

A romantic couple embracing in front of a Christmas tree. The woman is wearing a red lace bra, and the man is kissing her neck. The background is filled with blue bokeh lights from the tree.

A Whiskey Run
CHRISTMAS

ZOEY DRAKE

a whiskey run christmas

A Steamy Holiday Novella

zoey drake

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A Whiskey Run Christmas

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willow

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“**SPEED DATING**, when did my life come to this?” Chantelle talked me into doing this stupid thing today, and for the life of me I can’t remember why I said yes. How are you supposed to find your one true love by talking to him for only five minutes?

But here I sit with my steaming cup of white hot chocolate. It’s warmth in my hands eases the cold chill from outside. Chocolate, sugar, and the little bit of peppermint schnapps I snuck in are titillating my senses. The smell always reminds me of winter, Christmas in general, I suppose.

I find myself here at this Saturday night speed dating event because the truth is... dating is hard. Acing college? Easy. Picking out new outfits that are show stoppers? Also, easy. The rush that comes with a new man? The magic of a love bubble where, for the first while, it’s a honeymoon period where nothing exists outside of the two of you. Or... finding a guy who isn’t so into himself that he’d rather marry his left hand than you? Hard. I’m not opposed to a good old-fashioned knocking of boots, but I won’t be giving it up on the first date.

The matches tonight are underwhelmingly boring, but here I sit anyhow. Some of them intrigue me with just a look. Others, I’m hoping I won’t have to deal with in any manner of

the word. I'm looking for a certain type of man. One who will sweep me off my feet and make me swoon. Dark hair, blue eyes, strong jawline, five o'clock scruff. Is it too much to ask for?

Santa has known since I was a child that it's on my wish list - a boyfriend for Christmas. Is it childish thinking that Santa could really bring the perfect boyfriend?

You know... real book boyfriend material. I've been in love with fictional boyfriends for long enough, and it's about damn time I find one in real life. A guy who makes me fucking feel, someone who's more than just safe. Because you can't have both, right? Fun and safe? A heart of gold with a little bad boy mixed in? I've found there's a fine line, and neither side wants to cross. You either have the heavily tattooed motorcycle gang guy or the accountant in his perfect suit with his perfect house and well... the best life, but a boring one.

I want someone who's going to challenge me, and someone who knows what to do in between the sheets, if you know what I mean.

Static lashes out over the microphone and I cringe. "Hello everyone, welcome to Sugar and Spice's first speed dating Saturday. You'll have an hour to meet and greet twelve matches. Every time I ring this bell, you'll move on to the next person." She rings it for practice once to start us off.

The first man I sit in front of falls into the less desirable category. He definitely doesn't fit into any of my wants in a man, and isn't love cootie material. He's short with glasses, weathered skin, and is missing some hair on top. His lips part into a pleasant smile, but my eyes are drawn to every wrinkle on his shirt.

“Howdy. How are you today?” He winks at me and I fight the urge to cringe, again.

“I’m doing fine, thanks.”

“Is that a good fine or an I’d rather not be here but my friend dragged me here sorta fine?”

“Well—” I go to speak again when he cuts me off.

“Yeah, a friend dragged me here, too. You know, not many people in this town are my type, but I figured I’d give this whole thing a shot.”

“Okay then.”

The bell dings again and a deep breath leaves my body over the fact that I won’t have to make any more small talk with someone who’s definitely not my type. I almost knock over my chair trying to get up too quickly and a blush crosses my face. The look of confusion on his face is priceless. Did he really think *that* was hitting it off? Grabbing my spiced hot chocolate, I move on.

Sitting down at the next table, pale blue eyes meet mine. He is good looking. Definitely a little more my type with a chiseled jaw, straight nose, and those eyes.

“Hey there, I’m Willow,” I say, smiling over at him. He doesn’t return my smile. In fact, he appears to scowl more. His eyes never leave mine, boring into me. I take a deep breath because, quite frankly, the way he stares is unnerving. More of a maybe-he’s-a-serial-killer-type than a he’s just shy type. A minute later and he still hasn’t responded. He’s sitting back in his chair, arms crossed in a standoffish pose. Closed off.

“So, why are you even here?” I ask, trying again.

He remains speechless, staring me down. I tilt my head, as if somehow a simple twist of my neck will help me to figure out why in the heck this guy is wasting my time when clearly it's so off putting. The bell dings a second time and I'm getting increasingly agitated Chantelle even talked me into this whole thing. I don't see what speed dating can do.

I'm not going to find the perfect guy for me with a few quick questions about non-essential life things. Maybe I should try online dating, hell, maybe I should try tinder... but I've heard those could also be terrible ideas. Catfishing and all. My luck, I'd end up with a serial killer or some crazy shit.

And you aren't going to find a man by being so cynical. I remind myself, internally rolling my eyes.

I move on to the next table.

The guy in front of me isn't book boyfriend material, but he has a nice smile. Dark hair, dark brown eyes, hidden by black framed glasses. I mean he's like 80% perfect, right? Sure, it's good enough. I don't have to have 100%. Until... he opens his damn mouth.

I speak up first. "Hey, how's it going?"

"I'm doing great, how about you?"

A smile forms on my lips. "Really good, actually."

"Shall we get started?" he asks.

"Sure, why not?" I reply.

"Do you cook?"

"I do."

"Great, that's good to know because my mom's a great cook. Do you think you'd be opposed to using her recipes if

we get married?”

*What. The. Absolute. Fuck? He did not just go there...
Have we gone back into the 1950s and I just missed it?*

“Um, no one said anything about getting married...”
Despite the look on my face, he still continues on.

He nods. “I know, but it’s an important question for now because if you won’t, then this just isn’t going to work.”

“I’m to the point of knowing this isn’t going to work...”

“Was it something I said?”

“Yep, definitely.” The bell rings and I jump out of my seat, thrilled to get away from this momma’s boy. He’s starting to give me lives-in-momma’s-basement vibes. My eyes fall to the door and I wonder if I should just go ahead and leave now. Clearly this whole thing has been a bust so far.

No, I said I’d do it.

My eyes drift over to the next table and the guy looks up at me and smiles. A tiny sliver of hope emanates inside me. “Hey, I’m Corbin. Nice to meet you. What are you drinking today?”

“Willow. Nice to meet you, and this is one of my favorites, white hot chocolate.” I smile back at him, thinking that finally I’ve found someone who legitimately wants to be here. “So, what do you do?” *Let’s start with an easy question, right?*

He smiles and his cheeks form the cutest dimples. “Well, I’m a troubadour, roaming from town to town singing songs to beautiful women like you, and wooing them into relationships with me.”

Is this dude for real? I internally roll my eyes and think of something to placate him. “Oh, well that sounds like a

delightful life story.”

The bell rings and I’m not sure if I’m excited or disappointed I’ll be moving on to the next table. Corbin is nice, but his story makes him seem like a total player, and he’s the very last type of person I should be involved with right now. Been there, done that, and never again.

I go through eight more five minute dates. Not impressed with any of them until my eyes catch on Mr. Perfect across the room. I mean he’s gorgeous, right? He’s tall, with dark ebony hair, and his jawline could chip away at a mountain. His laugh is deep and masculine like I always imagined my perfect man having. It’s as if I’ve heard it before in my dreams and I drink it in like the most luxurious wine.

Dark eyes find mine and I swoon. *Now, I know what you’re thinking. This is completely shallow. There’s no way I just found my dream man and I haven’t even talked to him yet. But who was I to say no to a one chance encounter. Even if this never amounted to anything more than a one night encounter, I’d sure enjoy the hell out of myself.*

But what if I did? What if we were brought here at the same exact time for a reason?

His smile could make any girl weak in the knees, and I can only imagine his voice... *Gah, get it together, Willow!* I internally reprimand myself. My eyes roam over his chest looking for the typical name tag that would indicate he’s part of the speed dating tonight, but no luck. My eyes caress his arm muscles. His biceps are huge and rippling because, clearly, he works out a lot. That’s good. Being healthy is important. His sweater is drawn tightly over his broad chest, and his khaki pants hang low on his hips. I’m picturing a GQ model under all that clothing, *obviously.*

I watch as a dark-haired woman slides up beside him. Kissing him on the cheek as she gives him a side hug. Awareness spotlights within my mind. And... there goes my chance at Mr. Perfect. He's with someone already. Another book worthy guy who's already found his one true love. My heart sinks at another lost opportunity. My shoulders slouch a little in defeat. I pick up my cup. It's empty and this girl needs a refill.

Wrapping my black and white polka dot scarf tighter around my neck, I get up from the table and put on my new black winter coat. I'll put my gloves on once I have another cup of hot deliciousness to go.

"Hi, I'd like another white hot chocolate to go, please." I won't need an extra hit of peppermint schnapps now since this event is totally over. The cashier rings me up and points me to the pickup at the end of the counter.

The voice that comes over the speakers as they crackle yet again is nasally. "Order for Oliver."

I watch as the perfect mystery man walks past me to grab his coffee.

"Order for Willow." *Oh, that's me!* He's still standing at the pickup counter and I have the urge to blurt out how we're complete soulmates, but I resist. Because it would be stupid to say that in front of his girlfriend.

Hot chocolate in hand, I turn too quickly.

Why is he so close?

I watch, almost in slow motion, as my hot chocolate sprays all over him. *Noooooooooo.*

He winces, causing his own drink to spill. I'm sure both are burning into his skin as he watches; a grimace covering his

perfectly chiseled face.

“Oh, my God, I am so, so sorry! Here let me help you...” Before I know what I’m doing, I’ve picked up a napkin and am wiping him down without permission. My hand has a mind of its own as I feel up and down his hard chiseled chest. I try not to moan at the sheer delight. Dang, I’ve never felt pecs this muscular. I continue down with my napkin and realize I’m legit rubbing his cock in his pants. I mean... it is quite a package.

“Hey, it’s fine. I’m fine.” He pulls my wandering hands away from his groin and my eyes finally catch his. Heat spreads across my face in holy embarrassment. I’m speechless. I can’t believe I’d just fondled him, but I also can’t complain because, hello, Mr. Perfect.

“Here, let me get you a new drink. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to spin so quickly, and I didn’t know you were that close and...” *Great, now I’m mumbling like an idiot.* I internally roll my eyes at myself. *I did not just do that.*

“I’m Oliver.” He shakes his shirt out a little before offering his hand for me to shake. I eagerly return the gesture before realizing I probably look crazy and should tone it down.

“Oh, Willow. Nice to meet you...” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear nervously. My eyes cross paths with his again. Oh, definitely not blue, but that’s okay.

His eyes are a sensational shade of whiskey, and I want to get drunk on them. He smiles at me and I don’t know why I didn’t see those cute little dimples a couple minutes ago from across the room.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the woman he was with earlier walking toward us. She’s tan, dark-haired, perfectly

dressed, and the kind of beauty that most women envy. No wonder she snagged Oliver. I'd expect nothing less.

“So...” I clear my throat. “Can I buy you a new drink?” I nod at his empty beverage that spilled when I hit him. A simple friendly gesture, that's all.

“How about a raincheck on that? Say instead of a drink, let's get coffee another time.” A brush off... *delightful*.

A traitorous smile still paves its way across my face. “I would love to, but no.” And I really mean it because why wouldn't I want to get a drink with this guy? Except for the teeny tiny factor of him already having a girl.

“Ol, we've got to go. The showing at the gallery starts soon and we promised Thomas we'd be there.” The dark-haired beauty from earlier pipes up behind us.

My heart sinks. *Right, they're dating*. Before I can say anything else, she's dragging him out of the coffee shop behind her. A quick glance, a wink my way, and he's gone.

Snap out of it, Willow, he's got a girl already. I remind myself. I don't need to deal with that type of thing. Homewrecker will never be on my resume.

I've seen too much bad shit happen from affairs.

My eyes trail over the Christmas decorations on display in the coffee shop window. The window has been frosted to mimic snow. A miniature village lines the window. Townspeople frolic here and there between the shops, probably finding the best Christmas gifts for loved ones.

Little figurines skate on ice throughout town square, passing the annual Christmas tree with each glide around the rink. As people walk down the street, they're surrounded by light beams scattered from the garland streamed light poles on

every block. Horses observe passersby, waiting to take them on a magical ride around town. Groups of little houses are lined up like Lego's on the hillside behind the miniature town in front of me. Each window of each house is alive with tiny fake candles. Some have lights on the bushes out front while others have them lined across the roof.

A man is dipping his woman in the middle of the street as he plants a kiss on her lips. Talk about the most romantic thing I've ever seen.

Christmas is my favorite time of the year. There's not a thing I don't love about it. This little town of Whiskey Run goes all out. The old vintage carousel even gets decorated for Christmas. You name it, we've got it!

Twelve days of Christmas that allow us to live in the magical world of lights and creation. It's all about the mistletoe hanging from doorways everywhere, intimate family gatherings, decorations on Christmas trees, ice skating in the town square, celebrating the lighting of another Christmas tree, and snowflake kisses. Now, if only I could spend a white Christmas with a special someone, I'd be happy.

I hear my name called from across the room, snapping me out of my Oliver and Christmas trance. My eyes turn to find Corbin walking my way, a smile plastered across his almost perfect face. The look of a player. I've met many like him in these last twenty-four years.

"Looks like you spilled a drink there, can I buy you another one?" His smile is charming, and I almost fall into his kindness. *Almost.*

"You know, I think I'm actually going to head out for the evening. My day starts pretty early tomorrow." I smile politely.

He tips an invisible hat. “Well, it was nice to meet you, Willow. Hopefully, we’ll meet again soon.”

“Sure... maybe.” I turn to leave without the refill I so desperately want. The bell on the door dings as I leave, and I’m met with an all too familiar smell. One of my favorites this time of year. It smells like snow. Lorelai Gilmore is my witness, you can smell snow coming.

I get to my car before I feel the first flake drop onto the tip of my nose. My eyes drift skyward and I can see the night sky is alight with parking lot lights and the white crystalline flakes of frozen water.

It makes me happy.

There’s something about snow falling that brings new beginnings, a fresh new look on the world.

Maybe it’s wrong to put so much faith in one tiny moment. My mother always tells me I’m too much a dreamer, that the world isn’t as good as I make it out to be. But if she can’t believe it, then I’ll believe for her.

Ten minutes later, I’m pulling into my driveway. The headlights twinkle off the few lights I’ve already started putting up around the house, and I can’t help but admire the little cottage I’d purchased last year with the help of a loan from the bank. One day this place will be fully mine, and I can’t wait to fill it with a family.

The snow continues to fall, spotlighted by my headlights. Tiny frozen flakes of happiness. It’s starting to really come down, leaving a coating on the road and grass outside of my house.

I turn off the engine before I exit the car. My footsteps are gentle as I slowly approach the house, hoping not to fall. I’m

practicing the walk-like-a-penguin ice walk, shuffling from side to side.

The steps creak with the cold as I take the two to my front porch which provides slight relief from the snow. The handle of the door is chilly against my gloved hand as I hold it in place to unlock it. With a clicking noise, it opens as I push through.

Dropping my keys on the table beside the door, I decide to take a shower to wash the day away. I'm in and out in less than twenty minutes. Decker out in my favorite PJs and donning my favorite holiday socks, I make my way to the kitchen to make yet another cup of white hot chocolate, aka the most magical drink this time of year. Slipping into the living room afterward, I flip the switch on my gas fireplace, and it lights up instantly.

I pull up my beta reader copy of my favorite author's newest book on my reader tablet, bundle up under a blanket on the couch, and dig in. Just one of the many perks of being a personal assistant to a USA Today Bestselling Author, first dibs on her newest book babies. It's a gift I don't take lightly. Now, if I could just snag one of these book boyfriends in real life, I'd be set.

