

CRANBERRY
CORNER

Le Gaily

PIPER COOK

CADY

Cranberry Corner

By Piper Cook

Copyright

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and events are used fictitiously.

Copyright © Piper Cook – All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Sign up for my newsletter and get a complimentary book as a thank you gift:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/newslette>

[r](#)

Join my reader group here:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/pipercoo>
[kreaders](#)

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[CADY](#)

[WINTER WARNING](#)

[TURBULENCE](#)

[BUNK MATES](#)

[LIGHTS OUT](#)

[BIRTHDAY WISHES](#)

[TREASURE HUNT](#)

[THE GAME'S AFOOT](#)

[NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING](#)

[A MOTHER'S LOVE](#)

[ONE YEAR LATER](#)

[MORE BY PIPER COOK](#)

[Gingerbread and the Guy Next Door](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

CADY

Short and Steamy Best Friend's Brother Grumpy Birthday Girl Christmas Romance

When holiday birthday plans fall through, will the backup plan steal the show, or will Santa check his list twice and gift me all I've ever wanted this year?

Cady

I didn't choose Christmas. The holiday chose me.

Santa steals my birthday thunder every freaking year.

Not this year, Santa baby.

My bestie's coming home for the holidays to brighten my birthday spirit.

Only she gets stuck in a snowstorm and sends the only reinforcement she can gather.

Kent, my bestie's brother, my childhood tormentor, and the man I've secretly crushed on since third grade.

But now, he's stealing Christmas, too, and I'm grumpier than ever.

Kent

It's been a long time since I've been back to Cranberry Corner.

The town is full of good memories, old friends, and holiday cheer.

When my sister calls in a favor to keep our childhood friend company for her birthday, I'm ready to don my party hat.

But I'm not prepared to have my socks knocked off.

Cady's not a little kid anymore. She's all grown up, sassier, and sexier than ever.

It'll take a Christmas miracle to change her tune about the holidays and me.

If I can pull that off, anything's possible. Maybe even love.

Warning: When this gregarious guy falls in love, he'll check every box on her list to win her heart. If you love Christmas miracles, cinnamon roll heroes, curvy women, and sticky sweet steamy romance, then you'll love Cady and Kent.

If you're a hopeful romantic at heart and love steamy, short, holiday love stories, Cranberry Corner is the place for you. Guaranteed HEA with no cliffhangers.

Download the **Piper Cook Reading List**:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/piper-cook-reading-list>

WINTER WARNING

CHAPTER 1

Cady

Large blobs of snow splat against the windshield. Squeaky rubber wipers and hissing heated air play backup band to the song jingling from the speakers. I turn off the idling car outside my childhood home before Mariah Carey belts out another note of “All I Want for Christmas Is You.”

“I don’t care about presents under the tree either, babe,” I mumble.

The big two-story home I grew up in is decked to the nines, idyllic in the snowy setting. A tacky blow-up snow globe spews white fluff over a perfect snowman family, but I’m neither shaken nor stirred. I’m deflated, dreading another birthday stolen by none other than Santa himself.

It stinks having a birthday so close to the holiday. My birthday’s been swept under the tree skirt for as long as I can remember. No fussy birthday parties or cakes with numbered candles for me. Nope. My big day’s a footnote to every jingle bell holiday tradition under the snowy Santa skies.

I’m not asking for a birthday week or month-long celebration. All I want is one day when the party hats, birthday cake, and presents wrapped in anything but candy canes and holiday greetings are for me. *Just me*. If that puts me on Santa’s naughty list, so be it.

I grab my duffle from the backseat and tear myself away from my pity party for one. This year will be different. I made sure of that. Quinn’s flight lands in a few hours. Once my bestie’s here, there’s no stopping our birthday shenanigans. This year, the days leading up to Christmas are mine.

I scoot past the driveway packed with cars from relatives far and wide and trudge up the perfectly snow-blown path to

the front porch. Silver and white Christmas tree lights twinkle through the cold-fogged front window. The aroma of a wood-burning fire billows from the chimney, filling the early evening with coziness and warmth.

I pull in a chilly, lung-burning breath and muster a half-hearted smile before making my grand entrance. I stomp the residual snow from my boots and open the front door.

“I’m home.” I wait, listening for a shrill welcome or my father’s footsteps plodding down the hall. “Mom? Dad?”

It’s noisy, with children chasing each other through the foyer, screaming and squealing. A little tow-headed blonde crashes into my leg and bounces off like a bouncy ball. She’s on her feet with pigtails flouncing and a toothy grin that can only mean the tooth fairy has paid a recent visit.

“Who are you?” She tilts her head and gazes at me with wide, crystal-clear eyes.

“I’m Cady.” I bend on one knee, so we’re at eye level. “Who are you?”

It isn’t unusual to encounter strangers in my parents’ home, especially during the holidays. My father has never met a stranger, and my mother loves to entertain.

“I’m Rylee. I live next door.” She leans far to her side, peeking down the hallway after the other children. “We’re on a scavenger hunt.”

Her “S” whistles through the gap in her toothy grin. She struggles with the long word, but it doesn’t dissuade her cheerful nature.

“Then you better catch up, huh?” I smile and finger the bright red bow at the end of her pigtail before giving it a soft tug. “Careful not to run into anything.”

She nods like a bobble doll, then skips off down the hall. I’ll figure out who she belongs to later. I follow voices further into the house to the den. Football plays on the big screen. I adjust the duffle weighing against my back as I lean into the doorframe.

“I’m home.”

I’m drowned out when the center snaps the ball to the quarterback. He throws long, and it’s caught one-handed in deep coverage.

My dad scoots to the edge of his seat, yelling, “Go, go, go,” at the television. His chant is picked up by others in the room.

The crowd cheers as a wide receiver breaks free from an attempted tackle and runs into the end zone.

An announcer yells the obvious, “He. Could. Go. All. The. Way.”

Yep, he did, Captain Obvious.

My brother, Drake, yells his appreciation and high-fives his fiancée, Hope. Beer bottles clink, and everyone watches rapt to the big screen as it replays in slo-mo from every imaginable angle. I can’t compete with that kind of coverage. I roll my eyes and decide to follow my nose instead.

Freshly baked gingerbread cookie aroma wafts through the air, luring me toward the kitchen where Mom’s likely elbow-deep in flour and icing. I poke my head into the heavenly-scented kitchen as a timer beeps. Mom whirls around and pulls four racks of cookies from the double ovens. My aunt ices sugar cookie snowflakes with my cousin’s daughter. I wait for Mom to clear the stove before distracting her.

“Hi, Mom.”

My niece glances up from her sugar cookie masterpiece with more icing on her face and apron than her cookie. I wiggle my fingers hello. She smiles wide with a baby-toothed grin.

“Oh, you’re here. I lost track of the time.” Mom tugs at the mitt on her right hand, but the timer buzzes again. She turns away, distracted. Her voice muffles under the din of the house and the continuous beeping. “How was the drive? I was afraid you wouldn’t beat the snow. Weatherman’s calling for eleven inches by midnight.”

“I left early to miss the worst.” If I’d stuck around a little longer at home, I’d have missed all the holiday action for an enjoyable birthday just for me. Or better yet, Quinn and I should’ve booked a rental on the beach and spent the holiday with our toes in the sand while enjoying the sun, surf, and man candy. I check my watch. Only a few more hours before she arrives.

Mom finally glances up, giving me seconds of her undivided attention. She eyes my duffle bag as she scoops cookies onto a cooling rack.

“Dad and Sebastian brought down the top twin to your bunk bed from the attic. It’s already set up with clean sheets.” She cuts more gingerbread men from the dough and carefully places them on a parchment paper covered cookie sheet. “It’d be nice if you slept on the twin so our guest can have the full mattress on the bottom to stretch out on.”

I save the eye roll in lieu of a lecture on courtesy and manner. Mom’s distracted again, placing cookie sheets in the oven, setting timers, and stirring something that’s bubbling on the stove.

“Now, where was I?” Mom wipes her hands on the vintage apron that belonged to her mother and grandmother before her. It’s steeped in holiday tradition. I imagine she’ll pass it along to my sister, Angela, or Hope one day. Heck, she might pass it along to Sebastian since he’s officially a chocolatier.

Everyone in my family cooks or bakes. Everyone except me. I’m more into mixing whiskey than whisking eggs.

Our conversation has clearly reached its finish as Mom busies herself in the kitchen. I’m disappointed in the lack of enthusiasm at my arrival. A hug from my parents or good old-fashioned ribbing from my brothers would be nice, but it doesn’t come. I recheck my watch. Two more hours, and Quinn and I can let off a little pre-birthday steam.

“If anyone needs me, I’ll be in the front yard making naked snow angels.” I plod down the hall to the stairs, mumbling under my breath. “Not like anyone would notice.”

“Don’t be silly. There’s better light and cameras in the backyard,” Mom calls from the kitchen. “We could make a mint if the video goes viral.”

My footsteps falter, and I twirl around at the same time she peeks around the doorframe down the hall.

“It might look like I’m not paying attention, but I hear everything.”

She smirks, and I burst out laughing. My heart flutters a happy beat, and I drop my duffle to meet her halfway. She wraps her arms around me, surrounding me in an irreplaceable mom embrace.

“I’m happy you’re home.” She kisses my temple.

“Me, too.” And except for the grinchy birthday vibes I’m nursing, I am happy to be home.

Kent

Wheels touch down on the tarmac, and I fire up my phone. My sister, Quinn, and I haven’t returned to Cranberry Corner in years. Our brother, Burke, still lives here in our childhood home, but my parents moved away when they retired. They’re on to bigger and better things now that they’re free to travel. They’re spending the holiday in a sandy, sunshine paradise this year.

