

A sweet romantic comedy



Don't
They
Know
it's



Christmas?

HOLLY KERR

Don't They Know it's Christmas

Holly Kerr



Three Birds Press

Copyright © 2023 by Three Birds Press

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Chapter One

Davis

“I hate Christmas.”

Pepper Grant looks up from tying the red ribbon on the box of five dozen specially made gingerbread people. “Pardon?”

That shouldn’t have slipped out. Christmas is a time for smiley faces and happy thoughts, even though my feet are already aching and I still have a ten-hour shift to get through. “Never mind.”

“No, I think I just heard you—the Christmas fairy of Tilson-Ashbury General Hospital—say that she hates Christmas.” Pepper finishes the bow with a flourish and a frown. “What’s up?”

“I was just—” *Talking out of my butt*, is what I want to say, but Dr. Davis Tilson doesn’t say things like that. Dr. Davis Tilson is prim and proper and precise and doesn’t talk out of her butt or announce she hates Christmas in the middle of a busy bakery four days before the holiday.

But what if she did? What if she could go around saying whatever she wanted to whoever she wanted to?

But that wasn't the Tilson way.

All this goes through my mind in a flash as Pepper stares at me, probably worried about my sanity. I don't blame her. Since when do I think of myself in third person?

"It's a bit much," I manage with an ambiguous wave of my hand. The bakery has been Christmas-fied to the extreme, with tinsel and garland and shiny balls dangling from every surface and a tiny tree in the corner, the scent of balsam fir waging war with the heavenly bread smell.

It must be Reuben's influence since Pepper's never been one for holiday decor.

"It's always a bit much," Pepper agrees. "You okay?"

"I've got this." It's the story of my life. "Everything's under control."

Another mantra. I like things under control, which is strange because I'm an emergency medicine doctor, and in the ER, nothing can ever really be under my control.

Pepper narrows her eyes. I've known Pepper my entire life, but we've never been what I'd call friends, due to Pepper's advanced age—three years older—and the fact she's about as dedicated to her bakery as I am to medicine. But since I finished med school and started at the hospital, we've become friends. It's a slow-moving friendship, but it's there; in the four years since I've been back, I've gone from running into

Pepper's bakery on the weekend for fresh bread, to grabbing the occasional coffee on the way to work when there was a lineup at Leaves and Beans, to finally stopping in on a daily basis. And Pepper and I have gone from good mornings to conversations to drinks with the girls.

We're the only girls invited, but still—drinks.

"But are you okay?" she asks with suspicion. "You do tend to take on a lot, you know. Especially this time of the year."

The sigh escapes before I catch it. It's more of a soft exhale like when you pull out a ventilator. "Yes. I'm fine." But even I can hear the robotic quality of my words.

Pepper shakes her head as she rings up the cookies but doesn't push. "I don't understand why the fuss about Christmas if you hate it so much."

"I don't exactly *hate* it. I used to really get excited about it. It was my father's favourite holiday," I finish with a rueful smile.

"Say no more," Pepper says. "I really liked your dad. He could be scary, but he was nice. Do you know he really pushed for me to get the good coffee maker in here? He'd come in and get his scone and complain that I didn't have decent coffee to go with it."

"That sounds like my father." Dr. David George Robert Tilson had been all about control and ambition and getting what he wanted.

He definitely did not want the vasospastic angina, which, combined with atherosclerosis, caused the massive myocardial infarction that killed him five years ago.

Heart attack in his sleep. There had been nothing anyone could do. At least it was peaceful.

Christmas saved my mother after Dad died. She'd been lethargic for months, going through her day-to-day chief of staff duties without her spark or the quick retorts that had even the most confident attendants scared to face her. But she rallied that first Christmas, telling me and my sisters how Dad wouldn't have wanted us to miss out on the holidays.

Since then, Christmas seems to become a bigger deal every year, at home and in the hospital.

I came up with the idea of having something special for the kids forced to spend the holiday in the hospital years ago, and Mom put me in charge as soon as I started in the ER. For the twelve days leading up to Christmas, we now have movies and treats and visits from whatever local celebrity I can come up with.

Two days ago, Grayson Grant, the latest star of *The Suitor* and Pepper's brother, visited the kids with his fiancée and a bag of signed baseballs.

It was a little disconcerting how many of the little ones knew him from the reality show rather than as one of Ashbury's two local baseball heroes.

Today is gingerbread day, and with four days until Christmas, it's time to find a volunteer to wear the suit.

Luckily, Reuben takes the opportunity to slide my large vanilla latte across the counter before I can start the mental countdown of things to do. "Thanks, Reuben." He always puts it in an extra-large cup to give me more foam and adds a drizzle of something special.

Today I smell peppermint glaze.

The bell over the door jangles. By the expression on Pepper's face, I don't even have to turn around to tell who walks in.

Ethan Pike.

Raising my gaze to the plastic snowflakes hanging from the ceiling, I pretend to be admiring the decorations rather than cursing whatever fate put us together in Pepper's Pies and Pastries this morning. "Couldn't he have waited five minutes?" I mutter.

"You okay?" Pepper asks—again—out of the corner of her mouth.

"Thirteen years," I hiss. "I'm *fine*." For emphasis, I tuck in my AirPods. "Fine."

I take the big box of cookies and prepare to run without seeming to be running.

I should have run.

“Hi, Reuben!” All the air seems to have sucked out of my body at the sound of the youthful voice behind me.

“Rufus. How are you today, laddie?”

I move aside and take a careful peek at Rufus. He’s almost as tall as I am, with gangly legs, tousled hair, and a smile that is pure Ethan.

Doesn’t he have school? He shouldn’t be drinking coffee. Does he even know who I am?

I need to get out of here. Unfortunately, right behind me is the very last person in town that I want to see.

“Davis,” Ethan says. “Good to see you, as always.”

“Dr. Pike,” I reply in the very same voice I used with Freddy Barkus the fourth time he fell off his tractor while drunk.

Pepper snorts behind me. It’s either look back at her with the death glare I’ve perfected or—

I look up at Ethan Pike and instantly regret it.

He’s there. Right in front of me, just as tall, just as... everything. Same dark blond hair, although cut in a more fashionable style; same hint of stubble along his jawline. Same chest I used to rest my head on, only inches from my eyes, looking wider than when I knew it.

He’s right there in front of me, blocking my exit.

He needs to be gone.

“That’s a big box of cookies.” Ethan seems to have similar difficulties in meeting my eyes. I shift my gaze to his chin instead of his mouth—full lips, with the sweet half-smile, marred only by the scar on the top right corner. God forbid, I look straight into his eyes—hazel eyes with the laugh lines that never laugh when he sees me now. Instead, I get a mixture of frustration and pity.

It’s always great for the ego to be looked at with pity.

Fury rushes through me, as potent as the day—

Thirteen years ago.

I breathe through my nose, hoping it doesn’t flare my nostrils. I don’t want to seem like I’m still angry with Ethan, because that would make me look like some kind of obsessed shrew with a grudge.

I’m not obsessed.

“What do you want, Dad?” Rufus demands.

A blink, and I force myself to look through Ethan like he’s not even there. Clutching the box of gingerbread, I sweep past him to the door.

Thirteen years.

And I’m still not over it.

Ethan

I GIVE REUBEN MY order, fighting the urge to turn to watch Davis leave the bakery. Still, after all this time, it's like a punch in the junk every time she walks away from me. "That went well," I mutter.

Pepper shrugs with a nonplussed grin. "She's a smart girl with a long memory. You done her wrong."

"We were on a break," I say through gritted teeth. Rufus chats with Reuben, leaning over the counter while Reuben explains what he's doing.

My son needs to know how everything works.

My so.

"Maybe so, but with her best friend?" Pepper demands in a low voice. "And to get her..."

Pregnant, I finish silently. It wasn't just me; Darcy was right there, betraying her best friend. But she's not around to get the looks and quiet remarks.

I hate that Rufus gets the not-so-quiet remarks.

“Yeah, I get it. I’m the bad guy here. But you know—” I do my best to pull myself out of the funk that seeing Davis invariably puts me in. “You used to be my friend too.” I give her the smile that works best when I’m in a jam, the one that shows my dimple and makes my eyes twinkle.

Unfortunately, I’ve known Pepper too long for it to work on her. “You always were a brat,” she says with a roll of her eyes.” Always wanting to play doctor, and not the fun kind of playing doctor.”

“Like you would have given me the time of day if I’d come near you with my stethoscope. Now, if it had been Emmett...”

“Ha ha.” Pepper grimaces and snaps her fingers closed. “Shush.”

“You started.” I smile gratefully as Reuben slides the large Americano across to me. “Ta, verra much.”

Reuben nods his shaggy head. Even when he doesn’t speak, most of the customers end up using a weird Scottish-like accent with him. Luckily Reuben doesn’t seem to mind.