It's a Christmas story about two strangers who team up to be each other's dates for every holiday event. The perfect ruse to get nagging families off your back. What started out as a fairly innocent cup of tomato soup and grilled cheese at a food court morphed into a little more than everyone expected. Who knew that so much time spent together would make even the world's grumpiest grinch into the merriest of lovers?

What's better than Christmas?

Falling in love. I keep reading, enjoying every steamy and swoon-worthy moment. Plus, the banter.

This is why I love romance. If only for a couple of hours, I get to piggyback on someone else's fairytale.

Now, I do realize it's fiction and it's unlikely that things would ever go this well in real life, but that's what makes it so perfect.

I've got a laundry list of things to do tomorrow for my author, including scheduling a release party, managing her reader group, and anything else she has for me to do. Being an author isn't just about writing the book. It's also about marketing and building a fanbase. I've learned a lot over the last several years, and even though it can be overwhelming, it's so much fun.

An hour later, my stomach growls, reminding me that I haven't eaten dinner tonight. I was too nervous to eat before the speed dating, and I'd forgotten when I got home. Grabbing the peanut butter and raspberry jam from the fridge, I make one of my favorites, PB & J.

I fill up my cup with milk and cocoa powder to make more of the microwaved deliciousness I crave. Taking little bites of my sammie, my fingers strum along the counter while I wait. A ding resonates throughout the kitchen and my hot cocoa is finally ready. I pull it out and drop a handful of miniature marshmallows on top, grab what's left of my PB&J, and head back to the living room.

I really want to read more of my book before going to bed because I just got to the really good part. It's the part where everything's going really well, and the hero is Captain Dreamy, before shit hits the fan and it all goes down in a fiery ball of glory. My absolute favorite part.

Bundling back up on the couch with all my essentials, I dive back in. My PB&J is gone by the next chapter and I start sipping on my cocoa as it's had just a couple of minutes to cool down and be at that perfectly drinkable temperature.

For the next couple of hours, I get lost in the story. This has to be, by far, my favorite from this author, and I cannot wait to tell her about it in the morning.

oliver

. . .

WILLOW.

I can't get her name off my mind after meeting her. It'd been clear she was there for the speed dating last night, so she's obviously single. The way she'd blown me off when I asked her for coffee confused me. I find that I'm a moderately attractive male in the prime of his twenties.

I'm a catch.

Her molasses-colored hair fell in perfect waves around her slightly rounded face. A slim body, but she had some curves, too. She was about average height and wore glasses that shaped her beautiful eyes. The frames were Tiffany blue with a tortoise brown front. But her eyes behind the frames... they were the palest shimmering gray blue I'd ever seen. For a minute, I wanted to swim in their depths. Get lost in them.

Her voice could put someone to sleep, but not in the boring way. In the she-could-really -lull someone to sleep because her voice was so sweet and comforting. The touch of her soft skin against my hand shot sparks of electricity right through to every vein, lighting them up in a way I hadn't felt before. Hell, it even gave an extra jolt to my cock, making it stand up and take notice.

She hadn't given me any way to communicate with her after she'd seen me with Tessa. Maybe it's why she was so quick to turn me down. I want to tell her Tessa is only my sister, but I have no clue where she lives or if she even lives around here. I guess my only hope is that she'll show up at Sugar and Spice again.

Luckily, my job lets me work from wherever. So, although it might seem creepy, I'm just going to live there between the hours that it's open.

The Keurig coffee maker gurgles, letting me know my brew is ready. I grab a to-go mug and fill it to the brim. The scent of java beans hits my nose and I inhale it like a drug. Coffee is my addiction. I could never be a tea drinker. There's just something about a cup of coffee that tea can't do for me. Coffee drinkers everywhere could attest to this fact.

Packing up my laptop and some paperwork, I bundle up, put on boots, and trekk out through the snow. Sugar and Spice is only three blocks away from the two bedroom luxury condo I rent.

I'm thankful for the foresight I had to buy an SUV because the ground this morning is covered in a couple inches of snow already and it's still coming down. I slowly traipse along the sidewalk to my SUV and hop in. The engine roars to life and I put it into reverse, looking behind me as I back out of my parking spot. *Hopefully the snow won't deter her from coming out today.*

Traffic moves at the speed of a snail, and I can't help but tap my fingers on the steering wheel as I drive. The sounds of my mix playlist pump through my speakers.

I'm anxious to see if Sugar and Spice is someplace she visits often or if it was a one off thing last night. Finding a

parking spot near the door, I park and get out, grabbing my stuff.

The bell on the door rings as I enter the tea and coffee boutique. The sound of grinding coffee beans and the smell of freshly made pastries attacks my senses. My stomach growls, letting me know it needs feeding. A table in the back corner of the store sits open and I walk over to put my stuff down so I can order. At the counter, I order only a chocolate chip muffin, seeing as I brought a mug from home. I pay the cashier and head down to wait for my order at the pickup counter, feeling like *deja vu*.

A couple of minutes later my food and drink are ready. Walking back to my table in the corner, I scan the surrounding area looking for the molasses-haired beauty I saw last night. No luck... yet. It's still early. Maybe she just isn't awake yet. I pull my computer from my bag and it loads up slowly as I wait. Multiple emails pop up, time stamped after I shut it down last night, so I get to work going through them.

Being a graphic designer gives me the opportunity to work from anywhere. An email catches my eye. It's a personal assistant named W. Sanders, looking for someone to design her author's next book cover. Something I've done a time or two. I email back asking for specifics, an inspiration board, and a blurb to give me an idea of what type of cover this author is wanting.

A few minutes later, my laptop dings with a new email. W. Sanders has written back providing a blurb for the author as well as several inspiration boards and a description of her author's characters.

It's going to be a Christmas themed cover, but she's specifically asked for a non-cheesy type. Strangers who strike

a mutual agreement of Christmas dating to woo their families.

Okay, so from here I need to know whether they want a cover with a couple or something more object based? I respond to her email.

While waiting for a response from W. Sanders, I've responded to a couple of other emails I've received inquiring about graphic designs. One is a marketing design request and the other is a request for assistance with a new logo for their business.

The bell of the front door dings and my eyes fall to the source of the noise. For some reason my heart does a funny little trill thinking that maybe she's come in, and then sinks when it's not her.

It's still early. I remind myself. I didn't notice the other night that Sugar and Spice has already been decorated for Christmas.

Of course, they have. It's almost mid-December. My eyes stream over every inch of the room. Each table is lined with holiday centerpieces. There is a holiday display in the front window. Lights and garland are wrapped around the outside of the wall menu behind the counter. Christmas used to be such a magical thing, but these days it's just so commercialized that it's lost all the magic it used to provide. I shake away the thoughts and get back to the work at hand.

For the rest of the morning, I reply back and forth with W. Sanders. I do a couple of mockups for the customer requesting a logo and I email more information on the marketing design needed for Trippy's Kayak Shop.

The next time I look at my clock, it's lunch time and still no sightings of my mystery woman. I wonder if this is a stupid

idea. Wanting to give her a little more time, I decided to order a mediterranean wrap with tomatoes, cherry peppers, onions, feta cheese, romaine, and hummus.

The bell on the door rings two more times in the next hour and still no Willow. I'm starting to give up hope that she's actually going to show and realize there's stuff at home I could be doing instead. Plus, I'm sure Sugar and Spice wouldn't mind if I gave up the table I've been hogging all day.

I start to pack up my stuff when the bell on the door rings once more. Third time's a charm? My eyes slide to the door and the sight before me makes my heart pound. *She's here.*

It's the feelings of a first crush that I'm having. I haven't been interested in anyone since last year. My heart instantly shatters. I'd liked Shelby, but it obviously wasn't meant to work out. It seems to be a theme in my love life over the years. Willow's eyes find mine and the corners of her lips lift in a smile. *She remembers.* I wave at her and she waves back. I eavesdrop like a creeper while she orders a peppermint hot cocoa with extra marshmallows and a sandwich.

After she grabs her food from the counter, I wave her back to my table, but instead of sitting with me, she sits a table over.

She reaches up to pull the scarf away from her neck before setting it down on the table. Her puffy winter jacket and gloves come off next. Underneath all those layers, she's wearing a tight, burgundy, long sleeved shirt with jeans. Dressed down from last night, but still just as sexy. I can't help but allow my gaze to peruse her, sliding up from her black boots to those soft eyes I want to drown in. Perfect hips, the right size breasts, and now my cock is hard yet again.

"Willow." I nod at her.

“Hello again, Oliver.” Her smile hitting those pale blue eyes.

I scoot my chair over, trying to get closer so we’re not shouting at each other across a table, and a blush coats her face. A telltale sign that she likes me, or that I at least make her nervous.

“How are you today?” I ask, completely bemused by her presence.

“Good. Man... this morning has been a little crazy, but overall, I can’t complain. Busy makes the day go by faster, and when you love what you do, it’s almost a bonus.” She takes a sip of her drink and her glasses fog a little from the steam.

“So, what do you do that you love so much?”

“Oh, I’m a personal assistant to an author.” The email from earlier pops up in my mind and I instantly wonder if she could be my infamous W. Sanders.

“Anyone I know?”

“Depends... how many romance books do you read?” She eyes me, a hint of laughter in her voice.

I chuckle. “Well, as of this morning I’m working on a new book cover for a romance author.”

Her eyes widen in excitement. “Oh, very cool. I’d ask who for, but I’m assuming that’s not something you’d want to willingly give out to a stranger.”

“I can’t exactly give it out, but... I can blink once for yes if you guess.”

She taps her forefinger against her plump pink lips and my eyes follow the movement. I get the mental picture of how those lips would look wrapped around me.

“Hmm... is it Eliza Lee?” I blink twice for no.

“Okay, okay. Let me think...” She bites the inside of her cheek like she’s trying to really concentrate.

“What about... Sidney Hawk?” I blink twice again for no.

“Man, I really suck at this guessing thing. I know those two are releasing books soon, so I figured maybe they were cover hunting.” She taps her finger against her chin again, and I can’t help but admire how cute it is when she purses her lips in thought.

“Oooo... don’t tell me it’s for Ashley Fairchild.” I blink once, signaling yes. “Holy fuck! We totally emailed this morning. Funny thing... I’m her assistant.”

“Wait, so you’re W. Sanders?” I point at her.

She smirks knowingly. “In the flesh.”

“Well then, it’s nice to meet you, Miss Sanders. Since you’re here, any chance you want to take a look at the mockup cover I made right before you walked in?”

“Heck yes, I do.” I pull up the couple I’d found on a stock photo website. He’s got short cropped hair. He’s in a suit. His suit is unbuttoned and tattoos peek out. She’s a blonde with dark low lights, blue eyes, and skinny physique. Her back is to the camera and he’s facing her, looking longingly into her eyes, like he’s feeling a little more than just mutual attraction.

“Wow, Oliver. This is exactly how I pictured them when I read the book for Ashley. It’s perfect, and I think she’s going to love it.”

“So, I should go ahead and send it to her?”

“Yes!” Her face lights up in the prettiest way, and I can’t help but stare at that perfect smile.

We spend the rest of the afternoon talking about everything book related. She's clearly into the romance community. I learn that Willow is a personal assistant for a couple of different authors. She's obviously very good at what she does, and you can tell she loves it. Her smile is radiant, and I want to bask in it.

"Okay, okay, okay, less about me." She's bouncing in her seat like an adorable little Christmas elf, and it makes me grin. "Tell me about you, Oliver."

"What do you want to know?"

"Whatever you're willing to share. I take it you're some sort of graphic designer guy, if you're working on book covers and logos, right?"

"True. I own my own company. Do pretty well for myself."

"That's amazing. I love working from anywhere. It's almost the best part of my job."

Here comes the question I've been dying to ask her since she walked through the door. "So, I have to ask. How was speed dating last night?"

"Truth? It was horrible. I got talked into it by my friend, and honestly, I don't see how you can find your soulmate with just five minutes of talking."

"I don't think they mean for you to find your soulmate in five minutes. More like find someone who interests you and hang out or hook up. Get to know them. Find out what they like, what they do, etc. You have to spend time with someone to know they're right for you."

She laughs. "So you don't believe in love at first sight, huh?"

“Love at first sight, no. I believe in attraction at first sight or lust, even, but not love. Love takes time to cultivate. Time to grow.”

“Fair enough. So how about you? Have you found love?” She blurts it out, but then slams her mouth shut, almost as if she didn’t mean to ask it.

“No. I haven’t found my perfect someone yet.” Her eyebrows furrow.

“But... weren’t you here with someone the other night?”

“Oh, that was Tessa. My sister.”

A blush of embarrassment covers her face, and I can’t figure out why. “Uh... I thought you two were together. You just looked like the picture perfect couple.”

“I love Tessa, but yeah, no. Wait, is she why you said no to coffee?”

She nods her head, “Yeah,” and clarity sets in. It all makes sense now. I’d have assumed the same thing had the situation been reversed.

“I’m definitely glad you showed up today then, so I could clear the air. I’m one hundred percent single, and I’d love to take you out on a date.”

Her smile is a bright beacon, and I want to revel in the perfectly imperfectness of it.

“Well, good, because I’d love to go. The only question is where?”

“So, I read in the town newspaper there’s a Christmas tree lighting ceremony next Wednesday. How would you feel about making that our first date? What do you think?”

“I love the tree lighting ceremony! Do you know the history behind it?”

I shake my head. “No, but how about this? You can tell me all about it when we go out?”

“Sounds like a deal.” Her eyes twinkle just talking about the Christmas tree lighting. I only moved here a couple of months ago, but I can tell this community is ringing with all things holiday spirit. You walk down the street and every building has a lighted wreath or garland. Every single light pole is covered in decorations. It’s honestly like Christmas vomited its cheer everywhere.

I would gladly accept Willow as a Christmas present beneath my tree. All dressed down and wrapped in a big red bow for opening.

I’m a one-night stand kind of guy. Love ‘em and leave ‘em type. Because at the end of the day, all I’ve ever found is women use you until you’re of no use to them anymore, then they kick you to the curb. But sitting here looking across the table at Willow, I feel different.

She brings a joy to me I haven’t felt in a very long time. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I simply sat and talked to a woman, let alone stalked her down in a coffee shop. She’s different... and it’s making me want to do different things. Like woo her, take her out on dates just so I can watch her smile. So I can watch the way she bites her lip when she’s trying to decide something.

Or how she pushes her hand behind her ear when she gets nervous. Don’t even get me started on the blush. I wonder, does it go the whole way down or does it stop at her chest.

We grow silent, and I can't help but look at her sitting across from me, drinking her hot chocolate. This feels nice, normal, even, and I want more.

She catches me watching her and grins. "What?"

"Nothing, simply enjoying the morning with a gorgeous lady. Drinking a coffee and eating. Three of my favorite things."

willow

. . .

“OKAY, bae, dish. How’d the speed dating go the other night? You hook up with anyone? You have this glow thing happening.” Chantelle looks at me with a smile while sipping on her mocha. We met up at Sugar and Spice for our weekly gossip session.

I shake my head. “All cards on the table, it was awful, Chan. I have no idea how people think those events even work.”

“Well, obviously it wasn’t all bad. I mean. You met... what’s his name again?”

I smile, looking down at my hot chocolate. “It’s Oliver.” A blush crosses my face just thinking about him.

“There it is.”

“There’s what?”

“Your smile says it all. So, clearly, something good came out of it.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I want to like him, and I’m hopeful, but I guess I’m still a little hesitant.”

“Hey, it’s never too late to open up to the possibilities. Maybe you should just give in and let go. Enjoy this Christmas

season and see what kind of merry sparks happen.”

“Says the girl who’s happily engaged to the man of her dreams. Speaking of, how’s Gus these days?”

