



Christmas
SECRET

CHRISTMAS COOKIE CHALLENGE

HAZEL J. NORTH

Christmas Secret

Christmas Cookie Challenge Book 2

By Hazel J. North

Christmas Secret

Millie

Christmas with my family is serious business. It's the one time a year we all travel back to our hometown, so we go all out. Peppermint cocoa, yard full of tinsel, a thousand Christmas lights, decorated cookies... you name it, we've got it.

Too bad Mom tasked me with getting the Christmas tree this year because I totally forgot to order one, which goes against her "merry and bright" motto. In my frenzy to find the perfect pine, I end up at Mistletoe Christmas Tree Farm. I don't know what I expected to find there beside pine trees, but it sure as hell wasn't Gabe, my brother's best friend and my lifelong crush. Who can resist those lumberjack muscles and dimples-to-die-for? Not me, that's for sure.

Maybe this year, Santa will finally get me what I've been wanting for years: him.

Gabe

I'm desperate to get away from the life I've built in the city, so when my brothers ask me for an extra pair of hands to cut trees at our family's Tree Farm, I get on the first plane home.

But then Millie shows up, desperate for some fine wood. All I can think about while cutting down a pine for her are her delicious curves, innocent doe-eyes, sparkling personality, and amazing humor.

There's one tiny little problem, though. Okay, maybe two. She's my best friend's sister which means she's totally off-limits. And then there's the one secret I've kept from her for all these years.

Will she still feel all merry and bright when she finds out the truth?

Christmas Secret is a steamy short instalove romance and part of the Christmas Cookie Challenge series. Read them all to spice up your holidays. NO cheating, NO cliffhangers, and a guaranteed HEA.

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2022

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Prologue

The counter of Kringle's Coffee and Sweets Shoppe is crowded with holiday shoppers needing pick-me-up shots of espresso, while the tables in the dining area are occupied by couples on first dates and friends exchanging Christmas gifts.

The bell over the door chimes, and a woman with long, blonde hair walks in. "I just love this place," she says fondly, gazing in wonder at the beautiful decorations. A large, artificial Christmas tree takes up the corner, adorned with gorgeous ornaments, glittering tinsel, and strands of real popcorn. Life-size nutcrackers stand guard at the counter. An antique train set circles the store, and Christmas music plays over a speaker. "It's like stepping into the North Pole."

An employee that looks remarkably like an elf in a Christmas movie and wears a name tag that says HOLLY JOLLY in big, block letters, snorts in disgust. "The trees aren't *fake* at the North Pole," she says, shooting a nasty look at the Christmas tree in the corner of the shop. The look is so incongruous with her short stature and rosy cheeks that several customers blink in confusion.

Another employee, this one looking like Mrs. Claus brought to life, steps out of the kitchen with a tray of chocolate chip cookies. She smiles kindly and the cheerful atmosphere returns immediately. "I'm Mrs. Kringle, and I'd love to welcome you to my shop with a complimentary cookie."

An older gentleman steps forward to take one of the treats. "I collect trains, and I've never seen a set quite like yours. Where did you get it?"

"It's one-of-a-kind," Mrs. Kringle says. "My husband made it for me centuries ago."

"Centuries...? Oh, I get it! It's part of your Mrs. Claus act." He grins, stepping aside so other customers can take a cookie.

A woman glances at Holly's name tag and claps her hands. "Holly Jolly!" she exclaims. "Could that be any cuter?"

“It’s a very respectable name, thank you very much,” Holly snaps, folding her arms across her chest.

The woman licks her lips. “Um...okay?” She hurries away with her cookie

Mrs. Kringle shakes her head. “Holly, could you at least *try* to be polite to the customers?”

“I *am* polite! Did I make fun of *her* name? No, I didn’t. Even though it’s *ridiculous*.”

“Actually,” the next customer in line says, hoisting his shopping bags onto his shoulder, “I overheard your conversation, and she never told you her name.”

Holly shrugs. “She didn’t have to. I already know. It’s an elf thing.”

The man winks. “Is that right? An elf thing? So, what’s my name?”

Holly raises an eyebrow. “Matthew. And right now, you’re wishing that the free cookie was macadamia nut or even peanut butter. Which is rather ungrateful, don’t you think?” The man’s mouth falls open, and Holly reaches out with a hand to snap it shut. “You’ll eat the cookie, and you’ll *like* it, Mattie, my boy.”

Matthew nods vigorously, grabbing a chocolate chip cookie and shoving the whole thing into his mouth before running away.

Mrs. Kringle sighs, and her breath smells like cinnamon and vanilla. “That’s not okay, Holly. You know better than...ohhh” she breathes, spotting something over Holly’s shoulder. “A cookie exchange!”

Holly turns to look. Three women stand to the side, each holding a plate wrapped in cellophane, waiting for a table to open up. Within moments, Holly knows their names: Carly, Millie, and Lauren. Old friends since college, each forty years old and *single*.

Mrs. Kringle’s favorite.

Holly's face stretches into a grin. "Are you thinking it's time to break out the fortune cookies?"

"Absolutely." Mrs. Kringle rubs her hands together gleefully. "After all, we can't let Kris have all the fun. Let's work some Christmas magic of our own."

Chapter One

Millie

“Now the jingle hop has begun. Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell—”

“Fuck.”

My brother Dane looks up from his phone. “I’m pretty sure the lyrics are *jingle bell rock*, sis.”

“Turns out they change when you mess up an entire batch of cookies.”

He strolls to the kitchen and lazily places his elbows on the counter. “Let me taste.”

I push the tray of cookies toward him. “Go nuts. But don’t tell me I didn’t warn you. They look horrible.”

“Looks can deceive.” Dane breaks a cookie in half and puts it in his mouth. “These aren’t so bad. A bit dry maybe, but edible.”