Cranberry Corner’s the most festive place I’ve ever lived. Oddly enough, the holiday spirit never rubbed off on my parents. We had a tree every year, but nothing extraordinary. Holidays were always a formality rather than a time of celebration in our home. Burke, Quinn, and I made the most of it whenever possible, though. We were fortunate to have friends with families who welcomed us into their homes with open arms.

My phone flickers to life. The red notification light blinks, alerting me to new messages and emails. I check messages first. One from Burke.

Taking national news team on the grand tour at Mayor Stanton's request this week. Won't be around much. Key's under the mat. Let yourself in.

The holidays usually keep Burke busy with his tour guide business. Even so, I'm disappointed he didn't take time off to spend with Quinn and me. It's been a while since the three of us have gotten together.

I'd always imagined we stay close, no matter the physical distance between us. We all went our separate ways after college but kept in touch as best we could. Visits home gradually slowed as we each took on full-time jobs and the responsibilities of adulthood. I miss our holiday romps around town, the tree lighting ceremony, the Festival of Lights display, and all the holiday parties our friends threw.

That all came to a screeching halt when Mom and Dad retired and moved away in search of a warmer climate. When Quinn called suggesting we all get together this year, I was all in.

The plane approaches our gate as I continue scrolling through messages. Quinn's pops up.

All flights canceled out of Denver due to weather. The storm's a big one. Doesn't look like I'll make it in time for Christmas. I need a favor. If you do this, I'll owe you big time.

I scroll through the lengthy message for all the details. I'm disappointed I won't see Quinn anytime soon, but a spark of holiday spirit perks up my mood. I shoot her a text back. *On it. Let them know I'm coming. Just landed. Love you. Stay warm.*

I drop Burke a text next. *Never mind the key. Making arrangements with the Jenkins. Have fun playing guide to the stars.*

I loosen my belt and grab my carry-on from the overhead bin, lighthearted with a festive bounce in my step. It isn't the Christmas I'd anticipated, but I have a hunch the unexpected turn of events will be one for the books. There's never a dull moment at the Jenkins.

TURBULENCE

CHAPTER 2

Cady

I trudge up two flights of stairs to the converted attic space above the garage. It's the furthest room from all the commotion in the house. My oasis as a teenager, tucked away from my brother's stinky, smelly jock rooms and their dunderhead friends.

It hasn't changed much in the time I've been gone. The twin bunk is the only significant difference. Dad removed the top bunk midway through my first year of high school. I thought it too childish for my budding high school sophistication. Funny how the silliest things meant so much back then.

I'm not keen on sleeping on the top bunk, but Mom's right. Company should be treated as such, even if Quinn's more like family than a guest. Quinn's family moved to Cranberry Corner during the spring of my fourth grade year. She and I took to each other immediately. We had so much in common, especially bossy older brothers. Quinn, Kent, and their older brother, Burke, fit right in with our family.

Quinn and I spent hours in this room, fixing each other's hair, daydreaming about proms, and cramming for finals. We tried sneaking out a couple of times but were too chicken to go through with it. We'd sit on the garage roof instead, with our feet dangling over the edge, making wishes on the stars dotting the night sky.

We shared almost everything. Which teachers smelled funny, copies of exams, the latest mean girl gossip, and our hopes and dreams. But I always kept one secret hidden, even from Quinn. It was too weird and wild to share, leaving me a bit embarrassed and off-center. So I secreted it away, tucking it deep in my heart, knowing it could never see the light of day.

I toss my duffle on a chair in the corner and pluck my phone from my pocket to shoot Quinn a text. She won't get it until she lands, but I'm antsy and, admittedly, feeling selfish about my birthday.

I'm a ghost in my own home. Can't wait for you to get here.

Quinn surprises me with an immediate response. *Please don't be mad.*

My brows furrow. *Mad about what?*

My flight's canceled due to weather.

I gulp back disappointment at the momentary setback. *You mean postponed? How long? Are they redirecting flights? Don't lose faith.*

Afraid not. But I have a plan. Please don't be mad.

Quinn's good at improvising. Though my heart beats a little heavier at her insistence not to get mad. How could I ever be mad at Quinn? We've been through everything together, even managing to talk things through when we're hundreds of miles apart. My ears buzz, sensing something worse than a delayed flight.

Why would I be mad? You'll be late, but we'll still have the best time. I wait. No moving dots alert me that she's responding. No follow-up message. Nothing. *Quinn? What's going on?*

Shrieking from downstairs pulls me away from the phone. Quick footsteps plod down the second-floor steps, followed by more frantic yelling. Either someone threw a Hail Mary to win the football game, or something dire is going down.

I toss the phone on the bed and race down the steps leading to the second floor, then hurry down the second set of stairs. My foot hits the landing just in time to find my father slapping my childhood nemesis on the back like he's the prodigal son. My foot misses the next step, and I lurch forward. I gulp down a squelched screech as my fingers scrape against a metal baluster. My foot slips on the carpet, and a muscled arm

scoops around my waist as my ass impacts a step with a heavy thud.

“That was a close one.” His deep chocolate eyes glisten with mischief as he hovers over me too close for comfort and not close enough to scratch the itch I’ve carried for a lifetime.

Why would I be mad? I’m in the arms of my bestie’s brother, the man who terrorized my childhood and the man I’ve secretly carried a torch for most of my life.

Kent

“Let go of me.” Cady pushes against my chest as she squirms in my arms.

“Some things never change, do they, sis?” Drake chuckles as he looks on from behind me. “Accident prone as ever.”

“Oh, grow up, Drake.” Cady shifts her gaze to her brother, briefly pinning him with her stony glare instead of me.

“All right, now. That’s enough.” Mr. J chastises. “Good to have you back, son. How long are you here for?”

I straighten, pulling Cady upright with me. Her breath warms my chin and neck as she huffs. She’s two steps above me, so we’re eye to eye. And, my oh my, how she’s grown. She’s filled out everywhere nature intended and put her defiant stamp on each and every curve.

I stare into her dark, chestnut eyes, unable to look away. She tilts her head and crosses her arms over her body. It’s impossible to ignore the swell of her breasts when she frames them so perfectly with her naughty pout.

It’s been ages since I’ve seen Cady. She and Quinn are the same age, but even so, time stood still where Cady’s concerned. The mental picture I’ve carried of her is from the last time I saw her. It must be five, six, or maybe seven years ago. Has it really been that long?

“The week, I reckon.” I reluctantly turn my attention back to the room full of people. “Quinn said she called ahead.”

Mrs. J slips through the foyer doorway, wringing her wet hands on a towel. Her welcoming smile warms me to my bones. She's always been a second mother to me. Heck, the entire family is an extended family of sorts. I spent most of my afternoons and summers in this house or on the front lawn playing touch football with Drake, Sebastian, and our friends from school.

"She called. Everything is all ready for you." Mrs. J grasps my shoulders and rises to her toes to give me a peck on the cheek. "It's good to see you, Kent. You don't come home nearly enough."

"Yes, ma'am." I wrap my arms around her and give her a gentle squeeze. It allows me to steal another glance at Cady, who's scowling at us, unimpressed. "Thanks for having me."

"Don't wait so long next time." She pinches my chin with her thumb and forefinger and gives it a tug. "Now, off with you. Go get settled. Cady will show upstairs."

"Football and beer in the den when you get settled." Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins, Drake, and a gaggle of kids disperse, leaving Cady and me lingering by the stairs.

"Hey, Cadybug." I grin as she glares. Drake's right. Some things never change. Cady's as annoyed with me now as she's ever been. Something about that settles in my bones, comforting and familiar.

"I hate it when you call me that." She rolls her eyes and uncrosses her arms. "Get your bag."

"Bossy."

She leans past me, her breast brushing against my shirt sleeve. An unmistakable flow of static electricity catches flight on my flannel shirt, leaving a trail of goose-pimpled flesh in its wake.

"Which room, Mom?"

"Yours, dear." Mrs. J's voice muffles as she moves toward the kitchen. "We've got a full house this week. Dinner in twenty."

Cady swivels around so quickly that I'm afraid she'll have whiplash. Our eyes lock. Hers widen in disbelief, but there is no mistaking what we both heard. And for some reason, I'm delighted and amused.

“Oh, no. Over my dead body. You are not sleeping in my bed.” She pushes past me in a huff, hightailing it to the kitchen.

I watch after her as she charges full speed ahead, fuming mad and as defiant as I remember. Only Cady's changed. She isn't little anymore. She's all woman, soft and curvy, with a temper I'd like to tame.

Sharing her bed isn't such a bad idea at all.

BUNK MATES

CHAPTER 3

Cady

There's no amount of reasoning with my mother. Dad won't even intervene. In what world is it okay for Kent to bunk in my room? Did Mom not get a good look at him? He's not the same schoolboy who left his dirty, smelly sneakers in the foyer. He's a grown man. Tall with broad shoulders and a panty-melting smile.

Not that my panties are melting. His rugged good looks and churlish grin do nothing for me. I could take him or leave him. *Except...* I massage my palm across my chest as I climb the steps to my room. My heart pounds and aches in equal measure. I'm queasy, and my cheeks burn hot. I'm either getting sick, or a heart attack looms in my future.

It must be all the steps and losing my footing earlier. Falling into Kent's arms with his marshmallow campfire cologne teasing my senses doesn't make a lifetime of pining for him any better. He's thrown me off kilter for as long as I've known him.

I reach the landing outside my bedroom. The door's ajar, with a sliver of light breaking the shadowy plane. The rustle of denim and the jingle of a belt buckle or pocket change echoes across the wood floor. I tiptoe ever so quietly, avoiding the boards beneath me that creak.