“He’s amazing. We’re going this weekend to pick out our tree for Christmas.” The spark that lights up her eyes talking about her man makes me a bit jealous. I want what she and Gus have with my own guy.

“Didn’t you guys go last year?” I quip.

“We did, but this year the tree will be at our house. It’s our first officially engaged couple tree. You’ll understand what I mean when you have your own relationship.”

“Aww, Chan, I’m just so happy for you guys. I want that someday.”

“And you’ll get it. Who knows? Maybe Oliver is the Mr. Mistletoe you’ve been waiting for all these years.” I roll my eyes, but secretly I’m hoping she’s right.

My phone lights up on the table with a text from Oliver.

Oliver: Still picking you up for our date tomorrow?

A grin spreads my lips as I think about all the time we’ll get to spend together. Act cool, totally cool. I tell myself

Me: Of course! I can’t wait!

So much for cool... My response is immediate, fingers having a mind of their own. I think that’s the fastest I’ve ever sent a text and to my surprise his response is just as quick!

Oliver: Send me your address. I’ll pick you up around 6:30pm. If I remember correctly, the tree lighting is scheduled for 7pm.

Me: That’s perfect.

Oliver: Dress warm. The weather says it could be a very chilly evening tomorrow.

Chantelle makes a small happy noise grabbing my attention. I don't miss the grin she hides behind her mug and I shake my head, mildly embarrassed from her undivided attention.

Me: It's going to be amazing.

My heart is pounding with excitement and nervousness as I respond, but then I start to immediately go over the options I have to wear with him tomorrow. A real date. I haven't been on one of these in forever. A giddy feeling glides through me and I realize how incredibly happy I am right now.

Oliver: You'll be there. It's already going to be awesome.

I can't help the smile as it spreads across my face. He's such a charmer. It makes me really wonder why this amazingly handsome man is still single.

"What'd he say?" Chantelle is peeking at my phone.

"He's excited about our date tomorrow for the tree lighting."

"Oh my gosh, the ceremony is going to be your first date? That's perfect!"

"I really hope so."

"Don't doubt it. You're the coolest, prettiest, and most amazing girl I know. If this Oliver has any good sense at all, he's going to see it right away."

"Okay, Chan."

“So, tell me. When am I going to get my grabby little hands on Ashley’s new book baby? I know for a fact that you have a copy already.”

“Shit, girl, it’s so dang good. This may just be her best book yet.”

“Gimme, gimme. Stop holding out on me. Don’t I get any friend perks?”

“Chan, you’re getting it next week. You can wait. Ashley isn’t ready for anyone else to have it yet, and I have to respect her decision.”

“Okay, fine. I don’t like it, but I understand.” She fake pouts and I can’t help but shake my head at her. I love that she’s just as much of a book nerd as I am.

I glance down at my watch and realize how late it is. “Shoot, I need to get going, Chan. Same time next week?”

“Actually, we’ll probably see you all at the tree lighting ceremony tomorrow night.”

Grabbing my bag and my drink, I stand to leave. She stands too, and we do our famous fake kisses. “I’ll see you and Gus tomorrow then. Have a good rest of your day.”

Driving home is slower than normal, given the accumulation of snow the last couple of days. The salt trucks have been out all day, which is the only reason I can even drive my little car right now. Pulling into my driveway, my eyes trail over my quaint little cottage. It needs some serious decorations. It’s the first year I’ve had my own place and I definitely plan on decorating. I started outside with some of the trees and bushes, but the inside needs some love, too.

Hitting the garage door opener, I decide to park inside tonight. I grab my purse from the passenger seat as I get out

and my eyes linger over the shelves, looking for the boxes labeled Christmas.

“Bingo.” I say to myself.

After grabbing two boxes, I make my way up the two steps to the kitchen door. Opening the door, I push through and head toward the living room. It’s so bare. I haven’t gotten a tree yet this year, and the house needs some pepping up.

After throwing on some Christmas tunes, I get my butt in gear putting up some decorations. I line the mantle with frost flocked garland, some red beads, and then highlight it with white lights that sparkle.

I place two tiny paper black and white checked Christmas trees on the mantle behind the garland. I’m in love with this new theme called buffalo check, and it’s definitely going to be a favorite of mine.

I plop two olive buckets filled with birch logs and winter greens on either side of the checked Christmas trees and move on, grabbing two vases to put red berries in. The berries will match my recently purchased big red ‘*Tis The Season to Be Jolly*’ sign sitting proudly in the middle of my mantle. My single plaid stocking hangs from the fireplace with glee. Only one for now, but hopefully by the end of this year, there will be two. I remain optimistic.

I make my way back out to the garage for another set of boxes. I reach up and pull down two more from the shelf. The door is still open so I slip through, make my way to the living room, and drop my goodies onto the couch. I pull open each box so I can observe what’s inside even though they’re labeled. My *Joy* and *Peace* pillows sit on the very top of the first box, and I pull both out, placing them on opposite corners of the couch. I adorn the middle of my couch with a white and

red check pillow, a bright contrast to my dark navy-colored couches.

My phone rings, vibrating across the side table, and I reach over to pause my music before I grab it. “Hey, Daddy.”

“Hey, baby girl. I wanted to call and check in. Haven’t heard from you in a couple of days.”

“Sorry. I’ve been busy with work and I met someone.” I feel the smile as it crosses my face.

“Oh, you met someone. When will we get to meet this mystery man?”

“I’m keeping him all to myself until I know if he’s the one or not. I can’t give Mom a reason to tell me that it’s not going to happen for me.”

He sighs through the phone, and I know he understands. We love Mom, but her optimism only goes so far. She’s convinced I’m going to be old and gray with cats because I don’t want to settle. What’s so wrong with looking for someone who checks off all my boxes?

“Okay, Willow. Well, I just wanted to check in with you. Will you be over for Christmas? Maybe bring that new man of yours?”

“You’re hopeless. We’ll see.”

“Hey, Christmas is still a couple weeks away. The possibilities are endless.”

“We’ll talk soon, Dad. I need to get back to decorating.”

“Oh, don’t let me stop you. Where are you at so far?”

“Well, I just did the mantle. Going with a new color theme this year, buffalo check, white, and red. Still need to buy a

tree.”

“It sounds beautiful, darling. Better get to the tree lot today or else you’ll miss out on the very best trees.”

“Dad, you know it’s not about how pretty the tree is. It’s the meaning behind it. The joy it gives me every time I look at it.”

“Whatever you say, Willow. I’ll let you go. Don’t forget to call us every once in a while.”

I frown because I probably don’t call them as much as I should. “I won’t, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you too, sweet girl.”

I click the end call button, grab the remote, and hit play so my music comes back to life. It pumps through my stereo system and I get back to decorating.

He’s right about the Christmas tree. I really need to get to the lot today or tomorrow.

I move on to the nooks in my media console, filling each shelf with fun little Christmas trinkets I’ve collected over the years—red Ford trucks, the beds loaded with fir trees for Christmas, another buffalo check mini tree, and a couple of mini signs with Christmas quotes.

A small wooden box with a *Christmas Trees* label written across the front sits with frosted flocked tree leaves and acorns sticking out from the inside.

I move on to the tray I’ll sit on my coffee table during the holiday season. A mini Christmas tree with the elements from the mantle, a holly berry candle, a buffalo check ornament, acorns, and red berries in the bottom, along with some red beads. The goal of my tray is to use different shapes and

heights to make it look cohesive, and Christmasy, to flow along with the rest of my room.

I set up two steel, white Christmas trees to each side of the media console, next to the white lights I've taken the liberty of also decorating with lit garland. My living room is starting to come together, minus the big hole in the front right corner destined to house my tree for this season.

Next is my own personal mini hot cocoa bar in the kitchen. Hot cocoa is a must when it comes to the holidays. Peppermint mochas, white hot chocolate, dark chocolate drizzle, sprinkles, fancy candy striped colored straws, and cute Christmas mugs.

Remembering that I haven't sent my address to Oliver yet, I pick up my phone and shoot off a quick text.

Oliver: Got it. I'll be there. How's your day going?

Four little words to show he cares. I kind of swoon, not that I should. It's just a simple question, but he wants to genuinely know and that makes me grin.

Me: Good, still need to head to the Christmas tree lot. It's not Christmas without the perfect tree. Did you get your tree yet?

He doesn't strike me as Saint Nick by any means, but I wanted to know.

Oliver: I really hadn't thought about it.

My lips turn down in a frown. Who doesn't have a Christmas tree at Christmas? Probably a bunch of people Willow, I scold myself.

Me: You need a tree, Oliver. It's just not the same without one. If you'd like, I can help you pick one out.

Oliver: I'll take you up on that offer. *winking emoji*

Me: I'm going later today to pick mine out, want to tag along?

The text is sent before I sit back and overanalyze what I just asked, then fear creeps in at the thought of him turning me down. Rejection sucks, I don't care who you are.

Oliver: Sounds like fun.

Me: Good, maybe we can split the delivery cost to have them drop off at both of our places.

Oliver: I've got an SUV, we can just put them on the rack.

Sweet! Which is quickly followed by a happy dance.

Me: Really? That would be amazing!

Oliver: You got it.

I breathe a sigh of relief because that saves me money for sure.

Me: This won't mess up our official date tomorrow, will it?

Oliver: How about we call this our pre-date, date?

Where did he come from? He almost seems too good to be true. A prince charming as one might say.

Me: I love it! What time are you free?

Oliver: I can be ready to go in, say, an hour?

Me: Perfect. I'll bring the tree topper. Can't pick out the perfect tree without one.

Oliver: I don't have one.

My jaw drops in shock. Who doesn't own a tree topper? No worries, there's an easy fix to this situation.

Me: I've got one you can borrow.

Oliver: See you soon.

Butterflies float around in my stomach knowing that I get to see him in just about an hour. Was I too hasty in inviting him to my sacred tree shopping experience? I can't stop smiling, excitement showing all over my face, I'm sure.

I blow to dust off the next box I hadn't realized I brought inside. Opening it slowly, I peek inside. *This box.*

Pulling out the old carousel trinket, a flood of memories assaults me. This was a gift from my grandmother right before she passed. Christmas was her favorite holiday.

I think she's the reason I have all this Christmas cheer. I used to spend every year with her. We'd take the time decorating every single room, followed by cookie making, and gingerbread house building, all the while laughing and dancing to jingle tunes. I miss her so much. A tear slips down my cheek and I wipe it away. I'm sad that she's no longer here, but I'm so glad for all the memories I had with her.

I pull the old carousel from the dust covered box and walk over to place it in a prominent spot on the media console, moving around other things to give it the best view. My fingers trace over each line and crevice of the carousel.

There you go, Gran. Front and center.

One more trip to the garage allows me to bring in the last of the boxes housing twinkle lights, ornaments, ribbons, tinsel, and my favorite, the tree topper. They don't call it the most magical time of the year for nothing.

I organize the boxes so I'm officially ready for my Christmas tree decorating. I do tutorial videos every year of my Christmas tree setup. I've gained quite a following in the last three years I've been doing it.

A knock on the door grabs my attention and I can't believe how I wasn't even paying attention to the time as it flew by. Popping in front of the mirror in my living room, I quickly straighten my hair and run my hands down my clothes, trying and failing to smooth out the wrinkles. I breathe into my hand to check my breath.

Nothing a breath mint can't fix. I pop an Altoid from my purse on the table by the door before another knock sounds.

"Coming!" I yell. One more quick look and I decide it's good enough. Opening the door, I see Oliver standing there in all his manly glory. He's wearing a winter jacket, gloves, a winter hat, jeans, and boots. I can't help but admire how attractive he is standing on my front porch. My eyes trail over his body head to toe. A big white smile greets me and piercing blue eyes fade into a lighter color around the irises. A few pieces of dark hair escape his toboggan, but I resist the urge to reach up and fix it for him. His shoulders are scrunched as if he's cold and his hands are shoved in his pockets as he stands so casually at my front door. It's almost as if he's meant to be here. *Don't get ahead of yourself,* I tell myself.

"Willow."

"Hey, Oliver. Gosh, I lost track of time and I'm going to need like five minutes. Come in, come in. It's cold out." I walk back toward the living room and he follows. "Feel free to grab a seat. I'll be just a couple minutes."

"I'll be right here."

oliver

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HER LITTLE COTTAGE is way more than I expected. Decorated head to toe in Christmas galore. Everywhere I look there's something that sparkles, twinkles, or shines. The mantle is decorated with one lonely stocking, and an ache forms in my heart. I understand the single stocking. I used to do it myself before I realized that Christmas wasn't worth the ghost of Christmas pasts that came with it.

My eyes scan over her coffee table and I take in every single detail. I stop at a vintage carousel on the media console. I get up and walk over to get a closer inspection. It's almost identical to the one my grandparents had when I was little. My fingers trace over it when a throat clears from behind me. "You ready to go?"

I swallow. "Yeah, yep. I'm ready if you are." Turning, I see her in a dark navy sweater that exposes the pale smooth skin of her shoulders and perfectly formed collarbone.

Tight pants that hold every single one of her curves. A pair of boots. Her molasses-colored hair falls over her shoulders in light waves.

Her face isn't covered in her Tiffany blue glasses for once and I take in the shape and contour of each smooth inch. She's

even more gorgeous when she isn't hiding behind those lenses.

The corners of her lips perk up into a smile. "What? What is it? Do I have something on my face?"

"Nope, your face is perfect. You just look different without glasses on." I mean every word of it.

Moving a piece of hair behind her ear, she looks down at the floor, almost embarrassed. Maybe she thinks it's weird that I said her face was perfect. A smile peeks out as she looks up at me from behind those long, black eyelashes. "Um. Thanks."

"You're welcome." We stand there in a daze, the air between us still. Neither of us moves, waiting for the other to shift first. I move in and trace my lips down her cheek, making my way toward her lips. The kiss is gentle, her lips soft, and I love the way she feels. Sealing my lips to hers, I deepen the kiss, and she follows my lead. I slide my tongue along the seam of her mouth, begging for entrance, and she opens beautifully like a pearl from a shell.

I run my hands behind her back and pull her into me. I want some type of contact, some type of friction, and I can tell she wants it to. A moan slips out and I swallow it down, reveling in how fucking perfect this girl is standing here right now.

My hands go on a journey. Down her side, caressing her curvy hips, and around her back side. With a fiery determination, I lift her off her feet, my hands firmly planted on her delectable back side. I give her ass a squeeze.

She feels light in my arms and molds to me like cookie dough. The things I want to do to her right now are not so gentlemanly. I'm imagining taking her back to her bedroom, stripping her down, and worshipping her like a fucking

goddess. Fuck, I love eating pussy. I wonder if she's as sweet down there as her mouth is.

I can't wait to find out. My cock is now at full mast, ready and waiting for orders like a boat commandeering her port. Her hot center skates against the bulge in my pants and I'm about ready to call the whole tree getting thing off and just taking her here and now. Couch, floor, kitchen counter, bed... the possibilities are endless.

She pulls away from me, her face blushing a gorgeous shade of red, and I miss the contact instantly. "Why'd you stop, beautiful? I was clearly enjoying those wandering fingers of yours." I wink at her for extra effect before diving back in for more of her kisses.

The song pumping through the speakers changes and I'm jolted into remembering what we were doing in the first place. Reluctantly, I pull back and take a breath, calming my nerves.

"Shall we get going?" I motion toward the door and she starts moving. Grabbing her glasses from the table by the door, and her jacket from the closet, she puts it on. She looks at me as if she's waiting for me to open the door, and I pause.

"Are we... going?"

"It's freezing out there. You're going to need a winter hat and gloves." I watch as she pulls them from her pockets

"Got it." She smiles at me, and I can't help but get lost in that look. No one has looked at me like that since Lindsay left me. There's a spark here and I'm so excited to see where it leads us. I just hope my grinchiness doesn't get in the way of all her Christmas cheer.