“Are you sure?” I grab a cookie from the tray for myself.

“I am, but it’s clear what your problem is. You’re taking on too much. Baking cookies for the Christmas fundraiser, babysitting your nieces and nephews, getting our Christmas tree... It’s a lot.”

I stop mid-bite. “Christmas tree?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Uhm, yeah, your holiday assignment this year. You didn’t forget, did you?”

Mom enters the kitchen, looking way more stressed than anyone should be around the holidays. “What’s that about forgetting something?”

Dane laughs. “Oops, I’m out of here. Good luck explaining, sis.” He takes two more cookies with him and bails on me. Great.

I wave Mom's question away. "It's nothing. Just a little hiccup with the tree."

"A hiccup? What do you mean?"

I shrug, guilt building in my stomach. "That it'll arrive a bit later than expected."

"Later? Please don't tell me you forgot to order one."

I plaster on a fake grin. "I'm just teasing you. Could you imagine me forgetting to get the tree this year?"

She puts her hand on her heart. "You nearly gave me a heart attack with that silly joke. It's not even funny. Forgetting the Christmas tree... That would be a true nightmare."

She shakes her head and mutters something to herself about not wanting to have Christmas ruined.

It's not that I completely forgot about the tree. I thought about it multiple times. Made mental notes and everything. I just haven't gotten around to going out and buying one.

I get my winter coat from the rack and put it on before slipping into my warm boots. Winters in Trout Creek tend to get extremely cold as the town is up in the mountains, but I love every minute of being here. Even though I just turned forty and moved away ages ago, the same doubts creep up on me every time I return. Was moving to a different state the best decision? Or should I think about moving back, especially since my parents aren't getting any younger?

"Penny for your thoughts," my brother Dane says.

"Oh, it's nothing."

He crosses his arms over his chest and grins. "Did you just lie to Mom about forgetting our Christmas tree?"

"If you rat me out to her, I'll kill you," I tell him. "And stop following me around the house."

"I'm not. I'm just bored."

"Weren't you going to meet up with some friends from high school?"

He shrugs. “That’s not until late afternoon.”

“Okay.” I get my car keys out of my purse. “Do you want to come to the Christmas tree farm with me?”

“Nah, it’s way too cold outside.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Gosh, you’re insufferable.”

“Like a man who takes his role as older brother should be. Good luck finding a tree, sis.”

“Thanks. I’ll need it.”

I head out the door and make a beeline for the car. After defrosting my windows, I check Google to see where I can get a tree. I think about going to Mistletoe Creek Farm but immediately decide against it. The McArthur brothers own it, and seeing them will bring out old wounds I don’t feel like opening. Don’t get me wrong, Gabe, Scout, and Tristan are all perfectly fine men. It’s just... Gabe used to be my best friend, emphasis on used to. We were happy. I even thought we had a shot at something more until he disappeared into the sunset with another woman.

At least I won’t be running into him at the farm. He left more than a decade ago and now works as a gardener in the city. I only know this because my brother is still friends with him and mentions him sometimes. I always pretend I don’t remember who Gabe is, even though I miss him like crazy. Trout Creek isn’t the same without him, and every time I travel back here, his absence fills the air I breathe.

Anyway, I feel bad enough already without seeing his family, so I head to Santa’s Tree Fleet in our neighboring town of Apple Blossom Valley, praying they’ll still have some decent trees left this close to Christmas.

I take my sunglasses out of the glove compartment, and a piece of paper floats out. Right before it hits the floor of my car, I grab it. Memories of me and my best friends—Lauren and XXX—receiving fortune cookies from Mrs. Claus come flooding back. I stare at the words, still unclear about what to make of the cryptic message.

The truth is the last puzzle piece the heart needs to let a Christmas miracle in.

I shake my head and stuff the piece of paper into my purse. No matter how nice these words sound, they're nothing but a fantasy. Fun to think about, but just a gimmick.

I sigh. If only Christmas miracles were real, I'd be a happy woman.

Chapter Two

Gabe

Even though it's December and cold, I'm dressed in nothing but a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt. No coat, scarf, or sweater. Chopping down Christmas trees all day long is more than enough to raise your body temperature.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead with my bare hand after loading yet another tree into someone's pickup.

"Thanks again, and take care," Mrs. Leeroy, my old history teacher, calls out to me while turning on her engine. "And feel free to stop by my booth at the Winter Festival. I'm making my signature homemade mulled wine."

"Count me in," I tell her and wave her off.

"Gabe, I've got another customer waiting for you," my brother, Scout, tells me through the walkie-talkie. "Bring out your best lumberjack smile and make her day."

"Coming."

I pick up my axe and sling it over my shoulder. The weekend before Christmas is always the busiest here at Mistletoe Creek Farm, and today is no exception.

I take a moment to close my eyes and breathe in the crisp mountain air. Man, how I missed being out here. I can't believe I let myself get all wrapped up in my ex's demands these past few years. Even though I've only been home for two weeks, I know that moving back here was the best decision of my life. Cutting ties with my ex and leaving our dysfunctional relationship behind was like getting out of jail after years of suffering for a crime I didn't commit.

I feel as if I can finally breathe again. As I look over the rows and rows of perfectly cultivated Christmas trees, I know that this is where I truly belong. Mistletoe Creek Farm is my home, not some bustling city where no one ever sleeps.

My brothers and I run the farm together with our father. We do the heavy work, and Dad takes care of the administrative and financial side of the business. While I was away, I didn't work here for a decade, so now I'm spending every single minute I have making up for bailing on my family.

We all have our dedicated patches of trees to ensure we don't get in each other's way. I make my way to Scout's, east of where I cut down trees.