I brace my hand against the doorframe and inch closer. A blur of tanned flesh catches my eye. I slowly soak in Kent's wool-stripped socks as he pulls on a pair of fresh slacks from his bag. The pants puddle at his ankles as he pushes his socked feet free of the hem. He pulls the pants over his thick calves to his meaty thighs, pausing to hop as he carefully tugs the pants over the swell of his perfect taut ass.

My heart knocks against my chest, lurching forward until the whoosh of blood floods my ears. I bite my lip as I ogle his pristine body. He tucks his white undershirt into his pants, then slips his palm over his impressive bulge to readjust himself. My mouth waters as I watch wide-eyed, frozen in place. An ache, deep and powerful, throbs low in my abdomen.

His zipper clicks upward, and a flurry of goosebumps zing up my spine in unison with the metal. My fingers and toes tingle as if waking from a deep slumber. I'm on fire, parched, and in need of relief.

The door swings open, and I jump back, startled and embarrassed he's caught me spying.

"See something you like?" He leans into the doorframe, looming over me like a tiger on the prowl.

He grins, flashing me his pearly whites, and my body succumbs to his undeniable seductive charm. My panties dampen and cling to my sensitive flesh. My body's reaction is out of my control, but I'm in complete control of my senses. I refuse to fall for his teasing, lady killer smile.

"Next time, change in the bathroom or closet." I push forward, but he stands unmoving like an oak tree refusing to allow me comfortable passage. I lay my palms on his chest, realizing too late what a mistake I've made. Our eyes lock, and an inferno blazes blistering hot at my core. I push against him, but he refuses to yield. "Let me in, you big oaf."

He secures me with his arm, pulling me snugly against his chest. His heart rages beneath my palm, and I'm caught, spellbound in his heated eyes.

"We're stuck together for the week, so tell me why you've got a bee in your bonnet."

His smoldering eyes and plump lips distract me momentarily. I'm tempted to spill every dreamy thought I've ever had about him and beg him to kiss me and more.

"Quinn said you needed a friend, so here I am. We're still friends, right?"

And there it is. The friend zone. I regain my senses before making a bigger fool of myself.

“Yeah.” I roll my eyes, keeping my insecurity to myself. “Friends, but you’re no replacement for Quinn.”

“God, I hope not.” He ruffles my hair and places a sweet, lingering kiss on my forehead. I lean into that kiss, soaking in his heat as it kindles the fire that time can’t extinguish. “I’m better.”

The man knows how to push my buttons. He’s irritating one minute, then sweet as sin the next. I wiggle out of his arms before I throw myself at him like a lovesick puppy. He winks as a devilish smirk spreads across his perfectly kissable lips.

“Go on now. Get changed.” He swats my ass as I turn away, sending a blush of heat straight to my sex.

“Changed?” I whirl around, birthday hope sparking throughout me like freshly lit candles. It isn’t the birthday shenanigans Quinn and I planned, but a birthday date with Kent’s even better.

“Yeah. Your mom said dinner in twenty. Meet you downstairs.” He grabs the doorknob and pulls it shut, crushing the remaining hope I had of anyone remembering my birthday.

Kent

I hesitate on the landing. Something’s off, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. Cady runs hot and cold, but for the life of me, I can’t figure out what I’ve done wrong. Quinn’s text led me to believe Cady would be happy to see me, but so far, I’ve been an irritation to her. Except for the brief moment when she softened against my chest.

We shared a real connection beyond skin deep. When her hands slid over my chest, my heart leapt to meet her. She’s a temptation I shouldn’t entertain, with family bonds I can’t afford to squander.

There’s no doubt Cady’s special. I need to find the perfect way to show her how special she is. Quinn mentioned Cady

felt down about her birthday. Her trip here had less to do with Burke, me, and Christmas than it did with Cady. If Cady's down in the dumps thinking another trip around the sun makes her old, then she hasn't looked in the mirror lately.

There's more to her sour mood than I'm privy to, but no time to get to the bottom of it now.

The Jenkins' dinner table is exactly as I remember it. It's packed with familiar family faces and ones I don't know. Cady's one of the last to join us at the table. She's changed into a soft, curve-hugging sweater and a red and black plaid pleated skirt. Her eyes flit to mine as she takes the seat opposite me. She offers a brief smile that doesn't quite reach her dark chocolate eyes.

My heart aches for her. It's the most joyous time of the year, yet she's allowed her birthday to drag her down.

"Welcome guests, family, and friends." Mr. J clinks a knife to his whiskey glass, silencing the pre-dinner commotion. The room stills save for the muffled sounds of giggling children's voices coming from the kitchen. "For those of you new to our table, we like to start Christmas week with words of gratitude. I'll start. I'm grateful and humbled for the friendship of many and the love of my beautiful wife and family."

"Aw, that's so sweet." Drake's fiancée, Hope, leans into him, and he kisses her softly on the forehead.

My thoughts wander back to my lips pressed against Cady's forehead. Was it as soft, thoughtful, and heartfelt as Drake's kiss for Hope? Mumbled voices round the table as I tune everything out, but Cady.

I glance at her, enjoying a sneak peek while she's focused elsewhere. Perfectly manicured brows frame her dark eyes. A pale pink glow spreads across her apple cheeks and generous lips. When she turns to look at me, there's something wistful in her eyes that jumpstarts my heart.

Heat radiates across my chest as recognition slowly, surely dawns on me. I see Cady through a new lens, one triggered by more than physical attraction. She isn't the rough-and-tumble

little kid she was before. There's a full heart and soul hiding behind her shrouded eyes. A heart that deserves close attention and tending to. And I want to be the one to soften the blow of whatever it is that shadows her eyes.

Fingers curl around my hand. I blink, still staring at Cady. Her cheeks flush pink, and I catch the faintest smile play across her lips before she dips her chin to stare at her empty plate.

"It's your turn, dear." Mrs. J gently squeezes my fingertips. I glance at her aged hand on mine and then into her gray eyes, glistening with tenderness. "What are you grateful for, Kent?"

My eyes flit around the table, and I'm suddenly struck with the deepest sense of love and gratitude. I'm surrounded by a family I wasn't born into but who chose me to be one of their own.

"This, right here." I pause as a knot filled with emotion creeps up my throat. "I'm grateful for this family and all the holidays and birthdays I've celebrated with you all."

Cady's head bobs up. Her eyes shimmer hopeful and bright. There's something else I should say, but Sebastian cuts me off before another word passes my lips.

"Don't get all mushy on us, Kent," Sebastian teases. "You're already Mom's favorite."

"Oh, stop. You know I love all my kids." Mrs. J winks. "Especially the extras I've gotten to love on all these years."

Cady rolls her eyes at me. She averts her attention, yet again giving me the cold shoulder. *What am I missing?*

LIGHTS OUT

CHAPTER 4

Cady

I lock the bedroom door behind me and savor the last minutes of privacy before Kent comes up for the night. I toss the sweater and skirt combo for a comfy pair of long-sleeved flannel pajamas. A quick glance in the mirror tells me all I need to know. Nothing says frumpy like flannel.

I climb the ladder to the top bunk. It's claustrophobic lying so close to the ceiling I can touch it. I bury the back of my head deep into the pillow and scrunch the comforter close around my chin. It's been freshly washed and smells like home. This home, not my home away from home.

A tear wells in the corner of my eye. I wipe it away with the sheet. This year was supposed to be different. Every year brings a new distraction, and everyone forgets about my big day. I'm out in no man's land, unable to compete with my sister's ripe womb and the babies she pumps out. Drake and Sebastian bring home beautiful, talented girlfriends. The house is filled to the brim with aunts, uncles, cousins, and Kent, the golden child who's lavished with the last morsel of attention my parents have to give.

A niggle of jealousy eats at my full tummy. I shouldn't pout or find fault with Kent or anyone else. This year isn't any different than any other. All I need is a good sleep, and tomorrow will be a better day.

I'm glad Kent's here, especially since Quinn couldn't make it and Burke's galivanting around the county with a camera crew in tow. It would suck for Kent to spend Christmas alone.

The doorknob jiggles, followed by light tapping.

"Cady? The door's locked."

And it also sucks that mister tall, dark, and delicious is bunking in my room. It's bad enough I've crushed on him since fourth grade. But to have him in my room, dressing and undressing, sleeping below me is too much to ask of my poor beating heart.

I throw back the covers with a huff. The doorknob rattles again.

“You decent?”

My feet pause on the bottom ladder rail. My lip quirks into a grin as a mischievous thought crosses my mind.

“In a minute. I'm stripped to my panties.” I cover my mouth before a snicker slips out. “Give me a second.”

Something thuds against the door, and Kent's voice drops an octave. “Panties?”

I peel off my pajama bottoms and run my fingers through my hair, tousling it for that bedhead look. I peek in the mirror. It's more windblown scarecrow than bombshell bedhead, but there's no time to fuss. I unbutton the top two buttons of my pajama top and rest my hand on the doorknob.

Kent opens the door a millisecond after I twist the handle to unlock it. He looms large in the doorway. I gulp back my pounding heart. His jaw clenches as he works it side to side. His eyes rake over my body, slow and deliberate, and my bones soften to jelly. The tip of his tongue darts across his lower lip as his hooded eyes take in their fill of me. Giddy tickles curl around my spine, then trickle across my nervous system until every follicle of my body stands at high alert.

“Too bad I missed the panty parade.” The words roll off his tongue, buttery and seasoned with a healthy dose of hunger.

I pivot on bare feet and cast a long side glance over my shoulder. He's rooted to the spot in the doorway, eyeing my backside. I slip my foot over the ladder's bottom rung and pause to enjoy his feral gaze.

“Next time,” I tease.

He blinks hard and slow as he works the stubble along his jaw.