I open the door and take a step back, allowing her to go out first. There's a layer of lust in her gaze now. It's changed since

that kiss. “A gentleman, I see.” Her eyes twinkle with the look she gives me again.

“Always.” I wink at her, and a rosy blush creeps up her cheeks.

A cool breeze slips over us when we get outside and I watch her shiver slightly. “Are you sure that jacket is thick enough?”

“Yep, the wind is just a little bitter today.”

“For sure.”

“Oh, right. Let me...” She moves around me after I close the door to lock it. Her keys jingle as she tries to get them in the lock. Her hands shake slightly, and I wonder if it’s the same nerves I’m feeling right now.

After the second try, I offer my assistance. “Need any help over there?”

“Nope, I think I’ve finally... there. Got it.” I hear the lock click and we’re good to go. Turning around, she looks at my SUV. “This thing is huge. Why do you need such a big car?”

“Dealt with a lot of snow where I used to live. Guess I just kind of got used to having it and kept it after I moved here.”

“Makes sense. So, you’re new to the area?”

“Yeah, my family moved here a couple of years ago and I decided it was time for a change in my life.”

“When did you move here?”

“A couple of months ago.”

“Wait, so you have no idea how much Whiskey Run dives into Christmas?”

“Not a clue.”

“Well, then. Let me be your Christmas host elf when it comes to showing you around for all the big Yuletide events.”

“I don’t know... I’m not really into Christmas these days.”

“You what? I refuse to take that as an excuse. How about this? I’ll show you around to all the main events and if you don’t like the first three, then we don’t have to do anymore?”

“With that offer, how can I refuse?”

“Good, it’s settled. You’re stuck with me for the next two and a half weeks.” She claps her hands and laughs.

I quirk an eyebrow. “What makes you so sure that I’ll like the first three events?”

Her eyes widen before she speaks again. “How could you not? It’s Christmas. It’s cheery. Everyone deserves to have the most magical Christmas, and what better way than your own personal tour guide? I know all the places to stop.”

“Okay, we’ll do it.”

“Good.”

“You weren’t going to take no for an answer were you?”

“Not a chance.”

Slipping in front of her, I rush to grab the door before she can. “Here let me grab it.” I almost shout.

She puts up her hands with a giggle. “Okay, if you insist.”

“I do insist.”

I bend down and lift her effortlessly into the SUV, and then run to the other side to get in. Cranking on the heat, I turn it full blast. Looking to Willow, I ask, “I’m going to need you to give me directions. I have no clue where I’m going.”

“Okay... back out and turn right down Willowby Lane, take a left on Mistletoe Drive, and it’ll be about a mile and a half down the road on the right-hand side. You can’t miss it. It’s a huge farm full of trees.”

“So, close. Why do you get your tree delivered if you live within ten minutes of the farm?”

“Two words. Toyota Corolla.”

“Ahh, small car. Makes more sense now.”

In less than ten minutes, I’m turning right into Mr. Big’s Tree Lot. Rows upon rows of everything from firs, spruce, cyprus, to pine. “What kind of tree are you thinking?” I say, looking over at Willow.

“I’m thinking of a Fraser fir. It’s the most popular Christmas tree. The silvery-green needles are the perfect color and it’s soft to the touch, so it doesn’t prick you when you’re trying to decorate it. Plus, Fraser firs have excellent needle retention. Don’t ask me where I learned that because I can’t for the life of me remember. Oh, did you also know that although spruce is popular for Christmas trees, they tend to lose their needles first.”

“I actually had no idea.”

“So, what kind of tree do you want, Oliver?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I’ve never bought a tree for myself.” I say, taking a quick glance over at her.

Her eyes widen in disbelief. “Wait, you’re serious? Are you like a grinch or something?”

“No, I just have one too many ghosts of Christmas past in my stocking.” I whisper it quietly almost as if I don’t want her

to hear me. Sadness coats my thoughts over all the things in the past that have gone wrong over the holidays.

She reaches across the seat and squeezes my bicep lightly in sympathy. “I’ve had my fair share of bad memories in the past, but it’s time to change that. Leave those ghosts of Christmas past and hop into the Christmas present with me! Now’s as good a time as any to start new traditions.”

I shake his head and let out a sigh, eyes focusing back on the road because looking at her feels too personal. “It’s not as easy as you think.”

“Well, sometimes you just have to try a little harder. Okay, make me a promise?”

My heart trips up waiting to hear what this promise is going to be. “Depends on the promise?”

“Promise me that you’ll give Christmas this year a chance. Give it the opportunity to make all the ghosts of Christmas past disappear. Give me a chance to show you just how magical it can be for even the biggest scrooges.” She sounds almost as if she’s begging me and willing me silently to give it a try.

I look over at her and grin, pretending I’m not scared of trying. “I can’t promise that, but I can promise that I’ll try. For you.”

She seems to cheer up with my promise to try and it makes me melt a little on the inside. I feel like I’m going to be so lost on this girl.

“Good.”

“Let’s go pick out these trees then. They’ve got to be perfect.”

I follow along behind her as she moves effortlessly. Her ass jiggles with each step, and I can't help but watch it. I should be looking at the trees around us, but she captivates me.

The snow is falling at this point and I'm quickly starting to believe that maybe this town really is a winter wonderland. Maybe there is a bit of magic to be had. I watch as she inspects each tree, and I can't help the way my eyes linger on her blue jean clad legs down to her boots that crunch through the snow on the ground. "Why can't you just pick one?"

"Oliver, it's very clear you've never picked one out before so I'll clue you in on why I can't just pick one. It's about the needles, the shape, whether the top can handle the tree topper. Oh crap! We forgot the tree topper... shoot. We'll just have to eyeball it then." She sighs, shaking her head in frustration before going back to her inspections.

"Okay, why won't this one work?" I say pointing at the fir I'm currently standing beside.

"It's too perfect. That tree will get picked up by any family. It's gorgeous. I'm looking for the tree that's not as perfect. That I'm afraid no one else will take. The one that no one's going to pick because there's a hole in the needles on one side or its smaller than the rest."

"Well, that's easy. Why not just wait until all the best ones are picked and then come back?"

She shrugs like it doesn't matter. "I do a tree trimming tutorial online every year, so I need the tree now."

"I think I'm starting to see it." I internally roll my eyes. I'm still not stuck on the idea, but I promised her I would try.

"Exactly. That's the spirit!" She keeps walking and stops abruptly. "Here. This one is perfect!" I look at her, lifting a

brow as if to say what the fuck. My eyes flit back to the tree and I still don't understand. There's a big bare part of it. It has a slight tilt to the side. The top is not really big enough to hold a tree topper, but if she says it's perfect, then I'm going with it.

Turning around, a smile covers her face and reaches out to touch her eyes. "Now, we just need one for you and we'll be good to go!"

"But I don't have any ornaments or lights..."

"Oliver, you leave that to me."

"Okay, then. You really are all about this Christmas shit, huh?"

Her face grows serious and a hit of disappointment flits in the back of her eyes as she says the next words. "First of all, it's not Christmas shit. It's a celebration. Secondly, I've always wanted to spend it with someone special, so don't belittle it."

Well, now I feel like a complete and total asshole. Obviously she feels strongly about this.

Her eyes search for a tree farm worker and she whistles when she garners his attention, pointing to her tree. Great, now I need to find one. I start looking around, but I have no clue what her standard of tree picking consists of, so I'll let her pick for me. Her eyes find mine again and she speaks softly, "You don't want to cut it down yourself, right? For another memory?"

"Nah, I think I'm good."

"Okay, what kind of tree do you want?"

"How about I let you pick since you're the Christmas guru around here?"

“Sounds good to me!” She turns and keeps walking. Again, inspecting every single tree. My eyes land on one just a few steps away from us and I walk over to give it a look. It’s not perfect, but I have a feeling she’ll go for it. It’s not as full as the others around it, but the top is excellent for a topper.

“Hey, Willow. What about this one?” I say, pointing to the tree behind me.

She walks back toward me, looking over the tree. “It’s perfect, Oliver.” The tree farm worker isn’t too far away this time and she manages to wave him over without a whistle. The snow crunches underneath our feet as we make our way to collect both trees and checkout. We stand back and watch as both trees get sent through the tree baler, wrapping them tightly for the ride home. She pulls out her wallet to pay, but I shake my head.

“My treat, I’ll buy.”

“No, this is on me. It’s not a date, so I’m perfectly capable of handling buying my own tree.”

“Stubborn, I see.” She straightens her shoulders, acting bossy, and I have to chuckle.

“Get used to it.”

We pay for our own trees separately, and the workers help carry them back to my SUV. I open the back door and grab the blanket from the seat. Then, I step up onto the running boards and lightly drape it over my roof. No need to scratch the paint with fir needles, soft or not. The worker hands me the first and then the second tree, and I strap them both to the roof with tie downs. I wave my thanks and they go back to whatever they were doing originally.

“You ready to get these trees home?” I say, looking over at Willow.

“You bet! I can’t wait to decorate them.” She’s giddy and I can see the excitement streaming through her.

Our trek home is slow moving. The snow continues to fall, and it’s starting to accumulate. It’s been a while since I’ve driven in this much snow, but I’m used to it, so I continue. Just as I’m about to process another thought, Willow pipes up. “Holy shit, I can’t remember the last time Whiskey Run got this much snow. It may be a record.” Pulling out her phone, she starts hitting buttons.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking at the weather app. We’ve already gotten record amounts of snow, but this just seems like too much.”

I wait in silence as she checks it. “Well, fuck. There’s a winter weather advisory out for Whiskey Run. Looks like it’s going to get bad tonight.” Looking up and out the front window, her brow furrows. “It’s really coming down, Oliver. I don’t know if it’s such a good idea to be out in this too long.”

“Let’s just check the news when we get to your place. I don’t exactly have any place to stay if I can’t go home.”

“That’s not true. Last time I checked, I have a couch, second bedroom, and a master bedroom. Then you can help me decorate the tree, too. Win, win.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

Fuck yes, I’m so down for all of that with her. But like a gentleman, I respond instead with, “I don’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing at all, what’s a Christmas elf host without being able to actually host?”

I can't help but chuckle at her words. She does have a point, sort of. "Well, let's just see what happens when we get there. Actually, let's turn on the radio." Reaching over, I quickly turn up the radio and find a station talking about the weather.

"We've got messy weather headed our way tonight. It'll create slick travel conditions, but also dangerous situations in some cases. It's going to last the rest of today and tomorrow. This powerful storm will create heavy snow and powerful winds. Put the two together with the colder temperatures and we're heading into a blizzard. The temperatures are still dropping. This storm is going to be a rough one, folks. It's looking like one to three inches of snow per hour overnight. We aren't looking at an exit from the snow until Friday. Tomorrow we'll be looking at some of the top accumulations of snow in this area for a couple of years now. Predicting around two to three feet at this point."

Her eyes find mine and she breathes out the breath she'd been holding. "I think you should definitely stay with me tonight. It's not going to be safe to drive home."

"I don't live but a half an hour away from you."

"It's not safe, Oliver. I mean look at the snow. I will hear no arguments. You'll be staying with me tonight. I'll even wash your clothes." I'm looking at her when a horn starts blaring and I realize that I've swerved into the middle of the road. Quickly jerking the wheel back to my side, I also veer off the road, barely correcting at the last minute. I put my arm out for Willow to brace against as I come to a complete stop. I admit I may have enjoyed the way her breasts felt against my arm, but I shouldn't be thinking about sex while we're out in

this weather. *You'll get your chance.* I say to the guy in my pants adamantly pressing against my zipper, trying to escape.

Pulling off to the side of the road to avoid any more traffic, I try to calm each breath. What in the fuck is wrong with me, having a hardon after almost wrecking this SUV?

My heart is pounding. I knew the snow was coming down, but I didn't think the roads were as bad as they are.

Looking over at Willow's pale face, I reach up and stroke her cheek. My fingers move before I have time to think about whether it's the right decision or not, but her cheek moves against me, and it's all the confirmation I need. "Hey, are you okay?"

A whispered, "Yes" slips from her lips. She reaches up and grabs my hand, holding tight.

"I'm so sorry, Willow. I should've been paying more attention." My heart is gradually finding its normal rhythm and my main concern is her. Her face is still pale and she's clutching onto me like her life depends on it. "Let me get us home, okay? You're going to be just fine."

She nods her head and lets go of my hand. I check my mirrors before flicking on my turn signal and pulling back onto the road. I set my pace slower this time. Clearly the roads are slicker than I thought. I turn left onto Willowby Lane, and then a couple of minutes later I pull into her driveway. I breathe a sigh of relief that we're finally off these roads. Turning off the engine, I open the door to get out and hurriedly jog in front of the car to get to her side as she opens her door. I offer my hand, but she doesn't take it immediately, and when my eyes trail over her, I realize she's still a little shaken from the almost accident.

Slowly, she reaches out, allowing me to help her.

I watch as her eyes lift to the roof of my SUV. “Wait, where’s the other tree?”

I follow her line of sight. “It must’ve slid off when we swerved. The good news is that a tree can be replaced. You, however, are not replaceable. The weather people weren’t kidding. This snow is nothing to mess with tonight.”

She nods her head and I pull her into me as we walk toward the porch. I help her up the stairs and to the door where she fumbles with her keys, trying to open the door. “Here, let me get it.” She hands me the keys and I manage to get the door open in less than a minute. Allowing my arm to slip around her waist, she leans on me as I open the door and lead her to the couch to sit down.

“Thank you, Ol. Give me a minute, and I’ll help with the tree.”

“Don’t you even worry about it.” Grabbing a throw from the back of the couch, I wrap it around her, and then lean down to kiss her on the forehead. It isn’t the first intimate thing I’ve done today, and I bet it probably won’t be the last if I have my Christmas wish.

“I’ll be right back.” I set her keys on the table by the door and head back out for the tree. After unstrapping it from the roof, I try to shake off some of the snow before traipsing it inside and leaving behind wet floors. I swipe the blanket from the roof and bring it with me as I manhandle the tree into her cottage. I walk over to the living room and set it down in the corner where I assume she wants it to be.

Sitting down on the couch beside her, I ask quietly, “Hey, you doing all right?”

“Yes, I’m sorry I kind of freaked out. It was Christmas a couple of years ago that I lost my grandmother in a car accident because of ice. The snow started out of nowhere and all of a sudden the car slipped off the road and rolled. By the time they got her out... she was gone.”

My eyes start to tear up at the pain I’m sure she’s feeling right now. “I’m so sorry to hear that, Willow. I didn’t mean to scare you like that, but I’m so glad we’re okay.”

“It was hard celebrating Christmas that year. Every Christmas she would get the whole family together to sing carols, bake Christmas dinner, make gingerbread houses. It was something I can never forget. She’s the reason I love this season so much.” Her eyes fall to the carousel on the media stand, and I can’t stop the words before they fall out of my mouth. “That belonged to her, didn’t it?”

She looks up at me with a quirk in her brow. “How’d you know?”

“My grandparents had one similar to it, if not the same.”

Her eyes widen like she’s remembering something from a story she’s been told before. “Wait, what were your grandparents names?”

“Thomas and Charlotte.”

She smiles. “Really?”

“Yes, why?”

“I remember a story that my grandma used to tell me about this couple that she met while vacationing in Santa Claus, Indiana. They ended up having dinner together a couple of times and bought each other the same Christmas gift before leaving. If I remember correctly, those were the names she mentioned.”

I smile back at her. “Small world.”

“For sure.” Shaking her head, I can’t help but love the smile beaming across her lips.

“There’s a smile. Are you feeling better now?”

“Definitely. A cup of white hot cocoa, some Christmas jingles, and ornaments, and we can get this tree decorated. Thanks for bringing it in for me.”