A woman is talking to Scout, and I take a moment to look at her before approaching them. Her long caramel hair spills out from under her pink wool hat. Her warm-looking coat hugs her delicious curves. She's big and beautiful, and I can't wait to meet her.

"Did someone request a lumberjack?" I joke.

When the curvy woman turns around, my face falters, and my heart does this weird jump.

It's her. Sweet, gorgeous Millie. My best friend's little sister. The one I used to spend a lot of time with. The woman who probably hates me now. I mean, I don't know since we haven't seen each other for ages, but I can only imagine she's not fond of me.

"Oh, it's you," she says, taking a step back and almost tripping over my brother's axe.

I grab her arm right before she topples over. "Wow, look out."

"Smooth," Scout says with a grin and picks up his axe. "Anyway, I've got to run. Chop her a nice tree, okay?"

I have half a heart to beg Scout to stay so I don't have to be alone with Millie, but I don't. I'm a grown man. I'm sure I can handle a short interaction with the girl who looks even better than I remember, no matter how unlikely that sounds. She's always been stunning, but she's all grown up now.

"I didn't know you were back," I say.

"Every Christmas, me and my brothers travel back to Trout Creek. If you'd stuck around, you would've known."

I did know that. Sort of. Even though Millie's brother Dane is one of my best friends, I always try to avoid talking about her because it's just too painful. Too bad I can't tell her that nugget of truth.

"I'm back now, ready to chop down a tree for you."

She looks over to the tree field. "I'm glad you guys still have some. All the other places were sold out."

I frown. "Other places? We're the only Christmas tree farm in Trout Creek."

Her face flushes pink, and it's the most beautiful shade I've ever seen. "I might've gone looking at tree farms out of town to avoid coming here."

"Why?"

She looks me straight in the eye, and it feels like my heart gets punctured by an arrow. "Because I was afraid I'd run into you."

Shit. I've hurt her more than I thought. We used to be friends, after all, until I disappeared into the anonymousness of the city. Who knew she'd still resent me for leaving after all this time? If only I could tell her I didn't have a choice. Leaving meant protecting her. Too bad she can never know.

Her standing in front of me does something to me, though. I have the burning desire to make things right and to be there for her in a way I never could in the past.

"There's no need to be afraid. I don't bite. Why don't you follow me, and we'll pick out the perfect tree for you?"

She nods.

"What are you looking for exactly? Is it...for you and your husband to enjoy or...?"

"Is that your way of asking me if I'm single?"

I shrug, pretending I don't care about her answer. "No, but now that you've mentioned it, you might as well deny or confirm."

"I'm not seeing anyone at the moment."

“Me neither.”

“Yeah, right. I bet you’ve got women throwing themselves at you.”

I stop walking and shift my axe to my other shoulder. “True. Some customers ask me to wield more than my axe, but I never take them up on their offer.”

She laughs. “Oh my God, that’s too much information.”

“But it worked, right? I’ve got you laughing, and it’s a beautiful sight.”

There’s that pink shade again. “As beautiful as one can get when they’re forty and single.”

“Give yourself some credit. As far as I’m concerned, you’re forty and fabulous and should be proud, no matter your age or marital status.”

She bites her lip, making me wish I was the one to taste that mouth of hers. “I’m still not sure we can do this.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“Act as if nothing has happened. I mean...you left. And you never bothered to give me a heads-up or even an explanation. You made me feel like shit.”

Her words arrive with the force of an uppercut. She’s right, though. I did leave without a word of goodbye, but only so she wouldn’t get hurt.

“I’m sorry, Millie. I truly am. I wish I could make things right.”

“You can.”

“How? I can’t change the past.”

She looks me straight in the eye. “No, but you can start by telling me the truth about why you left.”

Chapter Three

Millie

Gabe looks at me as if I've asked the most impossible thing from him when all I want is the truth.

He grits his teeth. "I left because I'm a fool. Why don't we try to find you the perfect tree?"

I don't push the issue further. It's clear he doesn't want to talk about it, and I'm sure I'll get him to spill his secrets eventually.

I follow him up a narrow path with trees lined on both sides. His flannel shirt hugs his muscled back. I forgot how amazing he looks. No, that's not it. I forced myself to forget about him, but now that he's here, it all comes flooding back. How much fun we used to have together, how he drove me to my house after a party because he wanted me to get home safely, how his face lit up every time he laughed at one of my silly jokes. That, and how hot he looks with his beard and his tattoos and his unruly hair.

Too bad he sees me as nothing more than his best friend's little sister. I always assumed there was more going on between us, though. I mean, you could cut the sexual tension with a knife whenever we were together. Or at least that's what I thought. I don't seem to be the best judge of character when interpreting a man's behavior, which is probably why I'm still single.

"What kind of tree do you want? Big, small, thick?"

"I need a big, thick tree. One that doesn't let on that I initially forgot to buy one, even though that was my holiday task this year."

He looks over his shoulder and grins. "You forgot?"

I shake my head. "I know, it's ridiculous. I had one job."

“I’ll make sure you get the best tree of the entire farm. Follow me.”

He takes a sharp left, leading me to a fenced-off area. Gabe closed the fence behind us, then looks around with a contented smile on his face. “This is where we keep our VIP trees. Only the best of the best grow here.”

“And only the most expensive ones, I assume?”

He wiggles his eyebrows and extends his hand to me. “I won’t tell anyone about you forgetting the tree if you don’t tell anyone about getting a big discount.”

“Deal,” I say with a laugh.

“Go on, pick one. I’ll wait.”

I pull my coat closer around my body and stroll through the field of pines. I let my hands trail their leaves, smelling that delicious scent. It almost feels like a shame to cut these down.

I turn a corner and immediately know that this tree is the one. It reaches into the steel blue sky, its branches full and broad.

“I found one,” I call out to Gabe.

A few moments later, he appears by my side.