What I wouldn't give for a little whisker burn along my collarbone, between my breasts, or lower along my inner thighs. "Are you going to stand there like a statue or come to bed?"

Two quick strides and he's in the room with the door shut tight behind him. I hop to the second and third ladder rugs as a thrill of excitement zips through me. He unbuckles his belt and jerks it through the belt loops with one long stroke. My sex clenches tight, weeping into the thin cotton fabric buckling between my legs.

"Careful what you're offering." He smacks my ass with his broad hand, stinging the sensitive flesh.

My pussy pulses, and a tiny flutter skirts through my sex.

I think I've developed a spanking fetish.

Kent

My dick skips the precursory yawn when Cady mentions panties. I imagine her soft curves scantily clad in nothing but lace, and my manhood lurches like a beacon. But the crackerjack lock isn't the only thing holding me prisoner outside her door. I have mixed emotions where Cady's concerned. She's always been like a sister. Is it wrong to feel less than brotherly toward her now that we're both grown?

Cady isn't like other women. She's the daughter and sister of people I call family. One misstep and I could lose everything I've grown to love and care about outside of my own flesh and blood.

But when the lock clicks, I'm lightning fast, throwing the door open. My dick doubles in length as soon as I see her long tan legs peeking beneath the flannel shirt. Christ, it barely covers her ass. She twists when she turns, and the open buttons give me a peek-a-boo glance at her perfectly rounded breasts. Cooped up in this bedroom with her will surely be the death of me.

“Are you going to stand there like a statue or come to bed?”

She’s playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse, and I’m falling for the bait. She takes a step up the ladder and then another. Her nightshirt skims up her hips, and the swell of her bottom peeks from beneath the fabric.

If teasing’s her game, I can play dirty. I unbuckle my belt and rip the leather from its cage. But it’s hardly fair teasing her because it only heightens my awareness of the attraction bubbling between us. My dick’s ready to play, but I have no intention of humoring it tonight.

I’m inclined to bend her over my knee and give her a swift paddling but think better of it. I need a cold shower and a wall between us. But I falter and smack her ass with an open palm, savoring the sting as it vibrates up my arm. Her eyes widen, but it isn’t shock hiding in the dark. It’s something much deeper, darker, and dangerous.

Cady’s complex, and there’s a slew of reasons I should keep my distance. If I touch her again, it’ll be a baptism by fire.

BIRTHDAY WISHES

CHAPTER 5

Cady

I turn my back to the bathroom door and feign sleep when Kent emerges, freshly showered with an irresistible scent of campfire and toasted marshmallows filtering through the room. Whereas I'm sticky at the crux of my thighs and sweaty under the toasty flannel shirt and comforter.

Kent skims my shoulder and arm with his fingertips, then whispers into the dark, "Night, Cadybug."

I don't cringe at the pet name this time. It settles in my soul, warm and caring, soothing the bad holiday mood that bubbles beneath the surface. I wouldn't choose the name, but Kent chose it for me. Whether it was meant as a joke at first or not, it no longer matters. It's his special name for me and his alone.

I slip out of bed in the early morning light and tiptoe down the ladder as Kent snuffles in the bottom bunk. He's sprawled across the full-sized mattress, lying on his stomach with the sheet crumpled around his waist. I linger on the bottom rung, ready to bolt if he turns over. I'd rather he not catch me ogling again, but I can't look away. He's relaxed, the picture of perfection sleeping in my bed.

If I were brave or daring, I'd slip between the covers and snuggle beside him. But I'm neither. I'm tired, hungry, and ready to make peace with another backseat birthday.

"You're up early," Mom chimes as she whisks a vat of eggs. "Coffee's ready."

"Thanks, Mom." I pour a cup and settle onto a bar stool. "Anything I can do to help?"

“I’ve got everything under control.” She tootles about the kitchen, whisking and stirring like Better Crocker on steroids. She stops mid-stroll and glances around the kitchen. Her brows furrow as she twists her lips into a knot. “We’re missing the cocoa station. Would you be a dear and look around the attic for the box of snowman mugs and the Santa cookie jar?”

“Sure.” I slide off the bar stool, thankful to be of some use.

I top off my coffee mug and reach for a second mug and fill it. It wouldn’t hurt to take Kent a cup. I’m passing right by my room anyway. It’s not like I’m going out of my way or anything.

I make it to the landing outside my door as Kent’s making the bed. Domestic and handsome. I bet he’s good with kids, donates to charities, and carries an organ donor card in his wallet, too. My heart pinches, aware of my selfish birthday fixation. I need to shed the grinchies and get into the holiday spirit.

“Brought some coffee.”

He greets me with a charming smile that could knock my socks off and knock me up at the same time.

“Thanks.” He wraps his hand around the cup, and his fingertips brush against the sensitive skin on my inner wrist. It’s too early in the morning to swoon, but my heart doesn’t keep time. “You didn’t have to come all the way up here to bring me coffee.”

“I didn’t. Mom asked me to look for some stuff in the attic.” I’m uncomfortable in a hot, might spontaneously combust sort of way. So, I deflect and make light of the one act of kindness I’ve achieved since coming home. “Enjoy your coffee. Oh, and thanks for not snoring.”

He chuckles and tosses a throw pillow at me. I dodge it without spilling my coffee, a feat more difficult than it should be. I duck out of the room across the hall to the attic door.

“Wait up. I’ll help.”

I open the attic door and feel my way through the dark to the center of the room. I reach for the light’s pull chain, but it’s

out of reach. I kick around the floor for the box that doubles as a step stool, but someone's moved it. I tip up on my toes and stretch as far overhead as possible, but still can't reach the chain.

"I can't go twenty-four hours without saving your butt, can I?" Kent looms over my body, pressing against my back as he easily grabs the light chain.

I stand stock-still, barely breathing as my heart clamors against my ribs. His arm slinks down along mine, and a tiny tremor threads through me.

He lowers his head close to my ear, tickling me with his breath. "I think I liked it better in the dark."

Me, too. Me, too.

Kent

Thinking with the wrong head will lead me to a sure path of destruction. But I can't stop. Quinn assigned me one simple task—cheer Cady up for her birthday. I'm not supposed to want her in my bed, naked beneath me.

"What are we looking for?" I step away from her before I do something stupid. More stupid than kissing her forehead and smacking her ass.

The attic is littered with piles of boxes and bins, a discarded easel, and a nude mannequin striking a pose. So this is what half a lifetime of memories looks like. The room's a treasure trove of stashed mementos.

"The old cocoa cups and cookie jar." Cady places her hands on her hips and surveys the room.

"The snowman stuff?" I remember it well.

The cocoa station was a winter staple when we were younger. Mrs. J packed the tray with peppermint candy canes, marshmallows, sprinkles, and spices. Hot cocoa with all the trimmings was a warm, welcome treat after shoveling walks and snowball fights.

I open box lids and rummage through vintage stemware, old china, and a collection of salt and pepper shakers from every state the Jenkins' ever visited.

"I swear my parents keep everything." Cady pops the lid off a bin and pulls out a photo album.

I abandon the box of dishes and peek over her shoulder as she flips through pages of black and white photos.

"This is my dad on Christmas morning when he was three, I think. Oh, and this one's Mom. Her first birthday."

Mrs. J sits in a highchair with an itty bitty cake on the tray. She looks like she took a nose dive into that cake. Cake chunks cling to her chubby cheeks as she fists more cake in her hands. Cady takes her time, skimming a finger over the fragile photo before closing the book.

"Looks like she enjoyed herself."

"Mmhmm."

"What's bugging you, Cady? I know I'm not Quinn, but you can talk to me."

"It's nothing, but thanks." She frowns.

"It isn't nothing if it makes you sad." I rest my hand on her shoulder and tip her chin to look at me. "I care about you, Cadybug. Let me help."

A fleeting smile emerges, and I'm hopeful, but she shakes her head. "I'm disappointed, that's all. I'll get over it. Always do."

She rummages through the box and pulls out another photo album. She turns the pages slowly. I spy a spiralbound notebook with "Top Secret" scrawled across the front cover in bright red marker and grab it from the bin while she's distracted.

Each page starts with a writing prompt followed by Cady's perfectly looped fourth-grade cursive writing. I flip through pages of "What I want to be when I grow up" and "What I did on vacation." But the page titled "My perfect birthday" stops me cold.

My Perfect Birthday

I love birthdays, just not mine. My birthday is December 24. That's Christmas Eve. Christmas at my house is a big deal. We have friends, family, and neighbors over and celebrate the holiday for an entire week. It's fun, and I love spending time with my cousins, but Santa's a bigger deal than I am. Santa will probably stuff my stocking with coal this year, but all I want for my birthday is for my family to remember I'm important, too.

My birthday would be perfect if Santa would take a vacation this year or at least visit my house last, so Christmas Eve is just for me. I don't mean to be selfish, and I wouldn't ask Santa to go out of his way every year.

But just once, I'd like ice cream and adult coffee for breakfast. Twenty dollars so I can get my best friend something nice for Christmas. And a new journal to replace this spiral notebook. I want ten candles on Mom's famous Italian cream cheese cake instead of fruit cake. And I won't even make a wish for myself before I blow out the candles. I'll make a wish for someone who needs wishes more than I do.

There is one more thing I want almost as much as a real birthday. I want the boy I like to notice me, too, but I can't ask for that. I want him to notice me because he likes me, not because the birthday fairy made him do it.

P.S. He's my best friend's brother, so it's a secret I can't even tell her. I hope that doesn't make me a bad person.

Cady

“Did you find the cocoa set yet?” Cady closes the old black and white photo album. The camera flash on my phone brightens the attic's low light for an instant. Cady lays the album on top of the box and glances at me. “What are you read...”

Her voice trails off as realization dawns. I have just enough time to snap the notebook shut.