“One second, don’t move. I need to grab something else from the car.” Running out, I quickly grab my bag for emergencies - clothes, a toothbrush, and my backup laptop just in case. The snow is really coming down now and I can’t get back inside quick enough. My coat is almost soaked from all the snow. After stepping back inside, I ditch my jacket and hang it on the coat rack by the front door. “Brrrr... it’s cold out there.”

I turn from the coat rack and watch her eyes as they appraise me, approval gleaming brightly. This girl is perfect for me.

“Well then, get in here. Hit that button to your left. It’ll start the fireplace.”

I turn to my left and see it immediately. Clicking the button, it roars to life instantly and I smirk at Willow. “Well, I got the fire going. Come on, I don’t get any holiday spirit points?”

“Ol, it’s a gas fireplace. I’m not sure it counts as holiday spirit.” Her nickname for me slips so carelessly between those bright pink lips, and I can’t help but love the way it sounds. Tessa calls me Ol, but it’s not the same. It’s sexy coming from Willow.

“Can’t say I didn’t try.” I laugh, shaking my head.

“Okay, Captain Grinch. Let’s get to decorating. Grab that galvanized metal tree collar for the bottom.” She points to the metal bucket in the corner. “Since it’s a fresh tree, we have to keep it watered, and I find that’s perfect for keeping it fresh!”

“But how does it stand up in the... Oh, I see it now. There’s a tree stand in the bottom.”

“Oh, we need to drill a ¼ inch hole in the bottom so the sap drains out and doesn’t keep the tree from getting the water it needs.”

“Got it, where’s the drill?”

“It’s in the garage. Should be right on the tool bench to the right when you walk out.”

“The garage is...” I point in the direction of where I think it may be from the inside of her house.

“Right, you have no idea. Through the kitchen, and there’s a door on the back wall.” Nodding, I follow her directions and find the garage door right away. The drill is exactly where she said it would be. I pick it up and head back to the living room. My eyes find a socket on the wall and I plug the drill in before making the hole in the bottom of the trunk. Dropping it into the tree stand, the tree sits about two feet below the ceiling, the perfect amount of space for a tree topper. In total, I’d say it stands about seven and a half feet tall.

willow

. . .

THE TREE IS PERFECT. This whole day has been absolutely amazing. Oliver is the first guy I've spent any significant amount of time with for a while now that makes me want more. Something about him draws me in, other than the fact that I want to jump his sexy as fuck bones. I love talking to him, too. How can someone that's so sweet and gorgeous still be single?

Pulling the mesh from the box, I notice that it has tiny pops of white scattered throughout. I wanted something different when I went to pick out burlap from Hobby Lane, my favorite little DIY store. I picked out ribbons in black buffalo check and red to tie in with the other colors I'm using this year. I found adorable button ornaments, wooden bead ornaments in solid and red colors, plus I grabbed some extra red berries to match the ones on my mantle.

Rubbing his hands together, he looks at me with that charming smile that makes my heart do funny things. "Where do we start?"

"Well, I like to start at the top and work down, which means tree topper first, followed by the lights. Then I'll stream the ribbons in three different ways, add in the finishing touches, and voila! The tree is complete."

He clasps his hands together. “All right then, let’s get to it.”

The curtain on the front window is open, swaying back and forth as the old vent register blows heat into the room. I can tell that the snow has been coming down in sheets. The ground is covered in several inches, and it’s so thick that it reflects off the night sky in shades of crystalline white. It’s nice having Oliver here with me this year. For the first time, I don’t need a ladder to meet those crazy high branches to string up the lights. In no time the tree is half lit and we’re moving right along. He stands at the front of the tree while I stand around the back as we hand the lights back and forth to cover all of the tree.

The smile he gives me every single time he hands over the lights is making my heart somersault. Butterflies are taking flight in my stomach, and I can’t fight the *urge* I have to kiss him again. Everything about decorating a tree together is romantic. The sounds of “Merry Christmas, Baby” play softly in the background. The rest of the room is lit. Candles twinkle and dance, smelling of the winter season. The frosted cranberries mixed with the smell of our fresh tree is so nostalgic, reminding me of my grandmother’s house at Christmas.

“Oh, shit. We didn’t put up the tree topper.” I say, looking at where it sits on the couch. I can’t believe I’d gotten so lost in the lights that I forgot.

“Grab it and come here.” He motions me over to him. Starting to hand it over, he stops me. “Hold onto it.” Leaning down, he grabs me under the waist and lifts me easily up to the top of the tree. “Put it on now.”

As I reach out to place the topper, I feel teeth against my ass and I turn, eyebrow quirked. “What, I wanted a bite?” The lust burns brightly in his eyes like the fake wood in my fireplace.

“There. Perfect.” I say, placing the star at the very top of the tree. My body slides down his as he lets me down. He’s all hard muscle, and I can’t help the tingle that crawls up and down my body, ending in my core. Why am I so attracted to him? My body turns as he brings me down so my face is directly in front of his, and I can’t help but want to lean in so he can kiss me.

“Perfect indeed.” The look he gives me is intense, filled with longing, desire, and affection.

“Shit.” I say, standing and looking at the tree.

“We didn’t do a video for your bloggers.” He finishes my thought.

“It’s okay. We can do another one when you get a new tree...” I can’t keep my eyes off his lips, and he must notice when his tongue slips out to wet them.

“I’m going to kiss you.”

“Well, it would feel more appropriate with mistletoe, but I don’t want to wait for that.”

“Screw the mistletoe, I need to fucking kiss you right this damn minute.”

He leans in and his lips crash against mine. They’re soft, but firm. His arms wrap around me tightly, pulling me even more snug into his manly physique. His mouth is controlling mine with each warm breath. This is definitely not my first kiss, but I’ll say it’s probably the best one I’ve ever experienced. I want to just melt into him.

One of our phones dings from the coffee table and he drops me like we just got caught doing naughty things by my grandmother. I watch as he glides over to the coffee table and picks up his phone.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, it’s just Tessa. Making sure I’m not out in this weather.”

“Well, tell her you’re perfectly safe here. I’m teaching you the ways of my Christmas cheer with tree decorating, hot cocoa, and maybe a Christmas movie or two.”

“Hey now, I didn’t know I’d be watching Christmas movies, too. That’s a little much.”

I wink. “My house, my rules. Besides, you may want to stick around once you see what I like to wear while watching my Christmas movies.” Jesus, this man and his sexy looks. What have I gotten myself into? Hell, I don’t even care. It’s been a while since I got any and I could use a good fucking right about now. “What kind of host would I be if I didn’t make you watch countless hours of magical stories surrounding the holiday season?”

The corner of his lips tip upward as he types something in his phone. When it buzzes again, he chuckles.

“She says I need more Christmas cheer in my life these days. Keep it coming.”

“I like her already.”

“She apparently also apologizes that you’re stuck sharing a house with my grinchy self.”

“She just doesn’t know what she’s missing out on. Exhibit A...” I bring out my Santa hat and elf ears. “Now... do you

want to wear a Santa hat or elf ears?”

“Can I say no to either?”

I shake my head with a laugh. He dramatically sighs, “I didn’t think so. Ok, give me the ears.” He holds out his hand and I shake my head again.

“Nope, lean down. I’ll put them on for you.” He does as requested, and I can’t help this giddy feeling pounding inside me as I slide them behind his ears. “There. They look perfect now.”

He leans in again and kisses me. “I look ridiculous. But I make exceptions for sexy movie watching clothes and kisses.”

“All right, don’t be a scrooge now. We’ve still got half a Christmas tree to decorate. Sexy lingerie and making out can wait a little while. Anticipation and all that” My eyes find his and I give him a wink, feeling so smug.” He legit growls out his frustration at me and I can’t help but laugh at his annoyance.

“And I believe you have a Santa hat to don. Bring that sexy little ass over here.” He picks it up and pulls it down over my head gently. Pushing a fallen strand of hair out of my face, he looks at me with an expression I haven’t seen before, and I can’t help but fall for him just a little more. “It looks perfect on you.”

Another song comes on and I say the first thing that comes to my mind. “I kinda love this song.”

“Well then, it would be such a shame to let a song you kinda love go to waste wouldn’t it?” He bends slightly, extending his hand to me. “Shall we?”

“Oh, I suppose so.” Wrapping my arms around his neck, I look into his eyes, a small smile crossing my lips. My gaze

falls to his lips and I'm entranced. I let my hand slide down to his chest as I press my forehead into his. I'm only there for a couple of minutes before my greedy eyes want to find him again. I pull back, and once again my eyes find his lips. He leans in to kiss me and I fall into the enchantment of it. He dips me slowly, his lips chasing mine, and it's as if I'm going down a rollercoaster as my heart dips again.

We keep slow dancing until the end of the song, and I revel in this peaceful moment. Who knew such a tiny moment could become such a big memory? I think it's one of those happy ones I'll tuck away for a rainy day when I'm wishing I had a man like Oliver. As well as tonight is going, I know it has to come to an end at some point. Tomorrow or the day after the roads will be cleared up and we won't be stuck in our little bubble anymore. So I'm going to make the most of the time I do have with him.

“Okay, I think the Christmas tree is ready for us.” Picking up the mesh with white bits, I take it over to the tree. “So... I want to stream these ones from top to bottom all over the tree. Bundling and bunching them as we go along with the branches.”

“You got it. Show me your Christmasy ways, oh wise one.” He bows to me, and I can't help but laugh out loud.

“Okay, so at the very top we want to tuck the first piece under so it looks like a bow, and then we're going to weave it down the tree.” I look back, catching his gaze trail up and down my body appreciatively. I clear my throat to get his attention again and he doesn't even flinch knowing I caught his open ogling of the goods. “Then, we'll start out with the mesh ribbon, alternating each swoop of the black and white buffalo check ribbon throughout the tree. Next we'll add in

some red ribbon just to tie everything together. I know, more swooping. A few touches of red berries here and there. The cute little wooden bead ornaments, red trucks, buffalo check balls, tobacco boxes, and miniature signs I picked up this year and it'll be perfect."

"If you say so."

"Oh hush, it's going to be the perfect tree."

We spend the next hour finishing with all the decorations. The tree looks just how I pictured it and the mantle is gorgeous. My stocking is hung by the chimney with glee and I only wish there was a second one to keep it company. Ha, I laugh at myself for that rhyme. Plopping down on the couch with a sigh, I watch Oliver walk my way and follow suit, pulling me into his side. I inhale his teakwood scent like cocaine and enjoy the warmth of his body pressed against mine.

"So, Christmas elf, what's next?" He licks his lips, and I want to tell him all the dirty things I've been thinking all day long, but I also don't want to come across as desperate and needy, even though it's exactly what I am. Needy for him.

"Well, as far as I can tell, we have several things we could do. The possibilities are endless—Christmas movies, hot cocoa, cookie making, gingerbread house decorating..."

"So, you have to tell me. What is it about Christmas that makes you so cheerful? I find it so hard these days to get excited over a few strings of lights and some silly songs on the radio."

"It's everything about Christmas. I'm one of those people that makes no apologies, truly enjoying this time of the year full out. And I know what you're thinking, no, I'm not trying

to live out some childhood issues through the biggest holiday of the year. It's not about the gifts, even. It's everything that goes into the spirit of it. The magic behind it. I'm talking about the string of lights that get tangled when you're trying to hang them up for decoration. The Christmas cookies you can gladly eat without shame while you're drinking that spiked eggnog while sitting in your Christmas onesies. It's the time spent with the people who drive you the most crazy, but always seem to love you harder each year. It's about stolen kisses under the mistletoe. Sexy lingerie between couples followed by holiday sex in the kitchen while making cookies. Dancing to a slow song on a snow filled night. Buying that not so perfect Christmas tree from the lot so it has a home for the season, even though it's kinda ugly." I sigh. "I guess it's just the enchantment of it all. It's the first time you hear a Christmas carol on the radio signifying a break from normal life. When you get to leave that really bad year behind you, all new hope for the new year in front of you, and a chance to tell someone special that you love them."

"Wow, that's... not what I was expecting at all..." He looks at me with almost a new understanding. Now, it's my turn.

"Okay, Scrooge. Tell me why you don't like Christmas anymore."

"I used to..." I quirk an eyebrow at him, urging him to continue.

"Christmas used to be the most magical time of the year. I used to be a huge fan, but I have too many ghosts of Christmas past. The crazy family we're supposed to love, really took all the magic out of it."

"Why, what happened?"

“Let’s just say my parents changed when their company took off. Instead of family tree decorating, gingerbread house making, and parties, they started flying off to Aspen every Christmas. Tessa and I ended up spending the time off school with friends. It was just never the same.”

“Oh, Ol, I’m so sorry to hear that. It must’ve been hard being left like that. But you said ghosts. That’s just one bad part.”

“A couple of years ago, I proposed to my girlfriend on Christmas Eve. When we first got together, I was working for a design company. My boss was a jerk. My talent was underappreciated. She’s actually the reason I now work for myself. She pushed me to go out on my own. I thought things were going great. My start-up was killing it, and I thought it was time to take our relationship to the next level, too. Unfortunately, she didn’t feel the same way. She walked away that night and I haven’t heard from her since.”

“Oliver, that’s... completely awful.” I won’t admit it, but right now I’m glad she left him. Not that he went through the heartbreak, but if she hadn’t left him, he wouldn’t be here with me right now.

“It’s okay. Turns out she was a total maneater alien from Mars and I don’t know about you, but there’s just some things you can’t look past in a relationship. We just didn’t fit on so many levels. It was for the best. Enough about me, though, have you ever found love?”

“Nah, I haven’t been bitten by the lovebug. Obviously, hence the speed dating. He’s out there, I just haven’t met him. Or maybe I have, and I just don’t know it yet.”

“I’m surprised you don’t believe in Christmas miracles.” He winks at me, and I can’t help the automatic smile that

forms.

“Well, Santa hasn’t let me down before.”

“Please tell me you don’t believe in Santa...”

“What’s a little Christmas whimsy without believing in something unseen?”

“You’re hopeless.”

“You should try it sometime. You may learn to enjoy the simple things again.”

“Maybe I will.” His lips lift with the hint of a smile.

“And what better way to start enjoying the simple things than baking some cookies.” I jump up from the couch, pulling him along with me.

“You bake?”

“Of course, I bake. It’s like Christmas. It’s the spice of life. A little sugar, a little spice. Without one ingredient, the whole thing would be wrong. Too much of one thing or the other could make it taste bad.”

“So what kind of cookies are we making?”

“Christmas’ most favorite cookie, of course.”

“And that would be?”

“Peanut Butter Blossoms.”

“Lead the way. I’m here for whatever you need.”

“Whatever I need, huh?” I tease him.

“Whatever you need, I’m your man.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for later.” My lady bits yell at me, *why wait when there’s now*. I shake my head. I am not desperate. Maybe if I repeat it enough, I’ll believe it.

“So, we’ll need...” I list off the ingredients as he pulls them out. “Oh, and don’t forget the kisses...”

“Kisses?”

My eyes widen as I look at him. “You have seriously never had Peanut Butter Blossoms before?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Dang, Oliver. Please tell me you’ve at least had a sugar cookie, right?”

“Sugar cookies are more my style.”

“All right. We’re gonna drop the ingredients into a large bowl. Then get to whisking, my handy little elf. I’m talking about putting some major elbow grease into it.”

“You got it, boss. What about the rest?”

“Grab a second bowl and add the eggs and vanilla. We’ll need to beat that until well mixed, then mix in the rest.”

“You planning on beating anything else tonight, baby?” His look is coy, but devious. Oliver has heartbreaker written all over him.

I shake my head, not able to form the words to respond.

He grabs the hand mixer and starts mixing the first part of the process. When he opens the bag to the flour, it spews over everything, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Oh, you think this is funny?”