“This one,” I say. “One hundred percent this one.”

He smiles. “She sure is majestic. Perfect pick.”

I step back to let Gabe do his thing. He swings his axe against the tree’s trunk, the muscles in his arms flexing. I’m mesmerized as I watch him work. Every time his axe hits the tree, a bigger slice appears in the trunk.

The way he handles that axe makes me all hot and bothered. Even though it’s freezing, warmth gathers in my private parts, and my panties get damp just by looking at Gabe work. My thoughts start to lead a life of their own. I think about how he’d look without his flannel shirt or his pants. I can only imagine it would be a sight to behold. He’s got a tattoo peeking out from underneath his sleeve, and I have to restrain myself from grabbing his arm to look at it.

It doesn't take long before the tree hits the ground with a big thud, and I'm catapulted back to reality. "Let's get this to your truck," Gabe says.

"Oh, I don't have one. Shit. I should've thought about this. Do you guys do home deliveries by chance?"

He laughs. "Sure. You have to fill out a delivery slip at the front office. Come on, I'll show you."

Before we leave, he marks the tree as mine with a yellow plastic card. Jeez, I wish he'd mark me like that, telling the world I'm his forever.

I shake my head. I shouldn't let my imagination run wild like this. He doesn't want me in that way. For my sanity, I should get him out of my mind.

"Thanks, let's go and fill out that slip," I tell him.

Bells jingle as he pushes the door of the office open. Behind the desk is a burly man whom I recognize as his father.

"Hey, Dad. Do you have a delivery slip for me? It's for Dane's sister, Millie."

His dad looks up from the papers on his desk. "Oh, hey, Millie. Long time no see. How are you?"

"I'm good, thanks. Happy to have found a Christmas tree after all. My mother would flip out if I didn't bring home a beautiful pine."

He laughs. "Well, you've come to the right place." He hands me a delivery slip and a pen. "Just fill this out, and I'll make sure your tree gets delivered today."

I fill out my details and pay for the tree and the delivery, all too aware of Gabe watching my every move.

I hand him the paper, and as our hands touch, another wave of warmth floods through me. I look up, hoping to be standing underneath some mistletoe, but I'm not that lucky today.

"Thanks, Millie. I'll have the tree to you before nightfall," he says.

"Thank you for helping me out," I tell him and turn around.

I make my way back to my car, but before I can open the door, I hear Gabe calling after me. “Wait, I, um, wanted to know if you would like to join me at the Winter Festival tomorrow? It would be nice not to have to go alone but to take a friend.”

I smile at him, my heart thudding in my chest rapidly. “I’d love to.”

“Great. See you at eight then? I’ll pick you up.”

“Perfect. I can’t wait to see you.”

As I drive away, I can’t stop smiling like a fool. Maybe I shouldn’t get my hopes up, but I do. Even though there’s a chance I will get my heart broken all over again, I’m willing to take it.

Fingers crossed for a Christmas miracle.

Chapter Four

Gabe

I can't remember the last time I was this nervous about a date. Getting Millie to agree to accompany me to the Winter Festival was great. I thought she'd say no for a second, but I guess she doesn't hate me after all.

What I should do, though, is tell her the truth once and for all. I owe her that much if I want a shot at being with her.

"Dude, are you okay?" Scout asks, leaning in the doorway of the farm's bathroom.

I frown. "Why?"

"Because you've been staring into that mirror for twenty minutes."

I try my best to keep my cool. "Of course I'm okay. I'm going to the Winter Festival and want to look presentable, that's all."

He grins. "Oh, now I get it. You've got a date, don't you? Who's the lucky woman?"

"Shut up."

"My big, grumpy brother going on a date. It's a true miracle."

I straighten my shirt and cross my arms over my chest. "First of all, I'm not grumpy. And second, until recently, I was in a relationship, so it's not as if I can't get a date."

Scout shrugs. "That relationship you were in was a joke."

"Yeah, don't remind me."

My brother doesn't realize he's right on the money. A joke doesn't come close to describing the weird agreement I had with my ex.

"So...I need a name."

“You need to shut up,” I tell Scout, pushing past him.

“I’ll find out eventually,” he calls after me.

I smile as I make my way to my car. It’s way too much fun messing around with my brothers. It’s not that I don’t want him to know I’m taking Millie. What I want is for us to spend some time together without any expectations, pressure, or meddling. I only get one shot at this. I’ve been a fool to let her go once and don’t plan on letting that happen twice.

I put my car in reverse and make my way through the streets of Trout Creek. The road to Millie’s house is one I know by heart, and not just because Dane—my best friend—used to live there too.

I make a left and park in their driveway, right next to a giant inflatable Santa. The front of the house is filled with Christmas lights, and the Christmas tree Millie bought at the farm is set up right next to the living room window. Her family sure loves Christmas.

To my surprise, Dane is standing in the doorway. As soon as he sees me getting out, he pushes away from the door and marches over to my car.

Instead of a warm welcome, he throws me a death stare. “We need to talk.”

“Okay. What’s wrong?”

He looks over his shoulder at the house, then turns back to me. “You’ve got a date with Millie, right?”

I nod.

“I know we’ve never properly talked about this, but you hurt my sister in the past. A lot. If this happens again, I’m going to have to kill you.”

I can’t tell if he’s joking or not—that’s how serious he looks. “Dane, come on, I have no intentions of hurting her.”

“You better mean that. You’re my best friend, but I draw the line at messing with my family.”

“I promise I have no bad intentions. When I left in the past, I did it to protect her.”

He nods. “I know. I need you to promise me one thing, okay? If something happens between you guys, I want you to tell my sister the truth first.”

“Understood.”

Dane lets out a deep breath. “Good. Now, are we still on for beers tomorrow night?”