Rufus takes his hot chocolate and follows Mrs. April into the kitchen, probably for some snack that I shouldn’t be letting him have this early in the morning.

There are a lot of components to being a dad and I know I’ve dropped the ball on the snack one.

“Rufus excited about spending time with his mam?” Reuben asks in his rumbly growl. Rufus has always been a big fan of

Pepper, but it surprises me how much my son has taken to Reuben.

It shouldn't; I've only been back in Ashbury for six months and I'm still getting to know Rufus, as well as the rest of the town. The only thing that shouldn't surprise me is how so many are still fixed on Team Davis.

"I think so," I tell Reuben. I should know that; I should know if my son is looking forward to seeing his mother for the first time in years. I pass a pile of coins to Pepper, dropping several in the mug for tips. "That is, if I can pull him out of your kitchen."

"Ethan." Reuben's voice stops me cold. "Davis is a lovely lass."

"That she is." I brace for a Reuben lecture but have no idea what brought this on.

There's so much I don't know this morning.

"I wonder sometimes if she lets the past haunt her a wee bit too much."

I cock my head, confused at what he's getting at. I'm not the only one. "English, Reuben. Or at least English with the cool Scottish accent," Pepper says, finishing with a silly smile.

I've known Pepper for a long time and I've never once seen her smile at anyone like she smiles at Reuben.

"I dinnae think it's good for her to hold grudges," Reuben continues like Pepper hasn't spoken. "It might be time for you

to show the lass you're not the lad who hurt her. It's all she sees when you're around."

I look over at Pepper, who shrugs. "Listen to the man." She affects a Scottish accent that's worse than mine. "He knows what he's talking about."

Chapter Two

Davis

ETHAN PIKE WAS MY first everything and I've never forgiven him for it.

Annoyance quickens my steps, and I make it to work in record time. Even listening to ABBA's Greatest Hits at a louder-than-healthy volume doesn't help.

It would be good not to be constantly reminded that Ethan is back, but in a place as small as Ashbury, it's impossible not to keep bumping into him.

Especially since we *work at the same place*.

Why couldn't my grandfather have established a new hospital in Ashbury rather than giving a bunch of money to this one? Then Ethan could be some hotshite surgeon here and I could be happy there by myself?

But no. Things don't happen like that for me.

Pasting a smile on my face—because it wouldn't do to look like the robotic control freak of a drill sergeant the whole place thinks I am—I walk through the automatic doors to find the

ER a hub of activity. For a small town, the hospital is *busy*; the surrounding area flocks to Tilson-Ashbury with their farm injuries and public-school accidents, the only hospital within a fifty-kilometre radius.

As I cross the floor, I assess a broken arm, possible pneumonia, and a need for stitches before parking the cookies behind the desk. “Don’t touch,” I order the residents at the desk. “It’s for the kids.”

I mean it to be lighthearted and funny, but it never comes out that way.

“No,” Dr. Stratus says, her dark eyes wide with what could be fear.

It sure looks like fear. I take out my earbuds and tuck them in the case. “Good morning,” I add, with an attempt at a smile. “How was last night?”

I hate that the residents seem to be afraid of me, but Mom says it’s respect. At thirty-one, I’m already head of emergency services at the hospital and, if rumour is to be believed, have been earmarked to take over Chief of Staff when Mom retires in five years.

At least that’s Mom’s plan. She moved seamlessly into the administrative post, but I know it’s not going to be as easy for me.

Because here—this loud, chaotic, often bloody place—is where I’m meant to be.

Even with the constant urging of my parents, I've always dreamed of being a doctor. With both of them high-profile, extremely successful surgeons, it was natural they wanted me and my sisters to follow in their footsteps.

I'm the only one who did.

I probably spent more time in the hospital as a kid than was healthy, but I couldn't get enough of watching and learning and absorbing everything about medicine. Dad wanted me to become a surgeon, and Mom pushed for private practice, but I wanted the ER because you never knew what was coming in.

It was the only time I openly went against their wishes.

I'm with my first patient when I see Ethan walk in. He's a surgeon; he can easily go through the front doors and up to the second floor, but I've noticed that, most days, he wanders through the ER when he really doesn't need to.

I ignore him.

At least I try to.

He hangs by the desk, laughing with Stratus, trying to steal a gingerbread cookie. I give Stratus credit for refusing—when Ethan pulls out the dimple, he's almost irresistible.

Almost.

I still have no idea why my mother hired him. Yes, he's a great general surgeon, but she never liked him. Despite his brains and drive, Mom never thought Ethan Pike was good enough for me.

Which is why, thirteen years ago, after being constantly on the defensive, of arguments across the dinner table, and uncountable attempts to prove to my parents how amazing Ethan was, I finally caved to their pressure and broke up with him.

It was horrible. Anyone who doesn't think you can find true love at seventeen has clearly never been a teenager in love. I made myself sick from crying, refused to eat, and that was before I missed my senior prom. I was so miserable I was ready to defy my parents and beg Ethan for another chance.

Only to find he'd gone to prom without me.

I would have forgiven that, had he not hooked up with my best friend during the party afterward.

Not only that, but six weeks later, Darcy was pregnant.

That really put the nail in the Ethan coffin. My parents shipped me off to volunteer at some camp for kids with cancer, and then to university.

I never gave him a chance to explain.

Ethan wasn't worthy of me, but apparently, Dr. Pike is a fine addition to the hospital. He's been back in Ashbury for six months and I've managed to avoid any conversation that doesn't involve him cutting into one of my patients.

I'll see how long I can last.

Ethan

EVERYTHING ABOUT THE HOSPITAL reminds me of Davis.

It starts with her last name on the building. Then there's the parking spot right by the door—Stephanie Tilson, Chief of Staff. Then there's the portrait of her father hanging beside her grandfather's in the lobby.

And then there's Davis, all over the ER. Not only the ER, but this Christmas thing with the kids. I rush to the meeting after surgery, standing at the back beside the nurses' station, wondering how long I need to be here.

The scone I grabbed from Pepper's this morning can only go so far and I'm in need of lunch.

Jovi, the hospital's heart and lung guy, sidles between two peds nurses to get to me. I clock the way they smile at him. My friend truly is the McDreamy of Ashbury General.

I abhor that show. Every half-decent-looking surgeon will forever be referred to as McDreamy or McSteamy.

“What’s this all about?” I ask Jovi. I get my fair share of sideways glances from the staff, but Dr. Jovani Maran takes full advantage of the interest from the male population.

Finding out there was such a lively LGBTQ community in my little hometown was only one of the many surprises after moving back.

“They haven’t told you?” Jovi asks with mock horror.

“Who’s *they*?”

“They. The masses.” He waves his hand, the long sleeves of his tee covering the tats. “This is all for the annual Christmas collection.”

“What are we collecting for? ’Cuz I just got out of surgery so my wallet is back in the locker.”

“Not money, my innocent friend. *People*.”

That doesn’t sound ominous at all. “Explain.”

Jovi taps his watch. “It’s that time of the year. She’s looking for some poor sap to play Santa for the kids.”

“That doesn’t seem too bad.”

“It would actually be an enjoyable extra-curricular activity if you like kids, which I’m sure you do.”

“I like *my* kid. Not sure about the rest of them.” My moving home coincided with Rufus turning thirteen; he’s a tolerable teen, but judgment is still out on a few of his friends.

“Also, it’d be fun if it weren’t for the anti-Grinch.” Jovi drops his voice and gives a nod of his chin toward the desk

where Davis appears.

From the circles under her eyes, I can tell she's tired, and the pasted-on smile suggests she wants to be here even less than I do. "The what?"

"Dude, she's a hard-core Christmas freak. Why d'ya think this place looks like a Christmas tree exploded?"

I did notice the considerable amount of tinsel in the hospital.

"She makes the holiday worse than a bowel obstruction," he adds.

"I don't know. Bowel obstructions aren't much fun." I speak from the experience of just completing my fourth of the week, and it's only Monday afternoon. The folks of Ashbury really need more fibre in their diets.

"Anyway, don't get roped into helping because Little Tilson is worse than a prison warden. Don't be fooled by the cuteness."

Is it possible that there's someone working here who doesn't know my history with Davis? The realization makes me view her with new eyes.

I'd think she was cute even if I didn't know her. Strawberry blonde hair pulled back into a bouncy tail, big blue eyes, and a tiny little nose, but it's the mouth that pulls the attention. Full without being puffy, heart-shaped and with a tiny divot under her nose.

I used to kiss that nose because Davis hated it. I'd lean over her and kiss every inch of her pretty face except her lips. She'd

shake her head and I'd laugh as she tried to catch my lips with hers.

And then I'd finally kiss those lips and then we'd—

“Dude.” Jovi backhands my shoulder. “You're staring.”

“No, I'm not.” I pull my attention away, try to delete the image. It's been years—too many years—and I've moved on.