“Uh huh...”

“It’s gonna be really funny when I rub it all over you, isn’t it?”

I give him my sternest, hands on hips, expression. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He takes a handful of the spilled flour and rubs it on my cheeks and nose. I narrow my eyes at him.

He bends down to give me the biggest hug, despite my protests. Looking at this face, I notice a huge smear of flour and my hand moves automatically to get rid of it. Catching my hand in his, he kisses my hand like I’m the Queen of England. It feels intimate, magical. He’s Mr. Perfect, seriously. Captain of the swoon.

My needy little heart is being so dang hopeful. Pitter pattering in delight. “All right, jokes aside. We need to get these cookies going.” Covering the bowl with plastic wrap, we throw it in the fridge for thirty minutes along with some chocolate kisses. I hit the preheat on the oven for three-seventy-five, line a baking sheet with parchment paper, and then add the remainder of the granulated sugar into a shallow bowl and set aside.

His lips find mine again as we wait for our batter. Reaching over to the counter behind me, he scoops up some flour and lets it pour out off his hand onto my shoulders, some falling beneath my shirt.

“Oops.” He whispers.

I shake my head. *Oh, he’s good.* “Whatever will I do. Looks like I’m just going to have to get rid of this shirt.” He shrugs as if to say I guess so.

I drag my hands to the hem of my sweater and pull it off, leaving behind my bright red bra that matches the bright red panties I have beneath my pants. His eyes show more than a

hint of appreciation, and my nipples pebble into diamonds under his perusal.

He trails the back of his fingers up to my shoulder, across my collar bone, and then down through the valley between my breasts. He teases the tight rosy bud of my nipple between his fingers, eliciting the dirtiest sounding moan from my throat.

Oliver's fingers dance over my slightly flabby stomach, moving to the waist of my pants. He slips a rough thumb into each side and looks to me for permission. I nod yes because why the fuck wouldn't I want this sexy man right now? He gently starts to pull them down, and I help by shimmying. He bends as he pulls them down until he reaches to take one pant leg off, followed by the other.

He waits for me to look at him before his tongue traces up the inside of my calf, up my thighs, and then his lips kiss their way to where I want him.

He inhales deeply and I try to squeeze my legs closed, but he doesn't let me. He pulls them apart again. "Let me see, baby. I want to see what you're hiding. I want to know if you're as wet for me as I am hard for you right now."

I let my knees fall apart with the gentle coaxing of his hands, and his nose runs up the front of the thong I'm currently wearing. "Fuck, you smell good."

He won't even have to feel me to know how wet I am for him, but he does anyhow. His fingers rub along the outer sides of my panties and he groans in delight. "You're so damn wet for me." Pushing the fabric covering my pussy to the side, he lets his fingers trace over my outer lips, coating himself in my wetness before pulling them back and sucking them off with his tongue. "You taste as good as you smell, baby. You want me to play with you for a little while?"

I nod enthusiastically. He pulls my thong down my legs and off, throwing it onto the floor behind him. His hands reach behind me to grab something and I see the whisk come into view as he rubs it against my thigh.

My eyes widen in anticipation. What the hell is he planning on doing with that thing? He moves it between my legs and rubs it against me. The metal cools my overly heated skin. I let my head fall back as my eyes close.

He runs it back and forth between my legs, taking his damn time before I am a needy ball of horn. He slowly rubs it back and forth against my clit, and I'm about to go mad. "Oliver." My voice trembles with need for him.

"You need me, baby?"

"Mmhmm. Please." It comes out breathy. I swear I'm not normally like this, but he seems to pull a side out of me I've never seen before tonight.

"Open your legs a little further." I do as he commands and wait for him to stand, to take his clothes off, to fuck me dirty like I've been picturing for the last two hours. But he does none of that. I look down at him as he leans in to leave one small kiss to my pussy before sliding the plastic handle of the whisk into me.

And fuck me, does that feel good. Jesus, has it been that long since a man has played with me?

"Fuck yourself on it, baby. I want to watch this sweet little pussy suck it in and picture it's my cock instead." I must frown because he continues. "Don't worry, baby, this cock will be filling you up in no time." He grabs the bulge in the front of his pants. "But for now... I just want to watch you pleasure yourself."

I let go and give in, sliding myself up and down on the handle of the whisk as he holds it. It feels so damn good. Moans slip from between my lips and he groans in satisfaction of my pleasure. While he's fucking me with the whisk, his other thumb finds my clit and rubs in slow, teasing circles. My orgasm creeps up out of nowhere. I scream his name as it hits like a wave crashing against a rocky cliff.

“Fuck, that’s hot.” He pulls the whisk from my pussy and tosses it on the floor beside him before replacing it with his tongue.

Pulling away only momentarily he speaks the filthiest words I’ve ever heard. “Let me have my dessert first, before I fuck the life out of you so good you won’t be walking straight for a week.”

He eats me out like it’s his life mission. A man wanton with need and the desire to shower me with pleasure. I’ve been with men before, okay, one man, and he didn’t do this. Now I know what I’ve been missing.

He pulls away from my pussy, but his thumb on my clit never stops. The lower half of his face glistens with my juices and he sticks his tongue out to taste more of myself on him. “Mmm... so sweet.”

He runs his hands up my body as he stands and kisses me with a passion that steals my breath away. I can taste myself on his lips, and I’m not as weirded out by it as I thought I’d be. He grabs my waist and lifts me up on the flour covered counter. It’s the last thing on my mind, though.

I reach down and unbutton his jeans before unzipping them. I start to push them down and he helps me. His lips briefly slip away from mine. He shimmies out of one pant leg while flicking his leg to get the other one off.

My hands slide under his shirt and he raises his arms so I can take it off of him. Damn him and all this glorious man candy. His chest is a fucking work of art, and I can't help but let my fingers trail against every toned muscle.

He lifts my chin up so he can devour my mouth again as he reaches behind me to unhook and slip off my bra. His hands immediately find my breasts, his fingers teasing my nipples into ever harder buds than they were already. "I love these breasts. Just the perfect fucking size."

It's then I realize I haven't completely ogled him yet. My eyes widen as they trail down his body and land on the massive pulsating cock standing at attention between his legs.

I continue a slow and steady motion as I grip his cock in my hand, sliding it slowly up and down his engorged flesh. Its size is only growing as more attention is given to it. He kisses the side of my neck, trailing down over my collar bone.

He groans, his eyes closing. "Don't stop." He says as I start to stroke him a little faster. A while later, his hand encompasses mine and he starts moving mine faster up and down his shaft. "Need more friction, baby."

It doesn't take long for him to pull my hand away from his cock. "If you do any more of that, we can't skip to the good part."

"Oh yeah, and what is the good part?" I tease. When I was ogling earlier, I noticed that this countertop is exactly the same height for what we're about to do. He reaches between us as he takes my lips again for another kiss.

His cock taps against my entrance, and for a minute I freeze, hoping it doesn't hurt like hell because I've only done

this once before him. “Relax.” He whispers against my lips. I nod, melting into him.

“Keep kissing me.” I whisper against his lips and he does. He thrusts his way into me slowly, expanding my walls around him, making me feel so full. There is a little pressure, but pleasure wins out.

He groans. “Fuck, baby. Jesus, your pussy is squeezing my cock like it never wants to let go.” He pulls out, almost leaving me before shoving back in hard. “Fuck, you feel good wrapped around my cock, baby. This little pussy needed some love tonight, and I’m only too happy I was here to assist with such a delicate matter.” He winks at me before letting his head fall against my shoulder while he continues pounding into me. I feel his teeth skim the sensitive skin on my neck and it shoots right to my groin.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. You’re so fucking tight.” He slams into me again and I wince.

He pulls away, a wariness shining in his eyes as he asks the next question. “Are you a...?” He shakes his head as if he doesn’t want to finish that question. “I didn’t hurt you, did I? Shit, I should’ve gone slower, I’m sorry. I just couldn’t resist you and...” I shut him up with a kiss and shake my head.

“No, I’m good, keep going.”

I hear the sigh that leaves his lips. Digging my heels into his ass, I beg for more, and he willingly offers. I can feel the telltale signs of my orgasm creeping up on me. “Willow.” He says my name with such reverence. “You should be worshiped like this every single day.” He’s breathless as he speaks the words to me. Secretly, I wish for the same thing, but I don’t dare voice it. He slows his thrusts. “Can’t go much longer baby, you feel way too damn good.”

Reaching between us, he rubs his thumb against my clit and it's like a bomb detonating around me. The hardest orgasm I've ever experienced crashes into me, drowning me in pleasure.

He follows me over the edge shortly after, a long groan falling from his mouth as his forehead brushes against my own. He keeps thrusting long after I feel him release inside me, a few spurts of come follow, and then he stops. He doesn't pull out, just stands there, his arms wrapped around me.

Our breathing is erratic from our lovemaking, and I kind of want to do it again. He kisses my nose. "God, Willow. You feel amazing. I want to do that again. Well, many more times to be exact, but right now, I'm going to need to take a small time out." His mouth curves into the cutest smile, showing off his dimples. "Next time, though, I want to bend you over the counter and do you from behind so I can watch your sexy ass jiggle each time your tight pussy swallows my cock."

This man and his overly dirty mouth. Right now, I don't even care about the fact he doesn't like Christmas or he's kind of scroogey. My life is rainbows and unicorns after a good dicking.

"Uh huh..." I agree with him because I want it too. I'm praying to the snow gods right now that they'll keep us in this blizzard for a few more days. I need more of him.



OUR DOUGH IS ready to go thirty minutes later. "Okay, so we need to roll these into balls and roll them through sugar."

"You can roll my balls any time you want, baby." He winks and I giggle.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” My eyes trace over his chiseled pecs. He never put a shirt back on and is helping me roll cookie dough in his, surprisingly enough, mistletoe boxers. Scrooge, my ass. Somewhere inside is a Christmas lover, he just hasn’t realized his potential yet. I smile to myself, not willing to give his secret a voice.

He helps me put them on the parchment paper, following the two inch pattern I’ve started. Opening the oven, I toss them in for ten minutes. The timer dings and we pull them out. “Okie dokey, last step. Push one chocolate kiss into the center of each cookie.”

“I got this.” He winks at me.

“You know, you’re a pretty good little cookie making helper?”

“Do I get Christmas spirit cookie points?”

“You sure do. Whatever will you use them on?”

“Christmas kisses under the mistletoe, and other naughty things.”

“Blaming the mistletoe for wanting to kiss me and do other naughty things?”

“Well, nothing says love like a little bit of mistletoe hanging awkwardly in the last place you expect it.”

“Love?”

“You never know. Christmas brings with it a lot of possibilities.” His eyes hint at mischief as he winks, and my heart does a double beat.

oliver

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WILLOW HAS TAKEN me by surprise. I knew she was different from other girls I've been with, but she's got this charisma that I can't help but be drawn to. Every year since my parents started leaving Tessa and I to ship off to Aspen, I've hated the very idea of it. I've avoided all the typical things you do over the holidays. So, I've spent my holidays buckling down, taking on extra work, and carefully avoiding every Christmas related event.

Willow makes me want to embrace it again. To give Christmas a second chance to make me happy. To charm me. My eyes find her as she dances her way from dropping the cookies off in the oven back to the fridge to put things away. Each sway of her hips along with the music twists the corners of my lips up. She's smart, gorgeous, obviously good at her job, and she makes me laugh more than anyone I've ever met.

She also has a really nice ass. I wouldn't give her back her clothes after our little rendezvous, so she was forced into wearing panties and an apron. Yep, like I suspected, it's also Christmasy.

I take a walk over to the front window and look out. The snow is still beating down on us. The tires on my SUV are almost covered and it doesn't appear to be letting up any time

soon. Looking up, I see icicles dangling down from the rooftop. Snow has kissed the tops of each bush in the front yard, and has made a mound on top of her red and white checkered mailbox. I don't even realize she's crept up behind me until I feel her breath against me. "Isn't it just beautiful?"

"It is, as long as I don't have to drive in it." I murmur.

"Snow means all new beginnings. Happiness. A clean slate. It's why I always wish for a white Christmas. One last good hurrah before the end of the year, and then a hope going into the next that things will be better than the year before it."

I can't stop looking at her in amazement.

"What?" she says.

"It's just... the way you look at this town, at Christmas. You see the best of it. It's a nice change."

"Well, Christmas has been around for a lot of years. What's not to love about it? Speaking of... I'd say it's time for some movies for extra cheer. I'll make us drinks. What would you like?"

"I'll take some black coffee."

Her eyes widen before she starts dramatically shaking her head. "Nope, nuh uh. Not gonna happen. No way, sir. This is Christmas cheer in a delightful, sugary cup of love. Peppermint mocha, hot chocolate with marshmallows, or white hot chocolate with extra marshmallows. Those are your options."

"Peppermint mocha, it is." She dips back into the kitchen to make our drinks, and I make myself comfortable on the couch. "Hey, go ahead and turn on the TV. The remote's on the coffee table there. I've got a subscription to Passionflix just for the Christmas movies. I love them all."

Turning on the TV, I notice it's already keyed up to play Passionflix. The ridiculous ringtone of "Baby It's Cold Outside" scares the crap out of me when it goes off. "Oh crap, that's me!" Setting down the cup she was holding, she runs into the living room, grabbing her phone. "Tree Lighting Ceremony has been postponed due to the blizzard craze happening outside. Looks like they're planning it for Saturday instead. Gives us a couple days to get ready for it."

"How do you know?"

"The Whiskey Run Christmas blog. It has the most up to date happenings, cancellations, additions, news, etcetera."

"Interesting."

She heads back to the kitchen, grabbing what she calls "delishiness in a cup," and returns a couple of minutes later. Placing the mugs on coasters on the coffee table, she then grabs a blanket from the back of the couch and sits down. The couch compresses down as her slim body drops beside mine, and I can't help but to enjoy the feel as her leg presses against mine.

"Well, hello there." She smiles over at me.

"Hi yourself, thanks for making us drinks."

"You're welcome." Reaching forward, I grab my mug and take a sip of the hot beverage. Sitting it back down on the table, my eyes find Willow's and she giggles. "What? What is it?"

Reaching over, she goes "You've got a little bit of...." She wipes her finger across my cheek, close to the side of my lip, and I feel the warmth as it grazes across my skin. "Got it."

"Oh, thanks." Sitting back, I allow my arm to rest on the back of the couch, and she cuddles into my side. My fingers

graze over the back of her bare shoulders as my hand slides down to pull her into me, her warm skin meeting my own.

Covering her legs with her blanket, she looks at me. “Are you cold?”

What man on Earth would say no to that offer? To be close to the girl he’s crushing on? Not this one, I think to myself. “Freezing.” My lips curl up into a smirk.

“Liar.”

“Maybe, but if it means sharing a blanket with you, I’d do it again.”

“Charmer, too.”

I wink at her, and she shakes her head. “Okay, you. Scootch under.” Holding up the blanket, I pull it over my legs. Now I have my arm wrapped around her, my leg pressed against her, and I’m sharing her blanket. It’s the perfect spot. “Preference on movies?”

“Whatever you want to watch, Willow.” I say it because I don’t honestly care what we watch. Odds are I’ll be staring more at her than the movie anyhow just because my eyes always fall back to her.

“I like the sound of that.” She smiles wide. “I’m thinking *A Picture Perfect Christmas*. It’s about a photographer who returns home over Christmas to take care of her grandmother, and then gets involved with the next door neighbor who needs help taking care of his son over the holiday season. It gets a little spicy, too.”

“Sounds perfect. See where I went with that?”

“I do. Okay, now hush. It’s movie time.” Snuggling back into me, she rests her head on my shoulder and throws her leg

over my own. It's comfortable. Normal. It feels like something I would do with a girlfriend in the middle of a snowstorm. She reaches out for my hand and I give it willingly. It isn't long before small snores emanate from the sleeping beauty beside me and my eyes grow heavy as well.



