonna call in a few reinforcements to help, but yeah. We’ve got you. We *always* have time for the Santa Zeus who brought us together.”

He blinks at us again, and then he grins. “Heh. We did, didn’t we? It’s the first quadzeuslet miracle.”

We let him have it.

Even if he wasn't sleep-deprived, he'd still stay stuff like that.

But if Zeus and Joey hadn't given me a job, I wouldn't have found where I belong or had the courage to tell Trevor that I like him.

And after Zeus has had a power nap and we've made sure he's taking an Uber instead of driving himself, Trevor pulls me back into bed and says the same.

“Your job was our Christmas miracle.”

I press my hips against his. “And I wouldn't have it any other way.”

“Merry Christmas, Meg.”

“Merry Christmas, Trevor.”

It's the last thing either of us say for a long time.

Out loud, anyway.

Mostly, we let our bodies do the talking for us.

Trevor's the best present I've ever gotten, and I can't wait to show him every day for the rest of our lives.



Dear Reader,

I hope you had as much fun with Meg and Trevor as I did! If you'd like to read more laugh-out-loud romcoms about Trevor's baseball team's journey from lovable losers to champions, I invite you to check out the Copper Valley Fireballs series, starting with *Jock Blocked*.

Zeus and Joey Berger, Meg's employers, also have a story of their own in *The Pilot and the Puck-Up*, which is the start of the Copper Valley Thrusters hockey series.

And I hope you stick around and have fun with my newsletter, The Pipster Report, which features frequent drop-ins from characters all across the Pippaverse, along with regular updates on sales, new releases, and book recommendations.

Thanks for spending some of your holiday with Trevor and Meg!

~Pippa Grant



OTHER BOOKS

More siblings' best friends novels from Pippa Grant:

Mister McHottie (The Girl Band series #1, both hilariously funny and among the hottest Pippa Grant titles)

Flirting with the Frenemy (Bro Code series #1, featuring the funniest destination wedding ever with a side of fake dating and enemies to lovers)

Charming as Puck (Copper Valley Thrusters #4, with one of my all-time favorite openings [and in which no animals are harmed, I promise])

The Grumpy Player Next Door (Copper Valley Fireballs #3, featuring the glitter bombing to end all glitter bombings)

Love fake dating? Try these:

The Last Eligible Billionaire (Amazon #1 bestselling standalone title with the greatest pet dog to ever exist and a wax job gone wrong)

America's Geekheart (Bro Code series #2, featuring a hero with golden retriever energy)

Stud in the Stacks (The Girl Band series #2, featuring a librarian hero who's addicted to romance novels)

Real Fake Love (Copper Valley Fireballs #2, featuring the world's most-jilted bride and a super hip but also super terrifying grandmother)

And for more, including a full book list and links to all of my audiobooks, visit my website at www.pippagrants.com.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pippa Grant is a USA Today and #1 Amazon bestselling author who writes romantic comedies that will make tears run down your leg. When she's not reading, writing or sleeping, she's being crowned employee of the month as a stay-at-home mom and housewife trying to prepare her adorable demon spawn to be productive members of society, all the while fantasizing about long walks on the beach with hot chocolate chip cookies.