I've so moved on.

At least I had until I got back here, constantly reminded of the Davis-who-was and the Davis-who-is.

The Davis-who-was, was amazing, but the Davis-who-is seems pretty freaking incredible.

“Have some willpower, man,” Jovi hisses. “Her cuteness pales when you consider the weight of Big Tilson watching her every move. Who do you think is behind this summons in the middle of the day? I've got to prep for surgery in ten. I don't have time for this.”

“I don't think they'd appreciate being called Big and Little,” I mutter, but Jovi has no time to reply before Little Tilson—Davis—claps her hands like a teacher.

“I won't keep you long,” she calls over the din of thirty people packed in a too-small space as well as the usual noises of a hospital. “We've raised an incredible amount for the kids' Christmas gifts this year, and we'll be delivering them on Friday. As usual, I'm still looking for a volunteer to play Santa.” Her voice has more than a tinge of annoyance, similar to how she greeted me this morning.

I wonder if that's just the way she sounds these days.

Silence falls among the staff. Even the machines in the rooms closest to the nurses' station keep quiet. Davis drops her eyes to the clipboard in her hand with a resigned expression as the staff pushed to the front seem to shrink in size.

“What the—?” I mutter.

Jovi furiously shakes his head. “Don't do it,” he mouths.

I glance at him and then back to Davis, at the defeated slant to her mouth, the slump of her shoulders as the silence lingers far longer than it should.

There's no contest.

I raise my hand, but Davis's attention is still on the clipboard. “Sounds fun,” I say loudly. “Yay, Christmas.”

Chapter Three

Davis

E THAN PIKE JUST... *volunteered?*
To be Santa.

“Are you sure?” I blurt. During my first year doing this at Tilson-Ashbury General, I had plenty of volunteers to help with the gift delivery. The second year, the only person to raise their hand was a second-year resident with a soft stomach and an unfortunate crush on me. Third year, the only hand up belonged to Dr. Pavel Myrchuk, a visiting fifth-year neurologist from Ukraine. It was quickly pulled down when Nurse Natalie Nunsome whispered something into his ear.

Now—Ethan?

“I mean...I’m sure you’ve got surgeries.”

“We’ve all got surgeries.” I don’t recognize the voice, but I think it’s miserable Dr. Dru, who thinks bones are the best parts of the body.

Ethan spreads his hands. “Look, if you need a body, I am a body.”

“Yes, you definitely are,” someone says loudly. I’d put money on it being Nurse Natalie.

“I just mean, I think I’m well equipped to fill out the Santa suit.”

It’s impossible to miss the comments about that, because unfortunately, Ethan Pike is currently the best-looking, single, straight man on staff.

A fact I am well aware of as he grins at me, tall enough to look over most of the heads, ignoring Jovi Maran hissing beside him.

He’s the last person I want to spend the day delivering gifts with.

“So?” Ethan’s grin makes me think he really wants to help, rather than this being part of an elaborate joke at my expense. “You want me?”

Don’t say yes. I glance around the group, noticing how everyone finds something else to look at. I’m sure everyone in here knows our history. Old gossip best forgotten was pulled out and recirculated when Ethan started working here. “Thank you,” I say reluctantly. “I’d appreciate your help.”

I really don’t.

Already, the group is beginning to disperse as pagers beep and phones ring. I quickly assign two nurses to deliver the gingerbread cookies to the long-term patients this afternoon, and a pediatric resident to provide a list of kids who will be here Friday.

A siren wails in the distance and that's the end of the meeting. A quick glance at my list shows most of it has been checked off, and what isn't I'll take care of myself to avoid asking for more volunteers. At least I've found a Santa, but why does it have to be *him*?

When I look up, the area around the nurses' station is empty except for Ethan.

"You really don't have to do this," I say coolly, kicking myself even as the words hang between us.

"It's for a good cause." He smiles at me, but his hazel eyes are serious, like he's scrubbing for surgery. I hate, hate, *hate* that my heart skips at the smile.

Frown, goddammit!

"Still." Why did we have to end up at the same hospital? It had been the plan all through high school—same university, same medical school, then back here. But after everything that happened, Ethan switched at the last minute and headed to Ottawa, leaving me alone.

"I take it the decorations are your idea?" Ethan makes the statement into a question. "Very tinsel-ly. Your dad would have loved it. He was always a big fan of Christmas, wasn't he?"

Why did he have to bring up my father? Even though my parents made no secret of their disapproval, Ethan still showed the utmost respect for them. "He was."

“Come on, Davis.” There’s a pleading note in Ethan’s voice. “Can we get past this and be friends again?”

Yes. I hate being the person who holds the grudge, and God knows I need every friend I can get, but I can’t seem to get past that gaping hole of hurt inside. But when I meet Ethan’s gaze, I hesitate because there’s *something* there...

I miss him. I miss him so much, and having him around me only makes it worse.

The siren is closer this time and sets off an alarm in me. I take a deep breath and shut the *something* down. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Davis, please. I said I was sorry. You know I never meant to hurt you.”

I twist my ponytail into a smooth bun, leaving the back of my neck exposed. Does Ethan remember how I liked to be kissed there? “This isn’t the place to discuss this,” I say in a low voice as I reach for a gown to put over my scrubs.

His mouth tightens, a sure sign of frustration. “Then where is? I’ve been trying to talk to you for weeks. Months, and you keep blowing me off.”

“Maybe because I learned it so well from you,” I snap.

“Does it have to be like this?”

“How do you propose it be like? Should I forget everything and start over with a clean slate? Because, let me tell you, that is *impossible* to do here in Ashbury.”

“I’m not that kid anymore.”

“I don’t know anything about you anymore, Ethan, nor do I have any intention of finding out. We work at the same hospital. That doesn’t make us friends. It doesn’t make us anything.” Suddenly the doors to the ER fly open. “I’ll email you the details about the delivery,” I throw over my shoulder as I rush to greet the paramedics.

Three-car crash, one DOA, four others with serious injuries, one critical. By the time I’ve heard the list of injuries of the man on the gurney, assess for myself, then order tests and labs, Ethan is forgotten.

It’s better that way.

Ethan

THE SECOND-BIGGEST REGRET IN my life was leaving for school without getting a chance to explain to Davis how having sex with Darcy wasn't planned or intentional but happened only because I was so crushed that Davis broke up with me.

And we *were* broken up when I hooked up with Darcy.

Darcy hooked up with me.

The instigator of the event has always been unclear, but the outcome was the same—I slept with my ex-girlfriend's best friend, resulting in a teenage pregnancy.

Rufus.

It's hard to regret an action when the outcome is a kid like Rufus, but I truly never meant to hurt Davis. Or Darcy, since we should never have been together, and our being a couple ended soon after Rufus was born. She's great, but we never fit. Not like Davis and me.

The Tilsons are the closest thing there is to Ashbury high society. They run the hospital and the town—respected, admired, held above reproach.

Not loved.

Not like Dad is loved. And Emmett. And Ellie.

Not me, not after I broke the heart of one of the golden girls of the Tilson family and knocked up her best friend.

As much as Dad is loved by most of Ashbury, there was—and still is—a small minority who somehow blamed him for my mother's leaving us. How Dad could have ever been the bad guy for Mom abandoning her family, taking off with Pepper's father in the middle of the night, is beyond my comprehension, but small-town scandals rarely make sense. Unfortunately, the Tilsons were part of those few who were convinced it had been Dad's fault.

They never liked me with Davis. They *really* never approved of her friendship with Darcy. I still have no idea why Dr. Tilson approved my residency. There must have been some sort of midlife crisis to have such a change of heart to allow access to her daughter again.

Whatever the reason, I'm grateful. There's a lot of unfinished business between Davis and me and it's long past time we settled things.



Tuesday, the day after I agree to play Santa, I make it back to the farm before Rufus and fight to stay awake until he gets home from school.

Dad and Emmett are still in the greenhouse and Shae is nowhere in sight as I sit at the table and try not to make it seem like I'm waiting.

I've been back since June, and it still doesn't feel like home.

It's my own fault. I'm not the same kid who left the farm.

Emmett had left five years earlier, headed off with Grayson to live out their dreams of professional baseball. In my mind, he'd been already gone for years. I had a big brother, but I shared him with sports and girls and the memory of our mother. There hadn't been much time for me.

Now that I'm back for good, I don't know how I fit in with my family. I hadn't planned on it; with one more year of my surgical residence, I had planned on finishing in Ottawa and then moving closer to Ashbury. But Ellie got married and Emmett met Shae and Dad had a bad bout of bronchitis, and it was time for me to step up to be Rufus' father.

My family had initially stepped up when Darcy's mother—who had looked after Rufus while Darcy finished her art program—passed away. I'd just been admitted into medical school and Darcy had landed an incredible opportunity to study in Italy, and Dad had taken Rufus without a word of protest.