THE AIR IS cold this evening as it sweeps around Whiskey Run. The blizzard came and went. Two days later, small flakes still sprinkle down around us. My hand brushes against Willow's as we walk through the town, and I can't help but grab a hold of it. She stirs feelings in me I haven't felt since Lindsay left. Actually, if I'm honest with myself, I feel more for her than I ever felt for Lindsay, and it's only been a week. It's crazy, but I can't help how right she feels in my life. My own Christmas miracle if you will.

Everywhere you look it's like Christmas spirit spilled over. The whole town is dancing with lights and garland. An ice rink has been set up in the middle of town square. Fraser firs, as I'm told by Willow, enclose it, each decorated in lights and ornaments. Three horses and carriages are lined up along the sidewalk, waiting for the next couple to take a ride around town square. Each horse all done up in red bows and bells. Each carriage dolled up in wreaths, garlands, lights, and bells. The drivers suited up in their best Christmas suit and top hat.

"Hey, Oliver. Did Ashley tell you how much she loved the cover you did? She won't stop gushing about how perfect it is. I think you've got a fan for life."

"I'll never turn down good work. I'm really enjoying doing these book covers, more than I thought I would."

“I’m glad. You do such a great job.”

“So, if I remember correctly, the lighting ceremony is at seven tonight... which means we have a couple of hours to entertain ourselves before then.”

She looks up at me. “How do you feel about ice skating?”

My eyes widen. “Um...”

Grabbing my hand more firmly, she heads toward the ice rink. “It’ll be great!”

“If you say so. I’ve never been ice skating before.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you a cart like the kiddos use if you need it.”

I huff out a laugh. “So much confidence...”

“Hey, I was just trying to help. You were the one who sounded super not confident in the first place, I was simply trying to help.”

“Uh huh.” I shake my head, bemused by her.

Paying for our rental skates, we sit down to put them on and tie them.

Her gray eyes meet mine behind her glasses, and I can’t help but get lost in how they light up at the little things. It could be the smallest thing. A cookie, a new Christmas song on the radio, a friendly face. She lives her life like a bright ray of sunshine, and I can’t help but want to bask in her glow.

“All right,” she says looking over at me. “You ready?”

“As ready as I’m ever going to be. I can’t guarantee it won’t involve me face planting a time or two, but what the heck, let’s do this.”

I get up slowly, but obviously that doesn't help when my skate hits the ice and I immediately start to scramble. Someone somewhere must have been looking out for me or else I would've been on the ground. Willow looks over and I can tell she's trying her hardest not to laugh at my clumsiness. We start moving again and Willow glides across the ice like a snow angel. It's effortless, and you can tell she's probably been doing this every year at Christmas. I, on the other hand, am fumbling along, holding onto the railing while I watch her, hoping that I don't almost fall again.

I watch as she circles back to me. "See, isn't this fun?"

I huff at her enthusiasm. "Definitely, not the word I would choose, no."

"Oh, come on, Mr. Grumpy. You're doing really well for your first time. If you're a really good sport, I'll make it worth your time." She winks, and the corners of my lips start to quirk into a smile.

Holding her hands out to me, I bravely remove mine from the wall barrier and place them in hers. "There you go. See you've got this." She starts skating backward, holding onto my hands, and here I am feeling more and more proud of myself that I haven't landed face first on the ice. Apparently, life thought I was a little too happy because, all of a sudden, my butt is on the ice and I'm sliding away from Willow. She circles back over to me. "Oh my gosh, are you okay?"

Bending down, she tries to help me back up, but my two left feet keep getting in the way because I can't for the life of me stand up, and now we're both laughing about it. The people around us are laughing and I don't seem to care about anything other than her. "I'm thinking that maybe we've had enough fun for now. I have a treat for you later."

“Yeah, I don’t think my butt can handle any more falls today.” I reach back and rub my left cheek.

“Well, how do you feel about a carousel?”

“Like the ones little kids get excited over?”

“Of course, silly. With the crazy cool horses...”

“I didn’t know Whiskey Run had one here.”

“You’ll come to find out Whiskey Run has just a little bit of everything.” Finally pulling myself off the ice by the wall, I hold onto the rail until my feet are safely back on solid ground. Sitting down feels like a relief, and I can’t help the sigh that slips from my mouth.

Undoing the skates as fast as humanly possible, I swap them out for my regular sneakers. Standing up, I look down at Willow and pat my leg. “Here, put your foot here and I’ll untie them for you.”

“That’s sweet. Thank you.” She beams at me, and I can’t help but count another smile I’ve given her. Plus, I can’t help thinking about how I want to kiss those bright pink lips of hers again. *Not now.* I tell myself. She places her foot against my thigh, and I untie the first skate, then she swaps it for the second. Taking our skates back to the rental, we head off on our way to the carousel.

I can hear the music from the carousel as it’s carried through the breeze. An all-familiar tune from many years ago. When I was little, the town I grew up in had a completely restored carousel. This carousel is enclosed within its own pavilion building dedicated to whichever family donated it to Whiskey Run. It’s in motion already when we get in line for the next go round.

She moves forward with the line, but I pull her hand so she stops. She turns to me in question. “I’ve been wanting to do this for the last hour. I can’t wait any longer.”

I lean in and take her lips in a passionate kiss, my tongue entwining with hers. It’s like the dance of the sugarplum fairies in her mouth. She’s always so damn sweet. I let my warm breath linger above her swollen lips for a minute before leaning in to press another kiss to her forehead and then her nose.

Circular row after circular row of horses painted in all different themes and colors stand before us. Some poised with their mouths open as if they’re ready to fly into battle. Others seamlessly await their next rider as their manes seem to flare with some unseen breeze. Large, animal-like eyes trailing over every person, large or small, waiting in line to climb aboard this once popular children’s ride, now alight again with life.

“So, this carousel was restored several years ago by the Marcus family. It’d been sitting in an old barn and was put up for auction to the highest bidder. They just couldn’t see it going to waste, so they brought it back to life for all of Whiskey Run to enjoy.”

I look at each detail my eyes find on the carousel. “The restoration work is impeccable.”

“For sure, now we call this The Grand Carousel at the Marcus Pavilion Complex. It was our thank you to them.”

“Is this here all year round or do they just get it up and running for Christmas?”

“It’s here all year round. The only big difference is the music. Over the holidays, it’s tunes like ‘*Jingle Bells*’ or ‘*It’s Beginning to Look (a lot) Like Christmas*’.”

The line moves slowly in front of us as we wait to be allowed in. Finally getting to the front, we're through the gate and making our way to our horses of choice. Looking back at me, her whole face lights up. "Which horse do you want to take on this ride?"

In front of me stands a black horse, mouth open as if he's letting out a powerful war cry. A force to be reckoned with, and it reminds me of the horse I used to ride on the carousel when I was young. "How about these two?"

Her eyes follow mine to the horses lined up in front of me. Stepping up onto the track, I hitch a ride on the black steed I've chosen. Willow climbs aboard the tan horse to the side of mine. Her horse has an extra long mane and is decorated in Christmas bows, berries, and bells as if it would bring Saint Nick into town at the front of his sleigh. Once everyone has picked their horse for the ride, a single bell rings twice, announcing that everyone not riding needs to move away. The carousel starts to move, horses moving up and down in their singular routine.

Music swirls around us as the carousel picks up pace.

Eyes of wonder abound from the children on horses surrounding us and shouts of glee have me smiling. It's bringing back good memories, the ones before Christmas turned into something that didn't matter as much. I make eyes at Willow, and a huge grin spreads across her face. She pushes her glasses up in the middle before she looks away from me like she's embarrassed over her enjoyment for the carousel.

I reach out and touch the soft skin of her cheek. "Hey, this is perfect."

"I just thought you needed to feel like a kid again, just for a minute. There's something magical about an old carousel

that takes us back to the best parts of Christmas past. I find that very few people can say no to nostalgia like that.”

“It’s true. Before my parents started making yearly trips to Aspen at Christmas, we’d always go into town to ride the carousel. It was a fond memory and being here, hearing the music and seeing the horses, reminds me of that.”

“You see, not all ghosts of Christmas past are bad ones. Sometimes you just have to do something to remember the good ones.” Willow is making me see the joys this time of year that were lost on me a long time ago. She’s bringing me back to life one Christmas memory after the next. The carousel takes us around twice more before the bell dings again, signaling the ride coming to an end. Climbing down once we’ve stopped, I walk around Willow’s horse to help her down. Putting my hands on her waist, I can’t help but enjoy the way her body slides down mine to the platform below us.

willow

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SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY,

happiness found its way into my heart, the sneaky little thing. I know it has everything to do with the way Oliver makes me feel. I told myself meeting someone for five minutes wouldn't help me find my soulmate, but now I'm wondering if that's a lie. It took all of five minutes of Oliver and I talking over a spilled drink to find our way to this moment. I've been wishing for the perfect Christmas with a special man since I was little, and now I'm finally getting my wish. Maybe Santa saw my heart was finally ready to love another after my letter to him over ten years ago.

I'm a hopeless believer. I know Santa isn't real, but if I can't believe in a little magic, then what's the point of Christmas? I don't want life to make me jaded, and if saying it makes me seem naive, then so be it.

As we walk back toward the skating rink where the Christmas tree lighting ceremony will happen, Oliver grabs my hand. Even though we're both wearing gloves, I feel the warmth of his big hand as it settles against mine. I squeeze lightly, letting him know I love the way it feels, and smile over at him. He gives me a look I can only imagine matches how I'm feeling in this exact moment and, for once, no words have

to be shared between us. I can tell he's feeling this mutual attraction as much as I am. It seems silly that it's been a little more than a week since we first met, but my heart aches a little each time I think about the possibility of it ending soon. After all, I was simply supposed to be reminding him why Christmas was so magical.

Shaking away the notion, I get back to the moment at hand. The Christmas tree this year is situated right beside the ice rink so we can see everything from here. Families and children skate around the rink, enjoying the little snow that continues to fall. A shiver skates over me and Oliver must notice because he removes his hand from mine and instead puts his arm around my waist, pulling me into him.

We're one of the first ones here, so we pick a good spot close to the tree. His arm around me is supplying extra warmth in the breeze tonight, but I wouldn't miss it. I've been attending this tree lighting ceremony since I was a little girl. Every year the tree gets lit, I make the same wish. For peace, hope, and someone special to love.

Oliver leans down to talk in my ear, and I feel his hot breath tickle my neck. Goosebumps creep up my skin, but it's not from the cold. It's from how I'm feeling about him. "So, tell me, Willow. There has to be a story behind the tree, right? I feel like everything in this small town has something to tell."

"Since you asked... it actually does. For five decades, our Whiskey Run tree has been standing as a beacon for this little town and its visitors alike. Although the lights, decorations, and ornaments have changed several times throughout the years, it still remains the most attended event during the holiday season here. The founding families of Whiskey Run all pooled their money together to not only buy the tree, but

their families created the first ornaments and garland that hung on the tree.”

“Wow. You weren’t kidding.”

“Our tree is normally twelve to fifteen feet tall and actually comes from the tree farm where we purchased my tree this year. So, not only is it a special tree, it’s also purchased from a local grower.”

He smirks with a hint of pride and teasing. “You really know your little town’s history, don’t you?”

“Well, for someone who’s grown up here her whole life I’d be a little ashamed if I didn’t. Stick with me, kid, and you’ll find out a little bit of everything.”

“I like that.”

I feel a blush heat my face and I wish that he’d said he liked me instead. “I like you.” I blurt it out before I can put a damper on my lips.

“I like...” But before he can say any more, Chan waves, walking over toward us.

“Hey, Will. How’s it going? I can’t believe it’s so chilly this evening.” Gus has his arm around her, and I’m so happy she found her person. Their road to engagement wasn’t exactly easy, but they made it. Their relationship gives me hope that there’s a guy out there who will be willing to fight for me, to love me, like Gus loves Chantelle. Her eyes find Oliver, and she leans into me. “Is this him?”

I nod, giving introductions. “Oliver, this is Chantelle and Gus, guys, meet Oliver.”

“Hey, Oliver, how’s it going?” Chan says as Gus offers a fist bump.

Fist bumping Gus back, he responds with a chuckle. “Good, really good.”

“You guys just get here?” I ask.

“Yep, I know how you work. Early bird always gets the worm... or the best spot to watch the lighting ceremony. We figured we’d meet you here. Have you seen your parents yet?”

I shake my head. “Nope, not yet. Dad said they’d be here. Now we just have to brace for it.” I try to laugh, but it feels fake.

Chantelle pulls me in for a hug. “Aww, sweets. Maybe she’ll be happy this year.”

“Wishful thinking, perhaps. You know how she feels about me. Being a personal assistant is not a career. Yada, yada, yada.”

“But look how well you’ve done for yourself, girl. If she won’t be proud of you, I certainly will.” I nod, but don’t respond to her. I never know how to take compliments, even coming from my best friend. Voices from our other side prompt my attention. I look over to see the dark-haired girl from Sugar and Spice Cafe coming our way. *Tessa*.

“Hey, guys,” she greets us. We quickly make introductions, knowing that the ceremony is about to start soon. When the town mayor gets up on the podium, we all quiet down and wait. I look around for my parents, but don’t see them. Maybe they decided not to come this year.

“Welcome, one and all. Another year in the books, folks. Each year we celebrate the founding families in this town by lighting this tree, and tonight we do it again. Without further ado... in three, two, one... we all count down along with him.

The tree lights and cheers are spoken from the lips of people all across the square.

Oliver puts his arm around my waist and pulls me to him. “Merry almost Christmas, Willow. There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask...”

Before he can finish, a blonde walks up behind us. “Oliver?”

“Lindsay?” His voice sounds off. Clearly, he knows her and clarity spotlights itself when I remember the conversation we had about his ex-girlfriend, almost fiancé.

“Oh, Oliver, it’s so good to see you. We really need to talk.” Feeling like the odd man out, I slip from below Oliver’s arm. “I didn’t see you there. I’m Lindsay. Olly and I go way back. I wasn’t interrupting anything was I?” Not waiting for my answer, her eyes fall back to Oliver.

“Lindsay. What are you doing here in Whiskey Run?”

“A little birdie told me you moved here, and I couldn’t wait any longer to come see you. I’ve been thinking about us and...” I move away before I have to hear any more of this torture. Slipping away, I hear Oliver call out to me to wait, but the tears are already forming in my eyes. These last few days with Oliver had been perfect. I knew it was too good to be true.

Chantelle and Gus catch up to me. “Willow, wait up.”

“I just can’t...”

“What happened with Oliver? Why are you... hey, will you stop walking for a minute?” I keep moving and shake my head. I don’t want to stop. I don’t want to look back. I just want to get out of here.

She jogs to catch up with me, leaving Gus behind. “Hey, go this way. My car’s parked at the cafe. I’ll take you home.”

“Thanks,” I say softly, remembering that Oliver brought me here in his SUV.

The night sky is clear. Somewhere between the carousel and the tree lighting, the snow finally let up, leaving us alone with white covered roads and front yards. A few minutes later we’re in her car and she’s pulling into my driveway. The lights on the outside of my little cottage are shining brightly and the tree sparkles from the front window. My heart aches when I remember who helped me decorate all of this stuff. He spent a couple of days here so I’m sure my memories are stuck with me for a little while.

Following me into the house, she sends off a quick text. I’m assuming it’s to Gus to give him an update since she totally ditched him to follow me. “What happened, Willow? You and Oliver looked so happy tonight, then the next thing I know, you’re running away from him...”

“Lindsay showed up at the tree lighting ceremony.”

“Who’s Lindsay?”