I nod. “Absolutely. Can I come in now, or are you going to let me stand outside all night?”

He smiles and walks to the front door. “Millie should be right down. You know how long women take to get ready. God knows what they do in the bathroom before every outing,” he says with a roll of the eye.

“I wouldn’t know. My brothers and I avoid being in the bathroom any longer than necessary. What more is there to do once you’re clean and dressed?”

“Exactly. Anyway, I’ve got to run. I promised Mom I’d help her with decorating the backyard. See you tomorrow.”

I wait in the hallway for ten minutes until I hear a door opening. I look up and see Millie standing at the top of the stairs. The way she looks takes my breath away. I grit my teeth so I don’t accidentally let out a growl. Fuck, she’s hot.

Her black pants accentuate her curvy ass and big thighs in the most perfect way. She’s curled her hair and let it bounce off her shoulders, framing her pink cheeks. I wish I could take a snapshot of this moment and hang it above my bed.

“Hi,” she says with a shy look.

I suck in a breath of air between my teeth. “You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you.”

Her cheeks grow even pinker at my words, and I wonder what other body parts of hers I can pink up. She descends the

stairs, and I take that time to guzzle up every fucking second of watching her be the queen she is.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she says when she’s in front of me.

“That’s okay. I don’t mind waiting for you.”

She grabs her coat from a wall hook and slings her purse over her shoulder. “It’s been years since I’ve been to the Winter Festival. For some reason, I’m always too tired or busy to go. Or too lonely,” she adds.

“I’m glad I can take you. To the Festival, I mean.”

She laughs and follows me out the door. The town square where the Winter Festival is held is only a few blocks away, so we decide to walk. Nothing beats the crisp evening mountain air anyway.

At the entrance of the square, it’s bustling with people. A bit ahead of us, a pregnant woman with a stroller is frantically looking around a patch of grass.

My heart sinks in my stomach, thinking she’s lost her child until I spot a yellow octopus-shaped toy on the ground.

I pick it up and march over to the woman. “Did your baby drop this by any chance?”

“You’re a lifesaver. Thanks so much!” I hand her the toy. “Jason,” she calls out. “You don’t have to keep looking. It’s right here.”

Jason, a guy I recognize as one of the trainers at the local gym, runs over to us. “Thank goodness. We’d never get little Poppy here to sleep without her favorite stuffed animal.” He turns to his daughter in the stroller and hands her the octopus. “Here you go, sweetie.”

The woman smiles at us and takes her husband’s hand in hers. “Thanks again. Enjoy your evening.”

“That was so nice of you,” Millie says. “And those two looked adorable together. I don’t even know them, but I can tell they are madly in love. That must be nice, you know? Having someone like that in your life.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

I want to press my lips against hers, but before I can move, she grabs my hand and pulls me over to the center of the square, squealing with joy. “They have a firepit where you can roast marshmallows. Can you believe that?”

Her excitement is palpable and cute, making me want her even more. I look forward to spending this evening with Millie, but before the clock hits midnight, I sure as fucking hell am going to kiss her until our lips are red and swollen.

Chapter Five

Millie

Maybe I exaggerated a bit when seeing all the fun things the Winter Festival has to offer, but in my defense, the event was never this fun when I was young. Still, shouting about marshmallows and downing three cups of cocoa might've been a bit too much. I'm a forty-year-old woman, after all. Aren't I supposed to play it cool and act sophisticated in public?

I'm grateful Gabe hasn't given me a weird look. Instead, he's been stealing glances at me whenever he thinks I'm not looking. I kind of like it, even though I'm still a bit mad at him whenever I think about our past. Maybe mad isn't the right word. Sad is, though. We're having so much fun together. What if we missed ten years of fun because of his choice to leave?

"Millie." Gabe's voice reaches me, and by the look on his face, he's been trying to get my attention for a while. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I got distracted thinking about work," I lie.

How can I tell him that I still want him after all these years without me putting my heart on the line again?

"That's okay."

I smile at him, hiding my true feelings of nervous anticipation and need. "We should go and secure a spot for the Christmas tree lighting. If we get there early, we'll have a fantastic view."

His eyes light up. "I think I know the best spot in town to watch the lights go on."

He extends his hand to me. As soon as our fingers intertwine, that familiar warmth flushes through me once again. We make our way to the now abandoned gazebo and

empty playground. Gabe's right. The spot is located on a slight incline, making it the perfect place to have an overview of the town square below.

We sit down on the bench in the gazebo.

"The Christmas tree lighting should start any moment," I say, checking the time.

"I know, but there's something else I want to do right now."

I give him a questioning look, and he answers by pointing his finger upward. "Mistletoe."

That one simple word makes my body tingle. It's packed with a promise of our lips touching, of us getting closer than we've ever been, and I'm so nervous it makes me giggle like a sixteen-year-old.

He waits to kiss me like the gentleman he is. I lick my lips and smile, giving him the go-ahead.

Gabe tilts my chin up with his hand. I meet his unflinching gaze. The music and laughter from the town square fade into the background until it's just the two of us, inching closer and closer and closer...

His mouth touches mine, and it's like being plugged into an electrical socket. His fingers brush my cheek while his tongue finds its way inside. A soft moan brews in my throat. No one has ever kissed me like this before.

His kiss is filled with need and rawness yet edged with what I can only describe as something bordering on... love.

We break free from each other, gasping for air.

"Wow, that was... heaven," I say.

I touch my lips with my fingers as if my mind needs confirmation that I just experienced this amazing kiss.

"Wow indeed," he says.

"We missed the tree lighting."

He smiles as he takes my hand in his. "I'd miss everything if it meant one more second of kissing you."

If I'm not careful, I'm going to melt into a puddle.

"What's stopping you from doing exactly that?" I ask cheekily, and before I can blink, his lips meet mine again.