My boy has been happy here. So much, that he doesn't seem like my boy.

Again, my own fault.

It's quiet in the house. No more horrible music drifting from Ellie's room; no more tripping over balls or baseball bats crashing to the floor.

It's so quiet that if I put my head right here on the table...

"Dad!"

I jerk upright to find Rufus standing at the door, long-limbed and dirty-blond hair getting darker by the day.

"You sleeping?" He drops his backpack on the chair across from me.

"Just resting my eyes." I pull myself up and over to the counter. Rufus is perfectly capable of feeding himself, but it's one of the little things I missed when he was growing up.

"You sound like Gramp. He likes to nap."

Yet another reason I'm back. Dad isn't getting any younger. At least Emmett is around to help with the farm, which is a blessing, since I can barely keep a houseplant alive, but it's time for me to take ownership of my responsibility.

"How long did you work today? How many people did you cut open? Did anybody die?" Rufus peppers me with questions as he pulls books out of his bag.

I yawn widely as I fix him a chicken wrap. "I was there for twenty-eight hours with six surgeries and nobody died. It was

touch and go for a sec, though, when this guy's appendix burst. That's what happens when you ignore pain in the belly." I pantomime an explosion in the stomach.

"Cool," Rufus says cheerfully.

Of course, I'd love to have him follow in my footsteps into medicine, but Rufus will make up his own mind. It's still pretty neat that he's so interested in my hospital stories.

I don't miss how he's just as interested in what Dad and Emmett do with their days. Or Shae, Emmett's girlfriend. Rufus worships Shae.

I've got a good kid. "So, what's up with you today?"

"I met somebody."

I swear, the kid is Harry Styles-cool. "Somebody new in school?"

"Naw. I mean, she's been there since grade two, but today I really, you know, *saw* her."

Is Rufus talking about himself or about Davis and me. Not there is a Davis and me.

Yet.

Maybe.

Never.

"Yeah. I know how that is," I say, trying to sound as laid back as my thirteen-year-old.

"Really?" In an instant, cool is forgotten. "Because I don't know how, all of a sudden, she's just *there*, and I don't get

how I never noticed before.”

“What’s her name?”

“Hermione.”

“Seriously?”

“Parents were huge Harry Potter fans. Everybody calls her Nee.”

“So, this Nee—you just looked at her and started to see her in a different way or did she look different?” I really want to ask if the girl suddenly sprouted breasts, which would change the way all the guys looked at her, but I can’t. Rufus is the most respectful kid I know, thanks to Ellie.

“She’s in my group project and I had no idea she was funny. And smart. She’s always been pretty quiet and kind of pushed behind her friends, but they’re not in the group, so it’s all her. I like her.”

“That’s really cool. She like you too?”

“I don’t know,” he says uneasily. “I hope so. I didn’t say anything, but we had a moment, you know?”

A moment. “I do know.”

Rufus practically jumps across the table. “Who do you like?” he demands. “Somebody at work?”

“It’s not that.” Do I want to get into this with him? He knows about Davis; it’s best to keep the *something* that was between us yesterday to myself. “One of the doctors,” I admit. “I offered to dress up as Santa for her.”

“Why? Is she into Santa kink?”

“What? No! It’s to give out presents to the kids in the hospital.” I give my head a shake. “What do you know about kink?”

“I know stuff. Probably more than you.”

“Dude, I’m a *doctor*. I’ve seen stuff that you wouldn’t believe.”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve seen up somebody’s butt?” he demands.

“Rufus,” I say through laughter.

“What? There’s gotta be some weird stuff.”

I push up from the table. “I’m not telling you that. That’s—no.”

“C’mon, dude!” Rufus wheedles. I don’t know if it’s him calling me dude rather than Dad, which, to my ears, he still doesn’t feel comfortable with, but something makes me turn around.

“Strawberries,” I say with a grin.

Chapter Four

Davis

MY HEART IS AS heavy as my feet when I finally get home after a very long shift. The last of the crash victims were triaged and sent up to surgery, ICU, and unfortunately for one, the morgue.

I can't blame the weather for the last two hours since accidents happen in every season. It's just the way it is. People get hurt and I try to fix them.

Two kids had been brought in after falling through the ice at a nearby lake and I hadn't been able to save either of them.

Working in the ER breaks your heart on a regular basis.

But I do my best to push it into the backyard of bad thoughts because tonight is family dinner with my sisters.

"Davis?" Mom calls mere seconds after I shut the door quietly behind me. "Why don't you get changed and come join us?"

It's more of an order than a request.

My sisters and I drifted back home after Dad passed away, filled with an obligation to look after Mom mixed with an unspoken sense of relief that the pressure of living up to our father's expectations was finally gone.

Dad was a great man, but not an easy one to live with.

Luckily, the house is more than big enough for the four of us to have our own space—as well as the odd overnight guest, unseen by Mom.

At least Georgie and Bob have brought men home. I'm not sure about Stevie. There's been an embarrassing lack of opportunities for me to try my luck.

When I pull myself through the door, my sisters have already assembled: impossibly pretty Georgie; impossibly smart Stevie; and impossibly—and effortlessly—cool Bob.

Roberta Charlotte to our mother.

Because of busy schedules, Mom insists on Tuesday night dinners. Not that any of us can cook; meals in the Tilson house consist of takeout, salads, or whatever our housekeeper Lilly leaves out for us.

Tonight, Bob attempted a kale salad, which would be good in theory, but she threw in every green fruit and vegetable found in the fridge.

“How are you doing with the hospital Christmas plans?” Mom asks as I sit down beside Stevie, who frowns as she stabs a grape on her plate.

The last thing I want is to mention Ethan Pike to my mother. I still haven't figured out why she hired him in the first place, which leads me to rationalize he must have some seriously good references and therefore be very good at surgery.

But of course he is. Ethan Pike is good at everything.

He was *very* good at kissing.

My face flames. *Why* am I thinking about kissing him... again? "Everything is coming together," I tell Mom. "We did the gingerbread today and they didn't last long."

"Did you save me any?"

I raise an eyebrow at Stevie. "No. They were for the kids and other patients. You're perfectly capable of walking over to Pepper's and getting your own."

Stevie makes a face. "That's mean. Don't forget, I said I'd go to the FABBA show with you tomorrow," she points out. "I'm cutting out of a party early for it."

"You listen to more ABBA than any of us," Georgie accuses Stevie. "Davis is doing *you* a favour by going to the show."

The four of us share a healthy dose of sibling rivalry, more than a little resentment, and total devotion toward each other. It also helps that none of us would be easy to live with for a non-Tilson, and therefore, we're content to live with each other.

Also, none of us are good at relationships.

"I heard you found a Santa," Bob says coyly.

Mom clucks approvingly. “I knew my doctors wouldn’t let me down. Who is it this year?”

I push half a stalk of celery across my plate before I admit defeat and cut it into a more manageable size. “Ethan Pike.” I stare at the painting across the room and fight to keep my voice even and unconcerned.

It’s like a gust of icy wind blows across the table. Mom pauses with her fork poised inches from her mouth. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

She *hired* him so what right does she have to voice a completely irrational concern? “He was the only one who offered,” I say defensively.

“Still...”

“He. Was. The. Only one who volunteered.” I punctuate with a crunch of the celery.

“It’s been years,” Stevie soothes. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Of course it will,” Georgie agrees.

“I’m not sure.” Mom frowns. “That was a very emotional time for you.”

“She had her heart broken.” Bob stares sympathetically across the table at me, like she herself has never felt heartbreak. Which is so not the case. Bob has had her heart broken more than the rest of us combined. “She’s never given herself a chance to get over it.”

“I have so,” I protest around the fibrous celery that refuses to break down in my mouth.

“Both Ethan and Darcy broke her heart,” Georgie continues like I haven’t spoken. “She had every right to be emotional. She still does, especially with little Rufus as a reminder.”

“That kid is definitely not little,” Stevie corrects. “But, yeah, that’s got to be tough for her, seeing him all the time.”

“*She’s* quite capable of speaking for herself,” Bob points out.

“Yes, I am!” They start at my outburst like they’ve forgotten I’m in the room.

“I’m not sure working with Ethan is a good idea,” Mom says. “I think it’s best if I assign someone else to help you out.”

“No! I don’t want you to assign someone to help me.” *It’s bad enough that they think of me as one of your lackeys, is what I don’t say.*

“But working with Ethan will distract you. You can’t be emotional in your career.”

“If you think he’ll distract me, then why did you hire him in the first place?”

“I hired him as a surgical resident, with little interaction with you.” Mom sniffs delicately. “It’s a big hospital. I expected you to keep your distance.”

“It’s a *small* hospital, and I interact with *everyone*.”

Mom rears back, the lines around her mouth deepening. “I don’t understand why you’re speaking to me like this.”