“Give me that. You can’t read that.” Her voice reaches a crescendo pitch as she reaches for the notebook, arms flailing as I raise the tell-all notebook out of her reach. “Give it to me, Kent.”

She slaps at my arm, whacking my chest as she stretches across my body in vain. I chuckle at the spectacle she’s making but relish her feisty nature.

“This isn’t funny,” she huffs, clearly defeated.

I weigh my odds of getting out of the attic alive but am satisfied I have the necessary information saved to the cloud. I wrap an arm around her, trapping at least one of her arms between our bodies.

“Come on, Cady. It’s no big deal.” She pouts her bottom lip, and I fight the urge to nibble it before kissing her senseless.

“This isn’t funny.” She stomps her foot as she squirms against me. “That’s private. No one’s supposed to read it but me.”

Every movement she makes sets my nerves on edge. Her pillowy breasts flatten against my chest. My body conforms to hers like memory foam soaking in her curves.

“Stop squirming and I’ll give it back.” I grit my teeth, hanging on to every shred of decency I can muster. If her tummy rubs against my cock one more time, we’ll have one hell of a mess on our hands. “Deal?”

Her breath caresses the sensitive skin beneath my jaw. But it’s her eyes that have me rapt and drowning in desire. Even in her irritation, her eyes betray the need burning deep inside her.

She nods slowly, and I lower the notebook. She doesn’t grab it immediately. Rather, she lingers in my gaze. Sweet innocence peeks through her saddened features, and I’m filled with newfound hope. She carries a secret in her heart. One I desperately need her to share with me.

“I didn’t know Mom kept that.” She snakes her trapped hand up my side, and I wince, cursing the hard-on raging war

with my conscience. “I threw it away forever ago. She must have fished it from the trash.”

“It must be pretty important for her to rescue it.” It’s more than important. It’s special. It’s a glimpse of the ten-year-old Cady I was too stupid to recognize.

She takes the notebook from me and wraps her arm around my back. The metal spiral pricks at my shirt, poking me with its sharp edge. It’s a reminder to treat her with kid gloves. She’s more fragile than I imagined. Quinn should have told me something more about Cady’s birthday. But maybe Quinn’s not privy to all the secrets of Cady’s heart either.

I pull her closer, wrapping both arms around her, enveloping her in a protective cocoon. I’ll make sure Cady never feels less than special again.

TREASURE HUNT

CHAPTER 6

Cady

“Time to get up, sleepyhead.” Kent gently pulls me from dreamland with the aroma of fresh coffee and the soft touch of his hand on my lower back. “We’ve got a big day ahead.”

“Just one more hour.” I bury my face in the pillow, needing more sleep to face the day, yet thoroughly enjoying his hypnotic touch.

I read through my journal by camera light until the wee hours of the morning. The wistful ramblings of ten-year-old me were amusing in their childhood angst. Younger me had a disproportionate view of the world. If I didn’t get an “A” on my English paper, I’d never get into a good college. When I baked the brownies so long, they turned into rocks, I thought I’d never cook as well as Mom. If my outfits didn’t match like the Disney kids, I’d never fit in with the cool crowd. Such are the life-altering thoughts of a young girl.

But there are still disquieting threads of disappointment that continue to haunt my thoughts. Am I good enough? Am I important enough to make a difference in this world when I’m overlooked in my own orbit?

“No time for the snooze button today, Cadybug.” Kent strokes my hair, then fingers through it to massage my scalp.

I’ve died and gone to heaven. If I move, he’ll quit touching me, quit making me feel so damn good. I moan, and he massages deeper against my scalp.

“Keep that up, and I’m climbing in there with you.”

My eyes pop open. I’m faced with Kent’s fresh-shaven, chiseled jaw. His brooding dark eyes soften as a faint smile creeps to the corners of his plump lips. He leans his head to the side while cradling my head in his hand. I’d give up every

birthday and Christmas if I could wake up like this every morning.

“C’mon. Time’s of the essence. We have things to do and places to go.” His grin widens. “Oh, the places we’ll go. There’s fun to be had.”

“Says Dr. Seuss.” I snicker. “You almost nailed it.”

Kent ruffles my hair and presses his lips to my forehead. Oh, how I wish it was more than that, but I enjoy it all the same.

“As the good doctor says, we have unslumping to do. Up you go.”

I toss off the sheet and unfurl my legs as he tugs me into a sitting position. I flop my legs over the side of the bed and rest my heels on the first ladder rung. I cup the hot mug in both my hands and close my eyes as I get my first taste of adrenaline.

Kent’s hands glide over my thighs, stopping at the swell of my hips. I hold back my cough as coffee slips down the wrong pipe. I swallow hard and catch my breath. His fingers tease at the edge of my nightshirt. He studies me long and hard, and I’m caught in his gaze as my heart pounds ferociously in my chest. His fingers hover so close to my center, my sex quivers.

His fingers inch forward to the crux of my thighs, then skim the edge of my panties. My heart crushes against my breastbone. I dare not move. If he stops, I swear I’ll die. If he doesn’t...

He teases across the elastic edge of my panties, then slips his palms over my curvy hips to the swell of my ass. He tugs me forward, scooting me closer to the edge. My knees knock against his chest, and I can barely breathe, let alone think straight. I rest the coffee mug on the headboard’s wooden post and relax my knees.

He scoots me closer until my knees hug his chest, just below his outstretched arms. I search his eyes for something, anything to assure me this isn’t an elaborate joke. I rest my hands on his shoulders and hold on for all it’s worth.

“What are we doing, Kent?” I whisper, unable to find strength in my voice.

He steps on the bottom ladder rung. We’re eye to eye with my knees cradling his body. His signature fireside scent mingles with testosterone and desire, salty, sweet, and full of promise.

“Do you trust me, Cady? Really trust me?” His eyes plead with me.

I nod, unable to speak, unable to foresee the outcome of our undoing.

He rests his forehead on mine, and it’s only then I detect the tremor of his hands and his uneven breaths. “I need all your strength, Cady, because I can’t trust myself. I’m wound tight and ready to unravel. You deserve so much more than I’ve ever given you. I don’t know if I can make up for years of immature behavior, but I want to try and prove to you how much I care about you.”

Unshed tears sting behind my eyes. If I blink, it’ll rain. I’ve spent years pining for the man, and he’s afraid he isn’t good enough for me? I pull him closer, cupping his jaw in my hand, then weave my fingers through his thick hair. He tenses, but I continue on the path, taking what I want, leading him where I need him to go.

My lips brush against his, and all restraint is lost. He clutches my ass, digging his fingers into the thin fabric. My pubic bone mashes against his chest, electrifying my sensitive flesh. He nips and licks at my lips, curling his tongue around mine until I’m trembling, breathless, and drunk with desire.

“God, Cady. You’re more than I ever dreamed.”

He dots kisses down my neck, and I lean back to give him all the access he wants. He nibbles my collarbone until my shirt drags off my shoulder, exposing the upper swell of my breast.

His hand slips beneath my shirt and glides up my side. I shiver as an explosion of fireflies light his path. When his thumb reaches the heavy curve of my breast, he stalls. I rake

my fingers through his hair, urging him to continue. Needing him to touch me, taste me, and wring me out in every delicious way imaginable.

His thumb flicks over my puckered nipple. It hardens so quickly, prickling sensations spider through my breasts in a mix of pleasure and pain. I steady myself as one hand works my shirt buttons and the other, my sensitive nipple. He peels back the flannel, and cool air wafts across my chest.

When his tongue swirls one nipple and his fingers pinch the other, I unravel. Waves of tickling pleasure shoot straight to my core. My sex pulses and thrums as I arch into him, rubbing my mound against his solid body with reckless abandon.

He urges me on, nipping and sucking, lavishing my breasts with attention. My body tightens as pressure builds, and I begin to shake. A low, greedy moan spews from deep within my body. Years of desire bubbles over, flooding my body with pure, unadulterated pleasure.

Kent clamps a palm over my mouth, silencing my feverish appreciation. I giggle as the ripples tickling at my core subside. My body shakes, euphoric and subdued. I prop onto my elbows as my nipple slips from Kent's swollen lips. It's the sexiest thing I've experienced in my life. A loopy grin spreads across his face, elating me beyond belief.

"Can every Christmas Eve star this good?" I muse.

"Nope, but every birthday can." He kisses my lips as gently as a hummingbird, then pulls away. His eyelids flutter open, and my heart's filled with joy instead of the heavy ache I've carried for as long as I can remember. "Happy birthday, Cadybug."

I'm over the moon, beyond the stars, and still, I want more. I need to know what's between us is driven by more than friendship.

Kent

That didn't go how I planned. If I'd just left the coffee by the bed and turned away, I wouldn't have an iron rod straining against my pants. One look at her bare legs and perky breasts was all it took to send my body reeling.

I'm on a collision course with trouble and can't stop myself.

Quinn's going to kill me if I screw this up.

I cover Cady's naked body with the unbuttoned flannel and take a step down from the ladder. I'll do right by her, but not like this. She's not a quick fuck or someone to be toyed with. I have to be sure and do things the right way or risk losing her and a family that means the world to me.

"I almost forgot it's my birthday." She dips her head as a sheepish grin slips across her lips. She tugs at the flannel shirt, aligning the buttons. I'm torn between stopping her and scrapping the day's plans. "I, um...I guess I'm not the one to rely on for strength."

"Don't beat yourself up over it." I wink and pat her thigh. "If anyone's to blame, it's me. This isn't the ideal place to... uh...lose control."

Cady's brows tighten as she fingers the buttons of her shirt. Her damp eyes shine, wet and unwilling to yield. I'd give my right arm to know what's going on in that pretty head of hers.

"You said we had a big day?" She scoots to the ladder's edge.