The evening feels so much warmer now we're kissing. We need to take this somewhere private. Stat.

"Do you want to get out of here?" Gabe asks, his voice low and laced with longing.

"Definitely."

We jump up and start speed walking toward the town square, eager to get going. We're almost out of there when someone calls out to us.

"Gabe! Millie!"

Oh, fuck. It's Mrs. Leeroy, the now-retired history teacher at Trout Creek's high school.

"Can we pretend we didn't hear that?" I ask.

He groans. "Probably not wise to ignore a sweet old lady."

"I hate that you're right," I say with a sigh.

"Come on, have a cup of my mulled wine. The profits go to a good cause." Mrs. Leeroy scoops the dark liquid into two cups. "There you go."

Gabe shoves a handful of dollar bills into her collection box before taking the drinks from her.

I take a sip and cough. "Jeez, this is some strong stuff."

Mrs. Leeroy laughs my comment away. "Don't we all occasionally need a strong drink to get through the frenzy of the holidays? Or perhaps to remove some inhibitions," she says with a wink.

Am I seeing things, or is she on to us? And if she is, are other people as well? I look around the square as I drink my wine, but everyone seems to be minding their own business and not even giving us a glance.

Gabe downs his drink in three long gulps. He throws his cup away, and it lands in the garbage can with a dull thud. "Thanks

for the wine, but we need to get going.”

I down the rest of my drink as well and nod. “Yeah, it’s urgent.”

It’s not even a lie. I don’t know what will happen if I don’t get somewhere private with Gabe and continue our make-out session soon.

“Urgent? Is everything okay? You guys do seem a bit flustered.” Mrs. Leeroy recoils a little. “It’s not contagious, is it?”

Gabe takes it as a segue to get us out of here. “Um, yeah, we’re not feeling well. We need to lie down.”

I grin while I lock eyes with him. “He’s right. We’re feeling really, really bad.”

His eyes grow wide at my words. We wave Mrs. Leeroy goodbye and make a run for it.

When we’re out of sight from everyone, Gabe turns to me. “Are you okay with us doing this?”

I don’t know if it’s the wine talking or I’ve officially gone nuts, but the words escape my mouth before I can think them over. “Let me be clear. I want more than a kiss. I want you to do bad things to me. Deliciously bad stuff.”

He swallows, then pushes me against the façade of the diner, which is closed, fortunately. His hands grab my ass while his lips connect with mine. We kiss like two savages, tongues intertwining, panting hard. I can feel his hard dick pushing against his pants, and I grind my center against him.

“Shit, Millie, stop.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I want you, but not like this. Not here out on the street. I’m taking you home, and I’m making you mine.”

Chapter Six

Gabe

I take Millie to Mistletoe Creek Farm with me, even though there's a big possibility my family is still awake.

The ride home takes ages. With every bend and turn of the wheel, I know we're closing the distance to my house, shortening the time until I can strip her out of those clothes. I steal glances at her luscious body and knee-buckling smile whenever I can.

I park the car at the back of the house and tell Millie to be quiet. I slowly open the backdoor and peek into the living room. My brothers and father are all watching a sports game, oblivious to our presence.

We sneak past them up the stairs. I lock the door when we're in my room, praying no one will notice I've got a guest up here.

I lean against the door. "Are you sure about this?"

Millie smiles at me. "I've never been surer about anything."

"Before we do this, we should talk. About why I left."

"Let's talk later." She takes my hand and pushes me onto the bed. With excruciatingly slowness, she unbuttons her coat, one by one. The garment falls to the floor. Then, she does the same with the zipper of her sweater. Shit. This woman is an angel.

I extend my hand to touch her, but she shakes her head. "Not yet."

She pulls her t-shirt over her head, revealing her soft stomach and chest inch by delicious inch.

She throws the shirt on the pile of discarded clothes, and I marvel at the sight of her round breasts half-hidden by the fabric of her bra.

My dick is rock-hard now, and she's not fully undressed.

With trembling fingers, she flicks the button of her jeans open. She starts pulling them down, then stops.

“What’s wrong?” I ask in a husky voice.

“I...I...”

“Millie? You can talk to me.”

“I’m not like other women.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I wish I was thin and toned, but instead, I’m—”

I cut her off before she can continue. “You’re beautiful.”

“Please, you don’t have to say that.”

I put my hands on her hips and pull her on top of me. “You are. You’re gorgeous and funny and sweet and...I’m a fool for ever letting a perfect woman like you go. I’m not making that mistake again. Millie, I owe you an explanation.”

She puts her index finger on my lips. “Not now.”

She lowers herself, her hair falling on my chest and framing her face in the most perfect way. At first, our kiss is soft and warm, but soon it morphs into something rougher. It’s clear she’s been wanting to do this for a long time. I know because it’s the same for me. I drink in her scent. It’s nothing short of intoxicating.

“Drop the pants,” I tell her.

She does as I ask, and holy hell, I forget to breathe for a moment. Her black cotton panties drive me crazy.

I palm her center with my hand, putting pressure on the right spots.

She responds with a gasp. “Oh, Gabe.”

“Shhh, we’re not home alone,” I remind her.

She closes her eyes and bites her bottom lip. I flip us over so she’s flat on the bed and crawl on top of her, ready to feast on her breasts. She arches her back, and I unclasp her bra with a swift move of the hand.

I slide the straps of her bra down her shoulders. I can hardly believe Millie is lying on my bed in all her glorious nakedness, but it's real. It's all fucking real.

Her nipples are hard for me. I cup both her breasts in my hands. She makes a low sound, almost inaudible but unmistakably a sign of appreciation.

I close my lips around one of her nipples and start sucking. She pushes them further upward, filling my mouth with her big tits. I lick and suck while she squirms on my mattress, her hands fisting the sheets.