“Well, I don’t understand why we have to bring up my past with Ethan. He’s the last person I want to talk about.”

“You brought him up,” Stevie points out.

I breathe through my nose. Most family dinners end with one of us storming off. It’s like a tradition, now that the empty seat at the head of the table has given us some leeway. At least the years have trained me how to do it politely. I fold my napkin and place it on my plate, which is still half-full. “Thank you for dinner. I’m finished eating and finished with this conversation. Good night.”

Ethan

AFTER I CRASH FOR a couple of hours and Rufus throws some clothes in his backpack, we hit the road for Toronto.

I'm taking him to the city so he can visit his mother.

Neither one of us has seen Darcy in person in years. She's good at FaceTiming, but she hasn't been back to Ontario since Rufus was seven. So, her being in Toronto for a business trip is a huge thing. Rufus will be staying with her until Christmas Eve, when Darcy will bring him home.

I haven't figured out if I'm supposed to extend an invite for her to stay for Christmas.

We're almost to Darcy's hotel when I notice Rufus has been quiet for the past half hour. "You good, dude?"

"Yeah."

I'm not on good terms with many teenagers, and what I remember about myself at that age is that talking to your parents wasn't a thing you did.

Rufus is not like that. He talks about his feelings. He talks about others' feelings. He's considerate and compassionate and just plain neat, in a personal hygiene and housekeeping way.

I give credit to my father, with Emmett and Ellie getting a lion's share as well. They all did good with my boy, and I'm forever grateful, but there's always a lingering sense of... regret? Guilt?

I wonder how Darcy feels about that. She's got it worse than I do, because her influence over her son has been from half a world away, and only from a screen. At least I was in the same province and came home for holidays and summer vacations. Darcy would have no idea that Rufus's simple *yeah* reply means there's quite a bit going on in that head of his.

"Excited to see your mom?" The word hangs between us like an untied stitch. "Darcy?" I try again. "Do you call her Mom?"

"I haven't really called her anything," Rufus admits. "She's not exactly mom-like, but I can't call her Darcy. That's weird."

"Call her whatever you want. This whole arrangement isn't on the normal side." There's that surge of guilt from leaving my kid behind while I built a career for myself. Yes, Dad was perfectly willing to take on the responsibility, and yes, I'd been a kid myself, but still. Rufus is *mine*.

Mine and Darcy's.

What if he was mine and Davis's?

I give my head a very firm shake. Thoughts like that have been clouding my mind since I got back into town but have gotten considerably worse since I spoke to Davis yesterday.

Since I stood close enough to smell the faint scent of her perfume.

“It’s cool,” Rufus says.

“It’s only cool because you don’t know anything different,” I rationalize.

“Are you trying to make me into some brooding jerk who hates you?” Rufus laughs. “It was cool living with Gramp and Emmett and Ellie and seeing you when you came home. It’s not like I felt neglected. Abandoned.”

“Did you feel abandoned?”

“No!” He laughs again. “I said it was cool. Even if you hadn’t moved back, I was comfortable with you. I saw you. I knew you. Mom...”

“You can’t really know a person only by FaceTiming,” I finish.

“Technically, you can, like if you were in a relationship and there was a global pandemic and everybody was locked away and that was the only way you could see each other. But it’s hard when all you talk about is school and what I’m doing for the summer. *We talk*, you know. You and me. Mom...”

A burst of happiness explodes in my chest. *We talk*. Sounds to me like I’m doing okay with this Dad thing. “I get it,” I say. “It might be awkward for a bit, but your mom loves you.”

“I know that, but she doesn’t know me. Not like you do.”

Another warm bloom. I try to hide my smile. “You’ll get to know her. Staying with her, doing all the touristy things together. This’ll help.”

“Yeah.” I concentrate on maneuvering through traffic so it’s quiet for a bit. But then— “Do you think it’ll be weird?”

“With your mom?” I glance over, and his expression of concern is all it takes. “Do you want me to stay with you tonight?”

Chapter Five

Davis

FIFTEEN MINUTES AFTER I get to my room, Georgie opens the door.

“You could knock, you know.” I lie on my bed with head and feet hanging over the sides, mainly so I don’t have to stare at how my room hasn’t changed since I was fifteen.

The posters on the wall may have come down and there’s a few less stuffed animals, but it’s still the same pink and white stripes, like an old-fashioned candy striper’s uniform.

There’s still a pile of photos in the drawer of my nightstand that I can’t bring myself to throw out.

The bedframe creaks as Georgie flops beside me. “You’re so *emotional* that you might have refused to let me in.” I have to smile at her impression of Mom. “What’s going on?”

Georgie is four years older; she owns a fitness centre, so we have little in common but have always been close. “I have no idea.”

“You’ve been like this since Ethan’s been back. *Emotional.*”

“I have not!” Without lifting my head, I grab a pillow and toss it at her. “Shut up.”

“Have so. I can tell—a little moody, a little more irritable than usual.”

“You make it sound like I’ve got my period.”

“One that lasts six months? It’d make me a lot more irritable than that.” She grins at me, then the smile fades and concern creeps into her expression. “Have you ever talked to him about it?”

“About what? Why he cheated on me with my best friend?”

“Why you broke up with him?”

I catch my breath. I’m not proud to admit that when I remember the hurt Ethan caused me, I conveniently leave out the part where I broke up with him.

“You never told him, did you?” Georgie’s voice is gentle. “That Dad made you?”

I flip over with an exasperated huff. “What good would it do? What’s done is done.”

Georgie copies me but squirms around until she can lay her head on my stomach. “Other than making him feel guilty, I’m not sure if there’s any point. But I think you should.”

I toy with Georgie’s hair—more red than blonde, and cut short in a pixie cut that does amazing things to her face. “I really don’t want to have a conversation about anything with

Ethan, let alone admit my father made me break up with my boyfriend.”

“You’re still angry.”

“Did he ever make you break up with someone he didn’t approve of?”

“It wasn’t that he didn’t approve; he just didn’t see Ethan as being long-term for you. I don’t think you helped by refusing to tell him how much he meant to you.”

I resist the urge to push her off. “Are you trying to make this my fault?”

“No. I’m not trying to do anything, Dav. But—it’s Christmas. And he wants to help you out at the hospital. Neither of you are going anywhere. Wouldn’t it be nice to be friends again? Maybe this could be a good way to fix things between you.”

Georgie’s words send a rush of something I don’t recognize through me. Something I haven’t felt in a long time. It lodges within me, like a foreign object in a body cavity.

And then I remember how I’ve been treating Ethan: refusing to speak with him when he’s clearly making an effort. Refusing to even look at him. The rush stops because how can someone want to be friends with that? “I don’t think it’s fixable,” I say in my best rational voice, trying not to sound too morose.

“It’s Christmas, Davis-. Everything gets better at Christmas.”

The foreign object stays lodged in there.

Ethan

I STAY WITH RUFUS for the night. And Darcy is as excited to see me as she is to see Rufus. My guess is that she's nervous about spending time with him as well.

We were good friends once, but now Rufus is our only connection.

Still, it's fun to catch up with her, and over dinner, she regales us with tales of living in Paris, of her travels through Europe and Asia.

Does it give me a strange feeling that she enjoyed all these experiences while my family cared for Rufus? Yes. Yes, it does, but it helps to know that my father doesn't regret a single moment of the time he's had with Rufus.

And knowing my presence makes Rufus more comfortable with her helps as well.

It's a nice evening, and I drink too much wine. Darcy insists I share her room, and Rufus pulls out the couch bed without a word of complaint.

Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if Darcy had stayed—if we both stayed in Ashbury and raised our son. Would we have been happy together? Would our friendship have eventually turned to love?

Would I ever feel for Darcy what I felt for Davis?

“So.” Darcy is curled up on one of the double beds in the hotel room. “How are things at home?”

“Ashbury?” Because I know Darcy doesn’t consider that home, not since her mother passed away. And for me, I haven’t been able to shake the feeling that I’m an outsider in the tiny town.

Darcy nods. Rufus watches a movie on his laptop, headphones in. I could shout at him and he wouldn’t hear me. “You’re working at the hospital.”

“With Davis,” I say.

“Davis?” A series of expressions flash across her face. Surprise, eagerness, regret. Shame. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” I hunch over the pillow I hold in my lap. “It’s been...awkward, I guess?”

“Did she say anything about me?”

“About the former best friend who stole her boyfriend?” I ask sarcastically and Darcy’s face falls. “Sorry. I let myself be stolen, so it’s not all on you. No. She doesn’t say anything. She basically refuses to talk to me.”

“I thought she might forgive with time,” Darcy says with a wistful note in her voice. “At least you.”

I heave a deep breath. “Nope. Can’t see that happening.”

“But you were broken up, remember? You did nothing wrong.”