“His girlfriend, slash almost fiancé, who left him a couple years ago. The one he refers to as his Christmas past.”

“Well, if she’s a ghost of Christmas past then why did you run?”

“Did you see her? She’s gorgeous. Everything I’m not. Tall, blonde, perfect hair, a smile that would make anyone sing. I can’t go up against that.”

“So, instead, you what? Ran like a child instead of fighting for the guy you’re falling in love with?”

I scoff at her. “You did not just huff at me. You know it’s true.”

“So, what if it is? I was only supposed to be spending Christmas with him. I told him I would help remind him of the reason for the season, why Christmas is so magical.”

“Then maybe you did just that... plus, maybe you found each other. Honey, that man looks at you like I’ve never seen anyone else do before. He’s in love with you.”

“But... It’s been less than a week since we met.”

“Have you ever heard of a little thing called love at first sight?”

“Oliver says there’s no such thing as love at first sight.”

“He’s lying to himself, then, because the way he looks at you, it’s clear he’s been bitten by the love bug. Christmas magic and all.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“I guess I shouldn’t have run then.”

“Nope, but let him come to you. Give him time to tell her she’s not what he wants anymore. Let him choose you, then you’ll know for sure it’s not just Christmas magic between the two of you. It’s more.”

oliver

. . .

MY EYES WATCH as she runs away from me. I keep willing her to turn around, to make eye contact with me so I can assure her this is nothing, but she doesn't. She keeps moving. Chantelle and Gus go after her and that reassures me that she's not alone. I just hope she doesn't assume the worst of this situation.

"Olly... hey, Ol." My name comes back into focus as it comes from Lindsay's mouth. I don't want to talk to her. To be here with her. I want Willow. My eyes find Willow once more before Chantelle pulls her toward the coffee shop. When she disappears, I have no choice but to deal with Lindsay.

"What are you doing here?" My voice is brusque. I don't want to do this right now.

"I already told you. I came to talk about us. To see if I could fix us. I've had a lot of time to think about it and... I want to give this a real try. If you want me to move to this little town, I can do that, too... just don't tell me no."

"Why now?" I sound harsh, but I can't help it. When I proposed and she said no, my heart was ripped from my chest, and I had to learn how to pick up those pieces. Now, I'm in a new town with a new life, falling for a girl I can't see my life

without, and she chose this exact moment to show up? I don't think so.

“Look, Lindsay. I'm not interested in starting anything with you. When you said no it was the best thing you could've done for me. I'm happy now. Happier than I've been in years, and I won't throw it away on something I know I don't want any longer. I'm sorry you came all this way, but my answer is no.”

“But...”

“I'm sorry. I need to go.” Leaving her standing there, I walk away. I have to find Willow and explain. I have no idea what I'm going to say, but I'll figure it out on the way.

“Oliver, wait up.” When I first hear those words, I think it's Lindsay trying to get me to stay, but when they come again, my brain tells me that it's Tessa. I stop so she can catch up with me. “Why is Lindsay here?”

“She wants to get back together.” Seeing the frown on her face, I reassure her. “Don't worry, I told her no. I don't want her anymore. It's just... I've only known Willow for a little over a week now. What if I'm just setting myself up for heartbreak again?”

“You very well could be, but I can't say you look really happy at this moment either. But with her, you look happy. There's always a risk when you put yourself out there.”

“I know, Tessa. She's not Lindsay.”

“Well, if you like her and you want her to know it, then you need to find her and tell her. There aren't any shortcuts. You just have to wait and see if she's in it for the long haul, too.”

“You’re right. I need to man up and tell her. Even if it breaks my heart.”

“That’s the spirit. Now, get to it.”

I spin on my heel and head toward my SUV. I have a girl to win over. Stopping quickly at the flower shop, I grab a bundle of mistletoe so I can cash in on all those kisses that were promised if she decides to keep me. Hopping in the SUV and pulling away, it only takes a few minutes to get to her house. There’s another car in the drive when I get there and I assume it’s Chantelle’s.

I take a minute to calm the thoughts thrashing around in my head. This may be the one shot I have to get the girl back. I should’ve sent Lindsay away sooner. I should’ve gone after Willow immediately, but I didn’t. Opening the door, I hop down and turn around to grab the mistletoe. The snow is slippery under my feet as I make my way up her sidewalk and the stairs leading to her front porch, but I don’t let it stop my determination.

Knocking twice, I step back and wait for her to open the door. Instead of Willow, I find Chantelle. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to tell her how I feel. I’d say it’s about time.”

She smiles at me. “That’s all I needed to hear. She’s in the living room.” She points behind her and moves aside so I can enter.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. It’s up to her.” I nod my head and slide past her.

Willow turns and her eyes find mine across the room as I lean against the doorframe. “You’re here. I wasn’t sure if you

would come.” Her voice is small and sad. Her eyes dip to the floor so I can’t see them any longer and I hate it.

I want to rush over, pick her up in my arms, and never let her go. Something to cure the glimmer of tears in her eyes. It’s clear she’d been crying and my gut wrenched at the thought of doing anything that would make Willow cry. “Of course, I’m here. I’m sorry Lindsay ruined the tree lighting ceremony. I wasn’t expecting her to show up tonight, or ever, and it caught me off guard, but there is nothing going on with us. I don’t want her. I want you. Only you. You and this little town have made me fall in love with Christmas again. I’m kind of attached to it, and if I’m attached to one thing, I’m attached to them all.”

“Yeah?” She whispers so softly I almost miss it.

I walk over to where she sits and lean down before cupping her flushed cheeks in the palms of my hand and tilting her head up to look at me so she doesn’t miss anything I’m about to say.. “Do you know what that means, my little Christmas elf? I’m kind of attached to you and I want a chance to see where this takes us. I once said I didn’t believe in love at first sight, but now I’m wondering if you should walk by again... because I might just believe it now.”

She snorts. “Charmer, but super lame.”

“Willow, can I ask you a question?” I say in a serious tone.

She gives me a brief nod. “You can ask me whatever you want to.”

I sit down on the couch to her left and pull her in, loving the way her body melts into mine so instantly. “Will you be mine this Christmas? And always? Because I feel like I’ve been looking for you my whole life, and it took a little town

named Whiskey Run and a little Christmas cheer to help me find you.”

Every word spoken is true. You don’t realize how dull and lonely your life has become until one burnt out bulb starts shining again. It gives that tangled mess of lights a whole new outlook. I can say much the same about Willow.

I didn’t realize how lackluster my life had become until she came crashing in, shining her own Christmas light. What started out as another crappy holiday turned into something magical, and I can’t wait to see where our journey leads us. I just need her to say yes.

“I think I can definitely handle it.”

“Good, because I have a few mistletoe kisses on credit. I’d like to take advantage of those right now.” Leaning to the side I pull the mistletoe bundle from my back pocket and hold it above us.

“Now, I think we can definitely handle that.” She giggles and I can’t help but lean down and brush my lips against hers. I think this Christmas may just be my very favorite yet.

epilogue

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ONE YEAR Later

“COME ON, HURRY UP.” He says as he pulls me along.

“Where are we going? I can’t see anything with this blindfold on my face.”

“Soon, my little elf, soon.”

I huff, but I can’t be mad at this man. We’ve had our fair share of ups and downs this past year. It was a lot of learning how to live with each other after both living alone for so long. Oliver ended up moving in to help me pay off the mortgage instead of continuing to rent on his own.

I have to admit it’s nice cuddling up to him on those cold winter nights. I stick my cold little feet in between his legs and he never says a word, just lets me do my thing. It’s also nice having him around in general. He makes me happy, incredibly happy. He’s also really good at playing my body like his own personal instrument.

Phew, that man between the sheets. A blush crawls up my cheeks and I shake my head.

I hear a door open before he pulls me through. “Am I going to get to see anything soon, Ol? I’m starting to feel claustrophobic over here.”

“Five more steps, baby.” He pulls me to a stop, and before he takes the blindfold off, his lips crash against mine. His hands come around my waist and he hoists me up, wrapping my legs around his hips.

He was always hard for me and right now is no exception. I can’t see him, all I can do is listen and feel him. His tongue is warm against mine as he walks us toward our destination. “Wrap your legs tighter around me baby, hold on.” I do as he asks.

I’ve learned to trust this man with my life over the last year. He’s my person. Santa has finally granted my wish of a boyfriend for Christmas. These days, my wish has morphed into a husband for Christmas. I’m not getting any younger.

He sits down on what I’m assuming is a bench and continues kissing me. His large rough hands slide up my thigh underneath my dress and head toward home. I try to push him away. “Oliver... you can’t...”

“Yes, I can. Relax Willow, it’s just you and me here.”

“Okay.” My voice sounds small, but I relax almost immediately. Funny thing about Oliver is his amazing ability to calm me down with just a few words. His hand slides underneath my dress again.

“Wait... is my naughty girl not wearing any panties right now?” I shrug, not willing to say yes or no. He can find out for himself. “Fuck, babe. You never cease to amaze me.”

His fingers find my center and he strokes my swollen flesh. Like always, I’m already wet for him. Pulling some of

the wetness from me, he drags it up to circle around my clit, the way he always does. My hands find the hem of his shirt and I pull, asking silently for him to remove it. He does. I throw it behind me, not knowing or caring where it lands.

I'm still blindfolded, but in a way, I like it. We've had our fair share of kinky fuckery in the last year. Once he found out I'd only ever been with one other guy, he made it his mission to create a bucket list and check everything off. He told me he was making a list and checking it twice, even though he already knew if I'd been naughty or nice.

Blindfolding was one of the things on our list. We'd done just about everything except sex in a public place. Apparently, Oliver is granting this specific wish tonight, and I am more than happy to go along with it.

Two fingers slide into me and he fucks me for just a few minutes before I find my way to his belt and undo his pants. His cock is velvety softness in my hand like always, pulsing with a need I understand all too well.

I pull him from his pants and he lifts up slightly to shrug them down his hips so he has more room.

He pulls me in closer to him and I lift up so he can line his cock up with my pussy. I don't even wait for the go; I impale myself on his pole like a fucking slip and slide. He groans as our hips touch, and he always feels so fucking big this way.

“Not gonna last very long tonight, Willow.”

“When then you best get to fucking me before time runs out.” I'm not sure if time would really run out, but I needed him to start moving.

His hands move to my hips as he pulls me forward, then pushes me back, helping me fuck myself on his cock.

His lips find mine and I latch onto him, kissing him with such a passion I'm afraid I won't be able to breathe. It's not a slow, sensual lovemaking. It's a quick need-you-because-I-can't-wait-any-longer sort of sex.

Music turns on around us and I instantly know where we are. "Um, Oliver. You said there wasn't anyone else here."

"There isn't." He whispers in my ear, hot breath bathing me.

"Then who turned on the music?" I can feel a flush climbing up my body, nervousness overtaking my thought process.

"Chill out, babe. It's on a timer. We have a few more minutes."

"A few more minutes until what exactly?"

"You'll see in a few more minutes." He lifts me off him and leads me over to what I find is a wall, and from the feel of it, it's glass. I press my palms against it, enjoying the brief reprieve of heat simmering between us.

He pulls my hips back into him and lifts my dress up, entering me again from behind. "God, I love the way your ass looks like this."

"You have a problem."

"I do. I really do, and I don't care at all. We have to make this quick, though. There is only a short amount of time before people start coming in."

"What did you do?" I ask him, between thrusts. I bite my lip, worried that my moan will be heard by someone else.

"Let me hear it, Willow. I want to hear what I'm doing to you." The sound of our naked bodies slapping together isn't

enough for him. It never is. He likes it when I'm vocal with him. He tends to give me the same enthusiasm.

He pounds into me harder and harder, pulling my hips back against him. I meet each thrust, fucking myself on his hard shaft. Reaching around me, he finds my clit and rubs, while the other hand finds my nipple and pinches. "Oliver!" I scream it, not even caring who might hear me any longer.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck. You ready, baby?" I nod when words evade me.

His release is intense. Once he's done, we just stand there. Me pressed up against the cold glass. Him, pressed against my back. Both of our hearts syncing in rhythm as we pant from the physicality of what we just did.

"What would you say if I told you that everyone outside really enjoyed watching me fuck you. Watched as I told them you're mine." I gasp and start choking.

"Please tell me you're joking."

"I am," he says, kissing the shell of my ear. "But even if I wasn't, there isn't a chance in hell I'd let anyone see what's mine. I'm too selfish to share."

His cock deflates and slips from inside me. He kisses the back of my neck and pulls my dress down. Leaning in, he whispers. "Turn around, Willow."

I do as he asks. He removes the blindfold and I have to blink because the light is so bright. We're standing in front of the carousel, only it looks a little different tonight. I can't quite put my finger on what it is though.

Reaching out, he asks for my hand. "Shall we take a ride for old time's sake?" I nod, a smile forming on my face.

“I love this, Oliver. I love you.”

“I love you, too, babe.”

He lifts me up onto the carousel and I make my way between the rows of horses, trying to find the ones we always ride. A black steed for Oliver, and a brown horse for me. “I can’t believe you rented out the pavilion for us tonight.”

“Of course.” He says it, but his voice sounds funny, so I turn, and there he is. On one knee, a ring box popped open housing the most beautiful diamond ring I’ve ever seen.

“Oliver.” I whisper.

“Willow Annika Harper. This time last year I was a grouchy bastard, set on not seeing Christmas or ever giving myself a chance to get my heart broken again, but you came into my life like a snow storm and it’s been the best thing that’s ever happened to me. This past year has been one of the best I’ve had in a long, long time, and I want to continue on for many, many more years. So... I have one very important thing to ask you tonight.” He smiles nervously. “Will you give me the greatest pleasure of becoming my wife. Because I don’t just want you for Christmas, and I think you definitely need an upgrade from girlfriend.”

Tears cloud my vision and I’m nodding my head frantically. “Is that a yes?” He asks quietly.

“Yes, yes, yes. Forever yes, Ol. I will marry the fuck out of you.” He chuckles a nervous laugh as though he was scared I would say no before a look of relief masks his face.

“Good. I like the sound of that.” A camera clicks from somewhere beside me and I realize that Chantelle and Gus are standing there, cameras in hand. Oliver stands up and grabs me around the waist, spinning me.

“They didn’t...”

“No, Will. I flashed the lights twice before I took off your blindfold. It was the signal.”

“Oh okay, good.”

“I told you, you’re mine, baby, and I don’t share.”

I lean into him and my lips find his, only this time it’s not a frenzied kiss. It’s filled with heat and passion, but it’s a promise of what’s to come. Chan, Gus, Oliver, and I all find our own mounts and take a spin on the carousel. It holds so many memories for Oliver and I. I’m sure down the line, it’ll hopefully hold memories for little ones of our own one day.

Well, one day soon.

“Hey, Oliver?”

“Yeah, Willow?”

“I have a little announcement of my own tonight.” I pull the photos from the pocket in my dress and hand them over.

“Is this what I think it is?” I nod my head, tears again forming in my eyes. I am so damn happy.

“I’m pregnant, Ol.”

“Fuck, have I told you lately how much I love you because if not, you clearly need to hear it again.” Chan takes pictures the whole time we’re on the carousel. Recording Oliver’s reaction as I tell him we’re starting our own family.

Who knew that a stranger, a snowstorm, and a little Christmas magic would bring me to this point in my life? See... Christmas miracles are a thing, and this Christmas things are a little more special than normal.

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about the author

Zoey Drake is a hopeless romantic with a serious Chipotle addiction. When she isn't searching for her next book boyfriend, she's writing him. Although she has West Virginia roots, she currently resides in Ohio with her husband and rescue dog, Sir Cooper Ryder. When she's not writing, she can be found curled up on the couch with Cooper and a cup of tea, reading her favorite author's next book!

For more information on Zoey's books, check out:

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