I let my tongue travel downward into the seam of her panties. Hooking my fingers into the waistband, I slowly pull them down, revealing the most delicious cunt I've ever seen. I part her thighs and get a good look at her glistening pussy. Then, I go down on her, and fuck, she tastes like heaven. She squeals with pleasure as I suck on her clit.

Her scent is so good it's going to be my undoing. I pause for a second, trying to get it together so I don't come. She needs to come first. Today and every other day after this. Her pleasure is my top priority now.

"Gabe, you're driving me crazy."

"In a good way?" I ask, my mouth still on her folds.

She moans, and I take it as a yes.

I spread her even further and slide a finger inside, reveling in the softness of her tight pussy.

"Fuck!" she screams.

"Shhh," I tell her again.

"It's too good not to scream," she whines.

I put my hand over her mouth, and she bites my fist while I finger my way to her orgasm. I keep flicking my tongue at her clit, knowing she's close to coming.

She groans, biting my fist even harder, but I don't care. Her orgasm ripples through her, and it takes a long time before she

comes back down. I don't give a damn. I have all the time in the world.

"Thank you," she pants.

"We're not done yet," I say, planting small kisses on her collarbone.

"Good."

She asks me to lie down and gets me out of my pants, then my underwear.

"Wow," she whispers. "I want to ride that."

I laugh and pull her on top of me. "Be my guest."

"It's just... This is my first time. Please don't laugh."

I grit my teeth. "Laugh? Shit, Millie, that's nothing to make fun of. It's fucking hot."

She closes her eyes as I slowly lower her over my dick. Her pussy wraps around me, and it's glorious. When I'm all the way inside, she flinches.

"Are you okay?"

She nods. "Yeah, it's just fucking tight. It takes some getting used to."

I swallow, trying my best not to shoot my load too early. "You decide the pace."

With closed eyes, she rolls her hips. First, she's slow and deliberate, but before long, her movements become more relaxed and rougher.

She smiles and opens her eyes again, catching mine. She adjusts herself and balances her weight on her feet so she can slam into me. The sound of her skin slapping against mine makes my eyes roll back in my head. I slap her ass as she bangs me harder than I could have ever dreamed.

"I need you to take me," she says.

I flip her onto her back, kissing her passionately before slowly sliding inside her again. Then, I pull my cock out completely before burying myself deep. She grabs my ass as I

fuck her, faster and harder with every thrust. The way she's panting tells me she's close to coming, and so am I.

The walls of her pussy tighten, urging me to slam into her even harder. We climb the peak together until we both come within seconds, and the world explodes around us.

I roll off her gorgeous body and pull her into my arms.

"That was amazing," she says with a sigh. "I hope it was good for you too?"

"Good? It was fucking perfect, Millie. I'm never letting you go."

She kisses me, and it doesn't take long before I'm making her come again.

Chapter Seven

Millie

I close the door behind me with a smile and sigh. Tonight was fucking perfect. Too bad it had to end already, but Gabe was right. Staying the night would not have been the best idea. Our families would butt in and demand an explanation, teasing us or worse—not approving of our relationship. We want to explore our blossoming feelings in peace, without anyone meddling.

“Wow, you look happy,” my brother says, making me jump.

I shrug, feigning indifference, but I can’t stop smiling. “What are you still doing up? It’s past midnight.”

“Couldn’t sleep. What about you? The Christmas tree lighting ended hours ago.” He squints. “Were you with Gabe this whole time?”

“We hung out, yeah.” I try to be as vague as possible.

Dane isn’t having it. Instead, he pushes even further. “Did something happen between you two?”

My cheeks heat at the thought of everything that *did* happen between us. “That’s none of your business.”

He rolls his eyes. “Millie, come on. I’m trying to have an adult conversation here.”

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “I don’t want to spill the beans, but yes, Gabe and I are involved. I’m extremely happy. That’s all I can tell you for now.”

My brother releases a breath of relief. “That’s good to hear. So he talked to you about why he left? And you’re okay with the whole thing?”

I swallow. Gabe did want to talk to me, but I was so eager to get into bed with him that I cut him off. “How do you know about that?”

Dane shrugs. “Gabe’s my best friend. After he left, I was furious at him. He didn’t treat you in the best possible way, right? So I confronted him, and he explained, and that’s the last time we ever talked about the whole naked picture incident.”

“The what?”

“Those naked pictures you took.”

I’m unable to speak. What the hell is he talking about?

He frowns. “Please tell me you know.”

“I don’t!”

My brother slams his fist on the counter. “I’m going to kill Gabe.”

The joy and happiness I felt minutes ago are dissolving around me. What’s all that talk about naked pictures? And why didn’t Gabe talk to me about it? Sure, I told him we could talk later, but he could’ve pushed the issue.

“Let me get this straight. You all knew about supposedly naked pictures of me? Which, for the record, don’t exist. And then you talked about it behind my back? I feel sick.”

Dane grabs his keys from the counter. “I’m going over there. I don’t let anyone mess with my sister, not even my best friend. I warned him about not hurting you.”

I hold my hands up. “Dane, please calm down. I think it’s best I go there myself.”

He grits his teeth, knuckles white from balling them into fists. “I’m not letting you drive through the snow in the middle of the night, sis. I’m taking you.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I look around the living room as we make our way to the car. Every nook and cranny is filled with cheerful Christmas decorations, but I’m not feeling the merry and bright vibes this house normally gives me. I’m afraid of finding out the truth.

We spend the drive to Gabe’s house in silence. Dane is seething with anger, and I’m sadder than ever. Did I give my

heart and virginity away to someone who isn't who I thought he was?

Dane sloppily parks the car in Gabe's driveway and runs toward the front door, not even bothering to close the car. He raps his knuckles against the wood. "Gabe, open up. I know you're in there."