“Yep, we were on a break.” And just like on *Friends*, there’s been years of controversy about the fact. Half the town believes I cheated on Davis with her best friend. They’re the ones who had no sympathy when Darcy got pregnant, with comments about karma and *serves you right*.

Those who hold me blameless are few and far between, the result of the Tilsons’ influence over the town as well as my own refusal to tell my side of the story.

I don’t even know my side anymore. I had been picking up one of Emmett’s suits from the cleaners to wear to the prom and came home to find a tearful Davis on the front porch.

Her words were forgotten in my shock, but the gist of it was that she was breaking up with me.

We were too young.

We shouldn’t be tied down at university.

It was better this way.

I lie down on the bed, still holding the pillow. “Still makes it awkward.”

“It’s been almost fourteen years. She should have gotten over it. Gotten over you.”

“Oh, I don’t think she still has feelings for me,” I say with conviction, even though, deep down, I wish it was so. “But she’s still mad about it. We humiliated her, and Davis never liked being embarrassed.”

Especially not in front of her parents. She valued their opinion more than anything. In fact, I only remember one time Davis ever argued with her parents, and that had been about me, about six months after we had started dating.

Emmett had been starting to make a name for himself in baseball, and his adventures with Grayson on the road drifted back to Ashbury. Davis’s parents didn’t want one of their precious daughters to be linked with the Pike family.

I got it. There’d been too much talk about my family over the years for people like the Tilsons to feel comfortable letting their daughter associate with me. I didn’t like it, but I understood, especially after hearing the under-the-breath comments they made about Davis’s friendship with Darcy.

Davis never told me exactly what her parents said about me, but it was enough to upset her. I tried my best to treat them with the respect they never showed me or my family.

It’s ironic that Dr. Tilson hired me for her hospital.

“Do you think she’ll ever talk to me again?” Darcy whispers in a small voice.

“Do you want her to?”

She shrugs. “I miss her. Sometimes. She was my best friend.”

“Mine too.”

The three of us shared everything in high school. But that was then. Now, Davis and I work in the same hospital.

And that’s it.

Chapter Six

Davis

I HAVEN'T SEEN ETHAN in two days.

Not that I'm looking for him—I am, but only because I need him to try on the Santa suit.

That is the only reason.

I've drawn the line at paging him, but I have asked enough nurses that it's bound to start a rumour that I'm interested.

Every time I talk to a man, it gets around that I'm interested. I swear, there's more concern about my love life in this town than the care I give to my patients.

I thank my mother for that. Also, my sisters, since they're not shy about giving details about my personal life.

Not that I have a personal life. I'm in here even on my days off. The only way I'd meet a man is if he's working at the hospital. Or been admitted.

Mid-morning on Thursday, I swing out of the ladies' room, my mind already on the charts I need to finish when I run into

Ethan.

Literally run; my head bonks against his shoulder, my nose smushed into the clean-smelling scrub top.

His hands grab my hips to steady me and my breath escapes in a soft whoosh. “Ethan.”

“Davis. You good?”

The warmth of his hands bleeds through the thin cotton pants. I steady myself with a hand on his chest, the first time in almost fourteen years that I’ve touched him.

We must look like we’re about to dance. Dance at the prom we never got to go to.

I curl my fingers into the fabric of his top, closing my eyes for a split second to remember what it felt like to be held by him.

I take a deep breath. He smells good—woody and fresh.

Ethan drops his hands like I’m on fire and I have a horrible sense that he knows I just smelled him.

“Sorry,” I apologize as I leap back, straight into the wall. “I was in a hurry.”

He towers over me and, like the other morning at Pepper’s I’m afraid to look up at him. “You’re always in a hurry in this place.”

“If you aren’t, people tend to die,” I say in a breathless voice.

“That’s a bit dramatic, but yeah, guess so.” He gives me a lopsided smile, without the dimple. I can’t read the expression in his eyes.

Or maybe I don’t want to.

He slides into step with me as I start down the hallway. “What’s up?”

“The usual. Mr. Carter, from out your way, had a heart attack shovelling snow. I’m sure there’ll be more.”

“So it’s been busy?”

I can’t help my accusatory glance. “Of course it’s been busy. I work in the ER. I can’t pick and choose when people come in.”

“Ah.”

Usually when I use that tone, people steer clear of me. But Ethan stays by my side, and for once, his presence doesn’t make it worse. “I had the whole day off yesterday,” he admits. “First time since I’ve started that I’ve been away longer than twenty-four hours.”

“Oh.” That’s why I haven’t seen him. Not that he’s been avoiding me. Not that I’d blame him if he was.

“You should try it sometime. Getting away from this place.”

“No one complains when I work too much, only when I’m not here.”

“Yeah. You’re kind of irreplaceable. Which brings me to the reason I was looking for you.”

“You were looking for me?” My stomach gives a flip, equal to the one Wally Burns did on his trampoline last weekend that broke his wrist.

“Yeah. I need my Santa list,” Ethan says, as casually as if he’s asked about the weather. “Not the actual list, but instructions. What to do, when to do it? What I can’t do?”

“Don’t show up drunk,” I say without thinking.

“Like the mall Santa that year?” Ethan grins down at me, and despite my best intentions, I let myself smile. “I’ve never forgotten the smell of him. It was like he’d poured whiskey over himself.”

“I think I got drunk from the fumes.” The giggle bursts out like a tiny belch after downing a pint. “And Darcy—”

My smile fades. Darcy is the last person I want to talk about, and the first person who comes to my mind when I see Ethan. I blame her for betraying me more than Ethan. She was my best friend; he was only my boyfriend.

“I saw her yesterday,” Ethan says in a quiet voice. “She’s in the city, so I left Rufus with her for a visit. She’ll bring him back tomorrow.”

Darcy is in the city. Ethan spent time with her, left Rufus with her. Is that all he did? Did anything happen? Is it still happening? I fight to keep my thoughts quiet because it’s absolutely none of my business what happens between Ethan and Darcy. Or Ethan and anyone. “Is she coming for Christmas?”

Darcy Ebans had been my best friend since kindergarten. *DarcyandDavis*—one word. The D Twins. We slept over at each other's houses every week for seventy-six weeks straight, sharing everything from first kisses to family secrets and menstrual cycles. My parents never liked her.

Correction—they liked her fine. Everyone liked Darcy; she was vivacious and fun and always ready for adventure. My parents never approved of her.

They never approved how one of their daughters could be so close with someone from the wrong side of the tracks—which, in Ashbury, meant living on the rural road outside of town. Plus, a girl with a father who was out of the picture even when he wasn't in jail, and a mother who saved her waitressing tips to get Darcy enough fashionable clothes to fit in with the other kids.

I wonder what my mother would think of her now.

I wonder what she is like now.

Ethan shakes his head. "I don't think she's been back since her mom died."

A rush of what feels like relief and regret passes over me. "When does she see Rufus?"

"They Skype, FaceTime, things like that. I took him to Paris one summer. They don't get much time together."

"I couldn't do that," I say without thinking.

"Darcy isn't you."

“But she’s who you wanted.” I draw in a sharp breath.
“Never mind. Forget I said that.”

“Davis.”

I can still read Ethan’s face like a book, and guilt is written all over it. I hold up my hand. “No. Don’t.”

“You have no idea what I’m about to say.”

“It doesn’t matter. You and I were a long time ago. Over. Done. Moved on.” I take a deep breath. “How is Darcy?”

“Do you really want to know?”

My spine is as stiff as my tone. “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

“She misses you.”



When Ethan told me Darcy missed me, there was much more than a tug of my heart—it felt like it was being pulled out of my chest. Like Darcy was Thor and I was Mjölfnir: he would call and it would come.

That’s how it always had been with us.

Not anymore.

“Hi. I’m Dr. Tilson.” I smile at the tear-stained little girl on the gurney, her frazzled mother at her side. “What brings you in today?”

“LEGO,” the mother says through gritted teeth.

“Ah.” I tap the tip of the little girl’s nose.

“No. That would be easy. Abby *ate* her LEGO so her little sister wouldn’t play with them.”

I’ve been a doctor long enough to know not to laugh, but this is a tough one. “You know they’re not candy, right?” I ruffle her hair. “How many pieces are we talking about?”

Turns out little Abby swallowed six LEGO Friends figurines and half an ice cream stand before her mother caught her. After an ultrasound shows the plastic pieces in her stomach, I call up for a surgical consult.

Of course, it’s Ethan who responds.

“Whoa,” he says, turning to Abby after studying the ultrasound. “Did they taste good?”

“Not really,” Abby mutters.

“I’ve got a brother and a sister, and I never liked them to play with my stuff either. But maybe next time, hide them under your bed instead of in your stomach.”

“She really needs surgery?” the mother asks. “Can’t she poop them out?”