"Yeah, we need to get going." I back away, clearing the path for her to retreat.

If everything pans out, we'll have all day to hash out what's happening between us. "Get dressed. I'll meet you downstairs."

I close the door and wait on the landing for my dick to comply with my insistent command to back the fuck down. Cady dresses quickly and meets me in the rental car with fresh coffee and warm oatmeal muffins, compliments of Mrs. J.

“Where to?” She pulls the seatbelt across her lap and tucks her palms between her knees. “Did Mom give you a last minute list?”

“Nope.” I throw the car in drive and pull onto the freshly plowed street. “Sit tight. Quinn sent me on a mission to show you a good time for your birthday, so that’s what we’re going to do.”

She settles back in her seat and turns her head to avoid my gaze. She leans her head against the window and nibbles a nail, lost in thought. We spend a long couple of minutes in silence, which worries me. Something’s troubling her, and I’m betting it has everything to do with earlier.

I can barely put two coherent thoughts together, replaying the best damn experience of my life. It’s unfortunate it happened under her parents’ roof. My first trip back to Cranberry Corner in five years, and it’s only taken me a couple of days to muck things up.

“Was earlier part of your mission to show me a good time?” She throws me a side glance, then looks away again. “Was it pity?”

Aw, hell. I pull the car over in the nearest empty space and cut the engine. Cady doesn’t flinch. She stares stoically out the window as fresh snowflakes sprinkle around us.

“It isn’t like that at all.” I scrape my hand across my chin. I’m good at jokes and messing around, but not good at peeling back the layers for open heart surgery. I keep my feelings close to the vest. I’m less likely to be wounded that way. “I had no intention of anything happening between us. At least, not like that.”

“So, it was a random carnal urge?” She shoots me a warning glance. Her eyes flare with heat, and it isn’t the side of passion I’d like to be on. If looks could do bodily harm, I’d need an ambulance. “One look at thighs and boobs, and you lose control? Yeah, that’s comforting to know. Take me home, Kent.”

I've always admired the way Cady rolls with the punches, giving back every bit as much as her brothers and I doled out to her. But this time, her fiery nature hits me in the gut.

"It's not like that either. I've tiptoed around you, trying to figure out what's eating at you, making you so sad. When Quinn texted, I thought you were having some age crisis going on, but then I realized there's more going on in that thick skull of yours than something as superficial as a number."

She rolls her head on the fogged glass. Once again, I'm held rapt in her gaze, staring into the dark abyss that drowns her in self-doubt.

"I've always thought you were one of the strongest people I know. You hit back when you're backed into a corner. You defend those who can't defend themselves. And you love everyone unconditionally, except yourself."

"That isn't true." Her brows knit together in a wad of hurt and pain.

"Then why does your birthday make you so sad?"

Her fingers tremble as she looks away. A single tear streaks down her perfect face, and I'm cut to the core. I've opened her wound and placed it on display.

"Because it's selfish to want...to want to feel special like I matter more than a holiday." She pauses as her voice falters and more tears fall. She turns to face me, and her bloodshot eyes and red cheeks nearly do me in. I'd rather she yell and hit me than shed a single tear for something I've said. "I've been overlooked my entire life like I don't matter. And I forgot all that when we kissed, and you touched me. I felt like you wanted me, and that's really all I've ever wanted."

My heart shatters into a million pieces. I remove my seatbelt and shift my seat as far back as it'll go, then pop the button on Cady's seatbelt and pull her into my lap. She cries softly against my shoulder as I hold her trembling body.

"You're the most important person in the world to me, Cady. Never think otherwise." I stroke her hair and back and

cuddle her close, wishing I could absorb her pain. “I’m sorry I’ve been so stupid.”

I kiss her forehead and stroke her back until her sobbing subsides. She’s all I’ve ever wanted, and it’s taken me way too long to figure that out. It might cost me a family I love, but if Cady can lay her soul bare to me, then I owe her the same. I dry her eyes with my shirt sleeve and tip her chin to look at me.

“I think we’re all looking for someone just like us. Someone with the same value system, likes, and dislikes. But what we really need is someone who complements us and fills in our gaps. That’s the kind of person who helps make us whole.”

Silence stretches between us as I stare into her eyes. My heart pounds as my confession unfolds.

“My family never made a big deal about holidays. I watched from the sidelines as everyone I knew gathered with family and friends. I felt like I was missing something magical, some kind of unexplained warmth and joy everyone else had but me. Then I met your family, and I felt like I belonged to something bigger. I had everything I needed from my parents, but you and your family gave me what I was missing. I’ve realized this week that I’m missing another piece. You’re the only person who can make me whole, Cady. That makes you the most special in my book.”

She blinks back the remaining tears still clinging to her lashes. A weak smile plays across the lips I brutalized with kisses earlier.

“I’ve loved you my whole life, Kent. I never told anyone, not even Quinn.” Her fingers curl around the loose shirt fabric covering my raw, exposed heart. She has the power to breathe life into me or take it away. “I’m glad I never told anyone so I could say it to you first.”

She tips her chin and stretches to meet my lips. She fills me with hope and joy when she whispers softly against my lips, literally breathing her life into me.

“I love you, Kent. More than birthdays and Christmas. You’re all I need to feel whole, too.”

She kisses me slow and sweet, deliberate in her intention to convey her love. It’s taken me too long to grow into the man she needs, the man I’m meant to be. There’s no going back to the way things were before. Cady’s my destiny. I’ll cherish her forever.

THE GAME'S AFOOT

CHAPTER 7

Cady

We stay huddled together until the outdoor chill turns the car into an icebox. I scoot out of Kent's arms to my seat. Though I'm shivering from the physical cold, my heart's warm and fuzzy. Kent starts the engine and turns the heater dial to full blast. I flip on the radio, tuning it to a holiday station. It's about time I embraced Christmas instead of allowing it to wear me down.

"Where to?" If Mom didn't send us on errands, I'm curious about what Kent has planned.

"Sure you're still up for an outing?" He arches an eyebrow. His eyes twinkle with the familiar mischief I've grown to love about him.

What I once considered an annoyance is endearing now. It's his personality, what makes him unique and special. We all hide our true selves behind a facade, so we're less likely to be wounded. I allowed my insecurity to blind me to his, but I won't allow that to happen again.

"I don't know what you have planned, but I trust you. I'm up for a surprise."

"Atta girl." He winks, then checks for cars before pulling onto the street.

We head downtown and find an empty parking spot. The streets are full of last-minute shoppers hurrying to cross off the last items on their lists. Kent pulls a twenty from his wallet, then folds it lengthwise between his fingers and offers it to me.

"What's this for?"

"Birthday money." His smile widens as I pluck the bill from his hand. "Twenty dollars to spend on anything you

want.”

My eyes widen. The notebook birthday entry is fresh in my memory from rereading it last night. I’m not angry. Not even embarrassed. How could I be when he’s gone out of his way to convince me he isn’t playing games. We’re not a joke.

“You read my birthday wishes.”

“I did better than that. I saved it to the cloud.” He chuckles as he pulls his phone from his jacket pocket and waves it, taunting me with proof. “You and I are going on a birthday scavenger hunt.”

“I can’t believe you.” I roll my eyes and shake my head. What will he think of next to quiet the negative voices in my head? “If you read it, then you already know what I want.”

“You already got that kiss.” He taps my nose, teasing me with his sexy grin.

“I want more.” I lean across the console, fluttering my eyelashes like a goof, but he complies, threading his finger through my hair and pulling me closer as he cradles my head.

The kiss is deep, meaningful, and delicious. My fingers and toes tingle, and a nurturing throb sinks low to my center. His kiss is better than younger me could have ever imagined. He breaks the kiss, but I strain forward for one more taste of him.

“You’re greedy, but I love you for it. Now let’s go before everything closes.”

We lace fingers on the sidewalk, and he stuffs our clasped hands into the pocket of his jacket to keep warm. He leads the way, and I’ll follow wherever the path leads.

Kent

We stop at Brain Freeze for breakfast ice cream and adult coffee. Adult meaning dark roast, no cream or sugar.

“Welcome to Brain Freeze. What can I get started for you.”

Sebastian's cheery blonde girlfriend, Sophie, welcomes us from behind the ice cream counter. She's good for Sebastian. It's been a while since I've been around the Jenkins clan, but the difference Hope and Sophie make in Drake and Sebastian's lives is evident. They're more at ease than I've ever seen.

Cady searches the dairy case for the perfect flavor before deciding on the featured dessert displayed on the counter's chalkboard.

"Let's split the Winter Wonderland. It sounds amazing." Her eyes light up like when we were kids, and she didn't have a care in the world.

"It's been quite the hit. It's made with fresh brownies from Fudgeballs. Sebastian knows how to whip up a mean batch of chocolate anything." She offers each of us a sample brownie cube stuck with a toothpick. "It's a collaboration recipe created especially for the season."

"We're not splitting anything. It's your birthday. This is no time to watch your girlish figure." I wrap my arm around Cady's waist. "Besides, I'll keep an eye on your figure from now on. Leave that pleasure to me."

"I'm not worried about my hips." She playfully smacks my arm, clearly enjoying herself. "It's Christmas Eve. Mom plans a feast. I don't want to be too full to eat."

"I thought you didn't like sharing Christmas with your birthday."

"I didn't. But I'm feeling better about it." She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and leans against the dairy case. "Besides, it would be selfish to rob Mom of Christmas joy when she loves the holiday and works so hard to make it perfect."

"One Winter Wonderland?" Sophie pipes up, interrupting our sappy love fest. She smirks, unfazed by our banter.

We pour ourselves self-serve coffee and grab an empty table near the window. We sit opposite each other with hands entwined on the table. It's quiet, with only a few patrons enjoying a wintry outing.