The light in his bedroom flicks on, and he shoves the window open. "Dane? Millie? What's wrong?"

My brother crosses his arms over his chest. "You better come down here."

Gabe disappears from the window. A few moments later, his entire family is gathered on the front porch.

"What's this all about?" his father asks with a yawn.

As soon as Gabe appears, Dane grabs him by the shoulders. "You're going to take my sister somewhere private right now, and you're going to tell her everything. You owe her an explanation. Fuck, your explanation is a decade overdue. You owe her the truth. No more secrets."

Gabe nods and grabs my hand. He leads me to a secluded spot behind a giant inflatable candy cane in their front yard.

"I don't think this is going to work out," I say in a strained voice. "Apparently, you have naked pictures of me?"

"No, I don't. Millie, your brother is right. I owe you an explanation. Will you please let me do that before you make any rash decisions about our future together?"

I nod. "Okay."

"Remember when I started dating Janet?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, when we were together for a while, she started getting jealous of you and me. She felt we spent way too much time together and demanded I stop seeing you." He runs a hand through his thick hair. "But I didn't. I loved Janet—or at least I thought it was love—but telling me who I could or couldn't talk to? That was a bridge too far."

“I still don’t understand.”

He sighs, a pained expression on his face. “That’s because her request to break off contact with you was only the beginning. One day, she got home and shoved pictures in my face.”

“What kind of pictures?”

“Naked ones. I didn’t take a good look at them. I mean, I felt they were private. Then she said they were yours, and she would send them to the whole town if I didn’t stop seeing you.”

I stamp my foot on the ground. “That’s ridiculous. You didn’t even bother to ask how she got those pictures? Pictures I didn’t even take!”

“You’re right. I was a fool for believing her. It took me years to figure out the truth. She sneaked into the gym one night and took them while you were in the shower.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“I know. She confessed last month. I destroyed those pictures for good and ended things with Janet. Finally.”

“So you upended your life, left your family behind, and killed our friendship because of Janet’s crazy demands?”

He looks me straight in the eye. “No, I did it all because of you, Millie. I didn’t want you to get hurt. When I thought about those pictures getting out and what it would do to your life and career, I couldn’t take it, so I left. I felt it was the right thing to do. That’s why I settled for a life in the city with Janet. Yes, it wasn’t my dream life, but it was worth it if it meant you were happy. If your secret got out, you’d be heartbroken, and I couldn’t do that to someone I loved.”

I gasp at his words. “You loved me?”

He puts his hand on my face and brushes a strand of hair away. “Yes. I loved you then, and I love you now. It’s always been you, Millie. You’re the one. I only hope you can forgive me for being such a stupid fool. I never should’ve let Janet get

to me like that, and I sure shouldn't have let her blackmail me."

I lean in and softly kiss him. "I love you too, Gabe. No more secrets, okay?"

"I swear I'll only tell you the truth from now on. My God, look at us. It even started snowing. It's like a Christmas miracle."

His words remind me of my fortune cookie, and my jaw drops. *The truth is the last puzzle piece the heart needs to let a Christmas miracle in.* What are the odds? Before I can make sense of it all, applause breaks free behind us. I turn around and see Gabe's family cheering us on. Even my brother is joining in and wiping a tear away.

"Who wants some eggnog?" Gabe's father asks.

"Now? In the middle of the night?"

He shrugs. "Why not? We're all awake anyway. Besides, what better way to spend the night before Christmas Eve than celebrating true love, right?"

Gabe kisses me with a passion that sets my body on fire. "I can't say I disagree with him. What we have is true love, after all."

"True love indeed."

Everyone follows his dad inside, but we wait a moment to join them, enjoying the snow and each other.

I can hardly believe that after all these years, Santa has given me exactly what I've been dreaming of for decades: Gabe.

Epilogue

Gabe

Two years later

“You guys picked a great tree again this year,” Linda, my mother-in-law, says as she admires the Christmas tree I cut for her.

Ever since Millie and I got together, I gift them a tree from our VIP section at the farm. Millie moved back to Trout Creek, and we’ve been loving every second of our life together. She’s taken over my dad’s job at the farm, doing all the admin and marketing. My father is enjoying his well-deserved retirement now.

“Is this okay?” Millie asks, balancing on a chair.

“Babe, please let me hang the mistletoe this year,” I beg her.

“I’m perfectly capable of doing this.”

I smile at her. “I know, but I don’t want anything to happen to you or the baby.”

We tried for over a year to get pregnant. When it finally happened, we were over the moon. The baby’s due date is in one week, at Christmas. I’m not a big believer in weird coincidences, but I must admit that it’s a true Christmas miracle, something Millie has talked about ever since we got together.

“Fine, you do it,” she says and steps down from the chair.

“She can be stubborn,” Dane pitches in as he hands me some more mistletoe.

“I know. I married this stubborn woman.”

“Hey, watch it,” Millie says.

I hang the last of the mistletoe and envelop her in a hug. “You do know I love you, right? Forever and ever. Even in your most stubborn moments.”

She playfully punches my chest. “I’m not *that* stubborn. And I love you too.”

“Dinner’s ready,” Linda says, putting a hot dish on the table.

We all take our seats, talk, laugh, and enjoy each other’s company. As I look around at my family-in-law and my pregnant wife, I feel like the luckiest man alive.

Millie leans in and kisses me. “Enjoy your food.”

“You too, babe.”

“So, what are you guys hoping to get for Christmas this year?” Dane asks as he serves everyone a portion of glazed carrots.

I let out a content sigh. “Nothing.”

He laughs. “Come on, there must be something.”

I shake my head. “Nope. Millie and I are about to have a baby, and we get to spend every day of our lives together. There’s nothing I want from Santa. I already have everything I need right here.”



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