“That would be a lot of pooping,” Ethan explains. “Kind of *painful*—” —he mouths the word— “pooping. Might turn her off the act. If we go in here—” He gently pokes Abby’s belly. “—and make a small incision, we can pull them all out without trouble.”

The mother turns to me. “Do you think she needs surgery?”

“I think it’s the best course of action,” I say.

“I have to ask.” Ethan glances at Abby with a stern expression. “Is there anything else we’re going to find down there?”

I leave Ethan with Abby and her mother while I get the consent forms and prepare to do what I can to appease the mother’s fears.

Ethan finds me at the nurses’ station. “Ten bucks the Mom’ll freak out as soon as I take her up,” he says in a low voice.

I stiffen as his breath brushes my ear. “She’ll hold it together.”

“When the dad or grandma shows up, then. She’s on the phone now rallying the troops.”

“At least they’ll hang out upstairs in your waiting room.”

“Why would they want to? It’s so much cooler down here.” He looks around at the pale green walls, newly painted ten years ago, at the plastic chairs with the optimal uncomfortableness to make a trip to the ER a chore for the bottom as well as for any other body parts. “You’ve got LEGO.” He grins.

“I don’t think she’s going to want to play with it again.”

“Don’t be so sure. I seem to recall a fight between you and one of your sisters about a sweater.” He raises his eyebrows. “Stevie, maybe?”

“It’s always Stevie.”

He knows so much about me.

My smile fades. “I’d better get these back to the mom to sign.”

“Davis.” Ethan touches my arm, sliding his hand along my forearm until he cups my hand. I have a moment where I can’t catch my breath, and then it passes as his hand presses down on mine. “Maybe we could—”

“No,” I say as firmly as I can and walk away.

Ethan

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I wanted to say to Davis. Something that would take away that closed-off expression and let her smile at me.

Something that would make her forgive and be my friend again.

Because Darcy isn't the only one who misses her.

After removing forty-three LEGO blocks and the six figures, I head back to the ER to give Davis the status of Abby.

Only to find the place overrun with groaning, sweating patients, with the four triage areas and every seat taken. The piped-in Christmas carols and the tinsel tree in the corner give the scene an ironic twist.

"What's going on?" I ask Rose, one of the nurses.

The sound of retching reaches my ears.

Rose rolls her eyes. "Christmas party," she says. "For the bank. They used some catering place from Whitby with bad

chicken or bad shrimp. Bad everything.” She waves a hand. “Food poisoning.”

“Eck.” I grimace. “Why don’t they go home and throw up in peace?”

“As soon as they’ve been seen by a doctor.” She waves again, this time toward the curtains. “Things are a little hectic for Little Dr. T.”

“Is Davis the only one here?” I check the schedule on the wall. “Ronald’s on the board. Where is he?”

“Skipped out about an hour ago,” Rose informs me, disdain for the former chief of Emergency Medicine evident in every syllable. “Apparently, the bank wasn’t the only party in town today. Jena Markov’s Christmas Ball is going on as well.”

“Since when has there been a ballroom in Ashbury?”

“Their house is plenty big enough. I thought you’d be there.”

“No way. I’m too old to play nice with her. Davis was supposed to be off about a half hour ago.”

“She should have been, but Maran is covering, called and said he’d be late. She’s got no choice but to stay, at least until someone comes in for Ronald.”

“That’s not good enough. Call Jovi and tell him I said to get his butt in here,” I instruct as I grab a fresh gown and head over to one of the curtained areas. “Hey, there, I’m Dr. Pike. What seems to be—” The patient turns at the sound of my

voice and vomits all over my fresh gown. “Ah. Looks like you’re not feeling well.”

It takes forty-five minutes and two carefully worded announcements to those waiting before the room clears out enough for me to make my way over to Davis.

“What are you doing?” she snaps.

“Helping you clear up the backlog. What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Those patients needed to be seen.”

“And I’ve seen them. Everyone who was at the Christmas party who sampled the chicken satays or shrimp ring has gone home. Food poisoning. They’re better off in their beds.”

“And you’ve just opened the hospital up to a very costly lawsuit if you’re wrong.”

“I’m not wrong.” Davis sniffs. “You can thank me after we get out of here. The smell of throw-up is making me nauseous.”

“You don’t need to be here.”

“And yet, I am. C’mon. Jovi’s here now, and I’ve called in a couple of residents to help hold down the fort. You were off almost two hours ago. Let’s get out of here.”

Davis finds enough busy work to stay for another half hour. I stay right there with her, knowing that if I leave, Davis will still be here when I come back in the morning.

Finally, she's finished for the day, and I hurry down the hall after her. "Davis!"

"Dr. Pike."

I ignore the icy tone. "Are we back to that?"

"We never left it."

"So, are you going to the other Christmas party? The one without the bad shrimp?" I trundle forward at her blank expression. "Jena's party."

"I don't know of any other party."

"Oh." *Foot in mouth, dude, foot in mouth.* "I just thought, seeing as your parents were always so social this time of the year..."

"I'm not my parents." She visibly swallows. "I wouldn't go even if I was invited."

"Naw, I'm not a big fan of her either."

"I meant that I have plans tonight."

"Yeah. What are you up to?"

Davis has her phone in her hand and she glances at it before replying. Then she stops to read it and sighs. "Nothing now."

"Why?"

"My sister tried the bad shrimp," she says in a rueful voice. "Stevie was going to the casino with me tonight. We have tickets. There's an ABBA cover band playing."

"Cool. Go with another sister."

Davis shakes her head. “Bob wouldn’t be caught dead there. Actually, I think she might be still banned. And Georgie has plans.”

“Take someone else.” At Davis’s quick shake of her head, I open my mouth to ask if there’s anyone else for her to go with. “Take me,” I say instead.

Chapter Seven

Davis

I'M NOT SURE WHAT has me agreeing to take Ethan, but an hour later, after showering off the smell of vomit in the residents' lounge, I'm in Ethan's car heading to the casino.

"This is one of your pity moves, isn't it?" I turn to the window to watch the snowflakes fall on the fields as we leave Ashbury behind us.

"What pity moves?"

"You know, like when you took Melanie Marner to the Christmas Dance in grade nine," I say. "Or kept writing to Heather Grimes when she moved away."

"What?" Ethan exclaims. "That wasn't pity. Melanie got me through French in grades nine and ten, and Heather invited me to her wedding last year."

"Who did she marry?"

"Some guy from Toronto. We're still Facebook friends."

"I'm not even on Facebook."

“Probably a good thing. Huge time waster, but I like keeping in touch with people.”

I never kept in touch with anyone when I went to university. Hurt and humiliated because of Ethan and Darcy, my parents thought it best to keep me as far away from my high school friends to avoid gossip.

For the first time, I wonder if that was a good idea.

A few of my friends tried; Darcy wasn't my only friend in high school. Unfortunately, my lack of interest and their own lives stopped the attempts, leaving me without a friend group when I came home.

Which is evident from me not having anyone to go to the show with.

“Why do you say it was pity with Melanie?”

I glance over at him to see Ethan's face scrunched with confusion. He really doesn't get it. “Melanie was nice, but she wasn't all that popular, and you were *Ethan Pike*.” I wave my fingers for emphasis.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You were—you were you. Smart and funny and good looking—”

He smirks. “Always nice to find out you thought I was good looking.”

I roll my eyes. “I said smart, not stupid. I think it was obvious I thought you were cute.”

“Do you still think I’m cute?” There’s an eagerness in his voice that sounds like Rufus did the other morning at Pepper’s bakery.

I turn back to the window. “You’ve aged well.”

“Like a fine wine?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, thank you. And I took Mel to the dance because she helped me with French and because I liked her company. There was no pity involved.”

“She was in love with you for the next three years,” I tell him.

“No, she wasn’t!” I look at him with a raised eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really. She didn’t talk to me for a whole year when we started going out.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“Apparently, you were a little hard to get over.”

“So were you.”

His words are like a stinging bolt to the chest. I’m sure he meant them to be a compliment, but all I can think of is how he didn’t *need* to get over me.

And I’m not sure who to blame for that.

Ethan

I 'VE BEEN TO CONCERTS before, but nothing like this.

The ABBA tribute group—or FABBA, as the foursome is called, is made up of drag queens. Big hair, lots of make-up, and '70s-inspired outfits, including platform boots that make them seven feet tall.

Drag queens who really, really sound like ABBA.

“I don’t know what to say.” Wide-eyed, I turn to Davis after the first set. The seats are in the second row; not that we’ve sat down much since they started playing.

Davis has the biggest, brightest smile on her face. It’s totally worth coming just to see her like this. “Aren’t they amazing? I’ve seen them twice before.”

“You didn’t say they were in drag.”

“I didn’t think you’d come.”

The music swells and Davis jumps to her feet again. Out of her scrubs, strawberry blonde hair falling past her shoulders,

she's a different person than the one who rules the hospital with an iron fist. This is the Davis I remember—fun and happy, untroubled and with a ready smile.