A sparse spruce with a handful of baubles adorns the window, surrounded by cutout snowflakes and strands of popcorn and fresh cranberries. A little silver plaque rests against the tree engraved with “Festival of Lights Honorary Winner.”

“Enjoy.” Sophie places the decadent dessert on the table between us. “Let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

“Congratulations on your window. I’m curious about your Festival of Lights Honorary plaque.” With all the elaborate lighted windows in downtown Cranberry Corner, it seems odd that the quaint window decor could possibly outshine the others. “How did you pull off winning with all the competition?”

“It’s a long story, but a good one.” Sophie beams with pride as she swivels to glance at the window.

The bell above the door tinkles. Sophie excuses herself to help customers. We dig into the dessert, savoring the gooey brownie and ice cream. Cady’s quieter than before, and I worry this little birthday jaunt wasn’t a good idea after all.

“What’s got you thinking so hard.”

“Trying to figure out how I’m going to spend an entire twenty dollars. Twenty bucks was a lot of money to me back then.” She laughs, then places her spoon on her napkin. She rests her elbows on the table and cradles her chin on her folded hands. “Where to next?”

“You need a new journal.” I scoot my chair away from the table and gather our trash.

“So, you can peek at it and read my thoughts?”

“I’d rather know your heart.”

She rolls her eyes at my cheesy reply, but I don’t care. I’m lighthearted and enjoying this part of Cady I never got to know when we were younger.

We drop into the Nerdy Bookworm to pick out a new journal, and catch up with Parker, from our high school days. Cady finds a new cookbook for her mom and a football super

fan trivia book for her dad. We check off all the items on her perfect birthday wish list that I'm capable of giving her, then head back to the car as shops begin to close.

"This is the best birthday, Kent." Cady leans against the car as I open the passenger side door for her. She grabs my coat by the lapels and pulls me in close. "Thank you for giving me this day."

I envelop her in my jacket so she doesn't catch cold. She slides her arms around my waist, pressing her perfect curves into my body. Her gaze drops to my lips, and her lashes flutter closed as we share one last kiss before heading back to the Jenkins' Christmas craziness.

If things go the way I'd like, I'll give her many more days like this one.

NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING

CHAPTER 8

Cady

We pull up to the house and have to park a block away. The street's littered with cars as families gather for Christmas Eve. The driveway's full again, but it's unusually quiet as we approach the front door. The tree is lit, lighting up the foyer, but unlike earlier in the week, there aren't any children whizzing by.

"Mom? Dad?" Kent takes my coat, and I stow my snow boots in the closet. "Since when is it this quiet on Christmas Eve?"

"Quiet game?" He chuckles as he grabs my hand. "C'mon. I smell a feast in the kitchen."

I'm unnerved by the eerie silence that's fallen over the house. No one knows what's transpired between us today. Walking into family dinner holding hands is like yelling, "Surprise! We're now a thing!"

"Do you think this is a good idea?" I'm tentative, unsure of what the future holds beyond tonight. "Us holding hands like a couple?"

Wrinkles form across his forehead as he releases my hand. I've hurt him, which causes my heart to shrivel.

"*Are* we a couple, Cadybug?" He lays his hands on my shoulders, staring at me with his sharp eyes. His jaw tightens.

I nod my head vigorously, but my stomach churns. It's butterflies or hunger, or both, but I'm still nervous. This is big news for my family. I hope it doesn't come as too big a shock or harm friendships. What will Quinn think? Or my brothers? Or Mom?

“I don’t want to hide anything, as long as you’re sure.” He drops his hands down the length of my arms and captures my hands in his.

“I’m sure.”

He kisses my knuckles and leads me to the kitchen. Mom’s fussing over something near the stove with her back to the door. It smells divine with aromas of pot roast, mashed potatoes, gravy, and fresh baked...

“Surprise!” Mom whirls around holding a half sheet cake with toasted coconut cream cheese frosting and ten perfectly placed birthday candles. My dad, brothers, sister, aunt, and cousins pop up from behind the island, out of the pantry, and from the adjoining dining room. “Happy birthday!”

They clap and yell. Someone starts singing happy birthday. Everyone joins in, and the smiles and happiness that greet us take my breath away. I’m speechless and shaking. I cling to Kent’s arm, blown away by this perfect day.

“Happy birthday, Cadybug.” Kent kisses me sweetly on the temple.

Hot, stinging tears flow over my cheeks. I’ve taken the love in this house for granted, but no more.

Kent

Cady dries her eyes as Mr. J lights the birthday candles. She glances around the room before pulling in a breath. She pulls her hair back, leans over the cake, and blows. The candles flicker out, and tiny wisps of smoke filter above.

“What did you wish for?” The little blonde neighbor girl tugs on Cady’s shirt. She looks up at Cady with wide, curious eyes.

Cady bends to a knee at eye level with the girl. She cups her hands around the little girl’s ear and whispers. The little girl giggles and claps a hand over her mouth before running back to her mom.

“Well, what *did* you wish for?” I wrap my arms around Cady’s waist and pull her close to my chest.

“World peace.” She giggles.

She swipes a dab of frosting from her cake and sucks it off her finger. It shouldn’t make me stiff in a room full of friends and family, but it does. I can’t wait to give Cady one more birthday present before evening’s end.

A MOTHER'S LOVE

CHAPTER 9

Cady

After dinner, everyone gathers in the den for our traditional Christmas Eve movie night. I lag behind to help Mom clean up the last of the birthday cake and dinner remnants. I grab a pile of dirty plates and carry them to the dishwasher.

“Let me take care of this.” Mom swats my hand as I turn on the water to rinse them. “It’s your birthday. You go have fun.”

I stop what I’m doing and wrap my arms around her, pulling her in for a hug. She wraps her arms around me and brushes a hand over my hair.

“Thanks, Mom.” New tears pinch at my nose. I try not to let the waterworks flow, but I’m so grateful. “You always know exactly what I need.”

“Oh, Cady.” She hugs me tighter. “I don’t always know. This was all Kent’s idea, not mine.”

“He’s a good man, Mom.” My heart pounds like I’m ten again, confessing to something I’ve done wrong. “I love him.”

“That I know.” She pulls back and holds my shoulders firmly in her grasp. Her glassy eyes hold so much love in them. She smiles, and years of memories crinkle around her features, each line a reminder of how much I’m loved. “You’re happy together, and that makes me very happy.”

ONE YEAR LATER

EPILOGUE

Kent

I lie awake in the dark, thanking my lucky stars Cady's by my side. It's been a hard year adjusting to the move, but we made a good choice relocating to Snowflake Falls. It's small and thriving, much like Cranberry Corner, and not too far away on the other side of the county. I thought Cranberry Corner had cornered the market with regard to the holidays, but the residents of Snowflake Falls are every bit as festive, if not more.

Moonlight spills into the tiny bedroom we christened a year ago. The house is quiet as snowfall blankets the outside. In a few hours, the house will buzz to life. We'll have snow to shovel and a snowball fight or two, but for now, I'm surrounded by warmth.

I glide my fingertips over Cady's arm, and she purrs like a contented kitten. My cock stirs when she slips her thigh higher on my leg. I roll her over to her back and discard my sleep shorts, unable to resist her for another second.

I move over her quietly, hoping the bed doesn't squeak for anyone in the house to hear. My heart beats faster as I soak in my sleeping princess, grateful we're getting things right this year.

My fingers follow the curve of her body, down her slender neck to her clavicle, over the swell of her breasts and pearled nipples. Her eyes flutter open as she stirs. A groggy smile filters across her lips as she slowly focuses.

"Shh," I caution. Mrs. J has wicked good hearing.

She grins, giving me the permission I need to make this her best birthday morning yet.

Cady

My skin tingles, stirring me from sleep. My eyes flutter open, and I'm greeted with Kent's irresistible grin. A wicked gleam sparkles in his eyes. The look is filled with intent and sensual promise. My heart palpitates, expanding with anticipation as his fingers tease over the thin nightshirt covering my breasts.

"Shh," he warns with a finger to his lips.

I grin, relishing in his playfulness as his hands glide over my body, following my curves to the shirt's hem. He toys with the fabric, slipping it torturously slow up my sides. I giggle and squirm as he tickles my ribs. Chills trickle up my spine as his hands glide over my pebbled nipples.

I reach for him, sliding my hands over his shoulders and down his muscular back. He sucks my nipple into his hot, wet mouth, tasting me with his sinful tongue. I arch into him as he growls, sending a ripple of feverish want straight to my core.

I hiss and moan as he alternates between my breasts, sucking and licking one while rolling the other between his finger and thumb. He pinches and toys with me until I'm hyper-sensitive and wet with desire.

He peppers my tummy with kisses as he inches down my body. He circles my navel with his tongue, lavishing it with extra attention and probing kisses. Each thrust of his tongue electrifies me, sending bursts of eagerness thrumming between my legs.

He hooks a finger into my panties and drags them down my thighs. They're slick and sticky, dampening my inner thighs.

"You're so wet." He hovers over my mound with his hot breath warming me.

I tremble and buck, wanting him to satisfy my body's craving.

"Open for me, Cadybug," he whispers as he dots kisses everywhere except where I need relief the most.

I kick my panties off as he slides his hand over my mound, pressing gently to tease. I whimper and dig my nails into his shoulders while lifting my hips, wanting more pressure, more of him touching me everywhere. My feet slide up the sheet as I widen my thighs around his shoulders.

“Please, Kent. More.” I’m not ashamed to beg.

“You’re a greedy girl.” He chuckles against my mound, causing my body to vibrate. I shiver and grip his shoulders tighter.

He cups his hands beneath my hips and drags me closer to his face. His tongue snakes between my engorged lips, wicked hot and sinfully bold. I squirm as he holds me in place, grounding me where he wants me. He sucks and sips, kissing me until the thread holding my body together winds so tight it breaks. I come hard, squeezing his shoulders with my knees, threading my fingers through his hair, and pushing him harder against me. Needing more.

I shudder as the ripples of sweet satisfaction roll through me, thunderous and lightning fast.

Kent slides up my body, chuckling with lips slick with my wetness. His thick, throbbing dick twitches as it rests against my thigh, just shy of my weeping center.

“Happy birthday, baby.” He brushes sweaty strands of hair out of my eyes as I come down from the high. The man’s a master at playing my body.

“You are amazing.” My eyelids flutter open, and now I’m the one staring at him with a loopy grin.

“Have you been a good girl this year?” His cock teases at my entrance.

“I’ve been very naughty.” I shake my head and stick out a pouty lip. “I deserve coal in my stocking.”

“Do you need a spanking?” He chuckles and pushes the tip inside my well. I bite my lip and slide my hands down his sides. “Or something for your stocking?”

A bead of sweat clings to his brow. His arms tremble as he steadies himself above me. I dig my fingertips into his ass, prodding him forward, dying to have him buried deep inside me. I draw my knees up and lace my legs around him, lifting to give him all the access he needs to find comfort and release.

“Hold on. You’re in for a bumpy ride.”

He thrusts long and hard. I arch my back and press the back of my head deep into the mattress. I bite my lip as he spreads me wide. He throbs inside me, hot and needy. I buck against him as he withdraws before slamming into me again and again.

My heart races, beating against my chest. I gulp in painful breaths as my lungs struggle for air. My body tightens. My toes curl as I squeeze him tighter, needing every silken inch of him. I shake as he strains to hold on. He doesn’t give in to his release until my walls clamp down on him like a vise, pulsing and shattering my body, draining me of my sanity.

He unloads inside me, hot and creamy, slicking my walls with his seed. He jerks, straining into the freefall overtaking us both. He collapses on top of me, cocooning me in his arms as we catch our breath. We’re slick with sweat and trembling in each other’s arms. There’s nowhere I’d rather be than with him.

Kent pushes to his elbow and graces my lips with the sweetest, gentlest kiss. He wipes back my hair, and I’m held captive in his gaze.

“Merry Christmas Eve, Cadybug.”

EVERLY is next in the Cranberry Corner holiday series:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/everly>

Read more about Cady’s brother, Drake, and Hope in

GINGERBREAD and the GUY NEXT DOOR:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/gingerbread-and-the-guy-next-door>

Read more about Cady's brother, Sebastian, and Sophie in **OH FUDGE**: <https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/oh-fudge>

Check out all my books on my website:
<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links>

Download the Piper Cook reading list:
<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/piper-cook-reading-list>

Cranberry Corner is packed full of holiday antics and love matches. Meet all the women and men of **Cranberry Corner**, beginning with Parker: <https://geni.us/CranberryCornerSeries>

Scroll for a sneak peek of **GINGERBREAD & the GUY NEXT DOOR**

Subscribe to my newsletter:
<https://www.authorpipercook.com/newsletter>

MORE BY PIPER COOK

My promise to you: Every short story is steamy and sweet, with instalove romance and guaranteed happily ever after. Absolutely no cliffhangers and no cheating. I write sassy, strong, curvy women who don't need a man to save the day but love a man who can charm their hearts.

More Places to Find Me

Website: <https://www.authorpipercook.com/>

BookBub: <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/piper-cook>

Piper Cook Reader Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/pipercookreaders>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pipercookauthor>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/pipercookauthor>

Pinterest: <https://www.pinterest.com/pipercookauthor>

Find all my books and descriptions here:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links>

Gingerbread and the Guy Next Door

Curvy Girl Short & Steamy Small-Town Humorous Holiday Romance

She's a hot mess in the kitchen and in her personal life. He's the guy next door with a reputation. Can they bake up a little holiday magic or is she just his cookie of the week?

Hope

My life's a mess. But things are starting to look up when my catering business finally gets local recognition.

When my oven overheats in the middle of baking cookies for the annual gingerbread house decorating contest, the smokin' hot guy next door offers to help with my goodies.

Drake is a steamy cup of hot cocoa and I'd love to dip my cookie in his cream.

But can I trust my heart to a guy to a notorious reputation and bachelorhood emblazoned across his chest?

Drake

Voted Cranberry Corner's most eligible bachelor is an honor, but it's not who I aspire to be.

Full disclosure: I'm tired of serial dating and one night stands. I want the deluxe relationship package with all the sprinkles and cream filling.

Problem is I've found the red-headed woman of my dreams, but she thinks I'm nothing more than a smooth talking player.

Hope is a curvy swirl of cinnamon and sugar and I'd love to taste her candied ginger center.

Can I convince her I'm ready for a happily ever after, but only
with her?

Warning: When this smooth-talking playboy tumbles head
over heels in love with our sweet as sin curvy baker, he'll do
whatever it takes to win her heart. If you love cinnamon roll
alphas, curvy women, and sticky sweet steamy romance, then
you'll love Hope and Drake.

*If you're a hopeful romantic at heart and love steamy, short,
small-town, swoony romances, then Cranberry Corner is the
place for you. Don your mittens and prepare for a cookie
dough fight that'll give you all the warm, toasty feels.
Guaranteed HEA with no cliffhangers.*

Chapter 1

Hope

I'm running late as usual. If it were any other night of the week, I'd be curled up on my couch in comfy pajamas with a bowl of popcorn. But tonight, Cranberry Corner's City Council announces bid winners for all the significant holiday events. I entered Hot Mess Catering's bid into the candidate pool to bake cookies for the annual gingerbread house decorating contest. It's an enormous task to undertake, but I'll have the entire bakery to myself with Sage gone on holiday.

If I get the bid, that is.

Sage and I share a commercial kitchen. She owns Dessert First, and I'm Hot Mess Catering. The name suits my life to a tee. No matter how hard I try to stay organized, something always happens to turn everything on its head. It would have made more sense for Sage to bid for the holiday baking events, but she and Zane, my brother, are spending Christmas skiing in the Swiss Alps.

I find a parking spot and hurry across the chilly parking lot. The old movie house is the only space large enough for town meetings. When I reach the sign-in table, Parker Knowles has a badge, meeting materials, and my assigned seat number ready for me. Parker's the most organized person I know. Better than any electronic filing system. She knows the exact location of every book and magazine at the Nerdy Bookworm.

"I'm late," I wince, juggling my purse and the materials she hands me.

"They're only a few minutes into the meeting." She offers a cheerful smile, then winks like we're sharing secrets. "It's your lucky day. You missed Mayor Stanton's introduction. He goes on forever."

She drags out that last word, and I snicker, recalling his long speeches. I've been to more than one ribbon-cutting ceremony in the previous year to know how he drones on.

“Thanks.” I take a quick peek at my seating assignment and hurry into the meeting. The theater is dark with a holiday slide presentation playing on the big screen. The aisle’s numbers are backlit, making it easy to find my row. My seat is three rows from the front, middle aisle, two seats in. At least I’ll only have to drag my ass across one person to get to my seat.

“Excuse me.”

I touch the arm of the gentleman sitting in the aisle seat and feel like I’ve been zapped by a lightning bolt. That’s a lot of static electricity for a walk down the aisle. I recognize him as soon as he glances up at me with a cocky grin plastered across his face.

It’s my serial dating next-door neighbor, Drake Jenkins, with a penchant for tall blondes, not curvy redheads like me.

Drake

I stand so Hope can shimmy past me to her seat. I’d much rather pull her onto my lap, but that would only elicit stares and get me a slap in the face and possible handcuffs. The theater is dark, but there’s no hiding the curves of her delectable body. When her curvy ass brushes against my crotch, it’s all I can do to keep my hands to myself.

Hope moved in next door a few months ago. She was friendly at first, waving when we’d pass in the driveway. She even brought me cookies and potpies that were leftover from a few of her catering gigs. It’s calloused of me, but I’m so jaded I figured Hope had an agenda. Snag a date and have lifetime bragging rights with the town playboy. Yeah, my ego’s been overinflated, and it finally burst. I’m a man like any other, and sometimes I need to be hit over the head with a frying pan to appreciate what’s staring me in the face.

But now she’s avoiding me. When we bump into each other, she hurries the conversation like she’s trying to make a quick getaway. That’s when this whole bachelor thing started weighing on me. It doesn’t matter if I busy myself with dates. My life is headed for a dead-end, and all I have to show for it is this lousy bachelor title.

I'm thirty-six and the most eligible bachelor in Cranberry Corner. At least that's what I'm told. It's why I'm here tonight instead of throwing back beers with the guys. I don't know who votes for these things, but I'm beginning to think karma has a hand in it. I've played the field and broken hearts that didn't deserve to be hurt, but I was honest from the start with every woman who fell in love and then wept when I wasn't ready for "I do."

But now I *am* ready and can't shake the love 'em and leave 'em reputation. One-night stands don't appeal to me anymore. I want the real deal. The deluxe relationship package with all the bells and whistles. I want someone who can love me, faults and all. Someone who wants to settle down, have kids and live out our lives until we're old, gray, and I'm still chasing her through the house with my walker or cane. I want real love. Lasting love. And I want it now before I'm too old to play catch with my son or make my daughter's prom date squirm under my watchful eye.

It's an extensive wish list, but it's Christmas, and I'm hoping for some old-fashioned holiday magic.

Continue reading **Gingerbread & the Guy Next Door**:
<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/gingerbread-and-the-guy-next-door>

Read the **CRANBERRY CORNER** series here:
<https://geni.us/CranberryCornerSeries>