This is my Davis.

In high school, she was always up for anything. She'd say it was Darcy who had all the ideas, but Davis would follow her anywhere. In four years of high school, they left a swath of pranks and adventures in their wake, and I was right there with them in an attempt to keep them out of trouble.

Being the younger brother of Emmett Pike taught me a few things about that, although it was mainly his best friend, Grayson, who seemed to have a special talent for getting caught by teachers, parents, and especially boyfriends.

It's nice that his stint on *The Suitor* resulted in him finding someone special.

Davis sings her heart out, swaying to the music, and I can't look away. I don't want to look away.

But I have to when the spotlight falls on me. "Hey! Cutie down there," comes the shout from the stage. One of the FABBAs points right at me. "Dance with your lady."

"Or dance with us," another one cries.

A cheer erupts from the audience, and Davis turns to me with an expression of delight. "Go!"

"Where?"

“On stage!” She pushes me out to the aisle, and those seated around us take up the challenge, practically escorting me to the edge of the stage.

FABBA stands above me in all their glory, urging me on. And then I’m on stage, just as the notes to “Dancing Queen” begin and the crowd goes wild.



“I can’t believe you did that!” Davis is still smiling, even after the show ended, with me returning to the stage for a last encore. “I had no idea you could dance like that.”

Her cheeks are pink, eyes shining. There’s a puff of pride that *I* put that light in her eyes. Well, four drag queens and I, along with some really good music.

In the car, Davis pulls off her snow-covered toque. The fluffy flakes that dotted the windshield when we got here are now coming fast and furious, and it took both of us to clear off my truck. At least Davis tried to help, managing to get more snow on both of us than necessary.

“I didn’t really have a choice,” I laugh, pulling out of the parking lot of the casino. “Just followed their moves.”

It was a rush being on stage with the band, and the giddiness hasn’t subsided even with the crush of concertgoers exiting at the same time, straight into a snowstorm.

“That was amazing,” she sighs, leaning her head back.

“It kind of was,” I admit. The wipers can’t keep up with the swirling snow. “It was a lot of fun.”

“You sound like you’re surprised.”

“Well, it is *ABBA*...or *FABBA*,” I say with mock derision in my voice.

“You were never a big fan.”

“I’ll have you know, I watched both *Mamma Mia* and *Mamma Mia 2*.”

“I’m impressed.”

“You should be. That’s four hours of my life that I’m never getting back. Plus, I’ll never be able to watch one of Pierce Brosnan’s Bond movies without thinking how awful his voice is.” I shudder.

“It’s not awful, it’s—”

“Pretty bad.”

“It’s awful,” she finishes.

“I’m so glad you agree.”

Davis shifts in her seat to look at me. “Why did you come, then, if you hate *ABBA*?”

Is she serious? Does she not know I would do anything for her? Still? I would happily spend all my energy making up for the unhappiness I caused her.

That realization makes me catch my breath. I would do anything for Davis because she’s important to me.

She always has been.

“I don’t hate them; no one hates ABBA,” I say, fighting to keep it light. “That would be the sign of a truly terrible person if they hated ABBA. I mean—Dancing Queen.” I glance over and my smile widens. “Did you *see* me up there?”

“Everyone saw you, Ethan.” Davis waves her phone. “And I have proof of what you did.”

“Yeah, I’m going to have to figure out a way to get that back.”

“Good luck with that.”

I chuckle. It’s quiet, save the soft sound of Mariah Carey singing about Christmas on the radio and the squeak of the wipers. It’s usually less than an hour from the casino back to Ashbury, but I have a feeling it’s going to take longer tonight.

Not that I mind spending more time with Davis.

Once free of the hospital, things had shifted between us, back to how it used to be. Easy. Fun. I don’t want her to close off again.

“I wanted to go because I want us to be friends,” I say. “I’m not asking for forgiveness. It’s too late for that. But I hate you being mad at me.”

There’s a long pause. Either she’s going to tell me there’s no hope of renewing our friendship, or she’s going to tell me where to go. Either way, I don’t expect much, regardless of what I want.

Davis stares ahead into the snow, biting her lip as she picks her words. Whenever we used to argue, she would take forever to find the right thing to say, the best thing to say to prove her point and not to hurt me.

It still crushes me how much I must have hurt her with Darcy.

She takes a deep breath. “It’s not that I’m still angry,” she says in a low voice. “I was though. I was furious.” She laughs, sounding surprised. “I’ve never felt that much anger. Because it hurt,” Davis adds. “It hurt so much that I didn’t think I could bear it.”

When I was fourteen, I’d been playing baseball with Emmett and Grayson; Grayson had been working on his curveball. A pitch had got away from him, hitting me squarely on my ankle bone.

The sharp crack and the searing stab of pain made me physically sick to my stomach. They thought my ankle was broken.

That pain was nothing compared to Davis’s soft words.

“I’m sorry,” I say instinctively. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“I could never understand *why*. Why Darcy? You must have known what it would do to me. She was my best friend.”

“It wasn’t intentional,” I protest. “After we broke up—” because we *had* been broken up, I want to point out— “I was a mess. I never knew *why you* ended things. It seemed...” Now I’m the one picking my words. “It didn’t seem like you. It

didn't sound like you, saying we were young and there would be others, that we shouldn't get caught up in a teenage romance. You made it sound like you didn't care." I glance over at her. "And I really thought you did."

"I did," she whispers.

"I need to know, Davis—was it you? Or was that what your parents told you to say?"

I didn't think a person could sit so very still. "Ethan..."

"It's okay," I say with difficulty, puzzle pieces fitting together with an almost audible click. I'd suspected her parents were behind it, but I could never be sure. It was the only thing that made sense because Davis had loved me as much as I had loved her. "I understand. It just would have been nice to know. Darcy said that was what happened, based on how they were around her."

"I'm sorry," Davis whispers.

"She was upset," I continue, wanting to get everything cleared up. Needing to tell her why, now that I know the truth. "It wasn't after the prom like everyone said. It was the next day. We'd been at her place, both angry and hurt, and missing you. There was also alcohol involved. Not that that's an excuse," I add hastily. "Just an extenuating circumstance."

"I didn't know that either."

"It wasn't something I was going to point out. It's not something I'm proud of, either. It just kind of... happened. Afterward, we swore we'd never tell anyone, because I didn't

want to hurt you. We were going to pretend it never happened. Only...

“Rufus,” Davis finishes.

“Rufus. While I regret it happening, I can’t regret my son. It’s complicated.”

“I know.” Her voice is soft.

“I never, ever intended to hurt you, Davis. It took me a long time to get over you.”

“But you got over me.”

Her words dangle between us and I know if I want a chance with Davis, I have to grab it. “I don’t know,” I confess. “Did I? Did you? Did you get over me?”

“You were my first everything.”

“And you were mine. I loved you, Davis. Darcy and I—we share a child, but that’s it. There’s never been anyone like that for me, not Darcy, not anyone. You were it for me. You always have been.”

Davis draws in a shaky breath that’s loud in the car. “You said you wanted to be friends. Is that all you want?”

My body jerks in response to the question, and the truck goes along with it. Tires skid along the slick asphalt, and for a moment, nothing is gripping.

Chapter Eight

Davis

I GASP AS ETHAN wrestles with the steering wheel. It's a few moments of absolute terror as I'm certain we're about to end up in the snow-filled ditch, but he finally gets control of the car.

"Okay," he says in a shaky voice.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "That was fun."

"I didn't realize it was so icy."

"The ER is going to be packed." Thinking about work is better than thinking about what I just asked.

What was I thinking?

It sounded like I might be asking if he would give me another chance. If he *wanted* another chance with me.

I know I'm to blame for our breakup. I had picked my parents over him, obeyed their request, stopped fighting for

him. If it hadn't been for me, Ethan and Darcy never would have...

Biggest regret ever.

But it's hard to regret something when it results in a child.

"They can handle the ER, so don't go thinking about running in to help," Ethan warns. "I'm actually not sure I should be driving."

"You want to stop?"

"At the farm," he clarifies. "I think you should crash there for the night."



Once we get off the highway, the roads leading to the farm get worse. We're about twenty minutes away, and Ethan white-knuckles it there. It would be another half hour to get to the hospital and my place, and I'm so grateful to be off the roads that I forget what it's going to be like to be back at Ethan's.

I offered Ethan a concert ticket; I'm staying over because of a storm. All of which means *nothing*. Nothing has changed.

Maybe we'll be able to be friends.

I take a trembling breath as Ethan pulls up in front of the house. "Made it," he says. The smile he gives me is just as shaky.

"I knew we would."

When I get out of the car, my gasp is one of surprise rather than relief. Through the swirl of snow still coming down, the strings of colourful lights give the house a cheerful glow.

Not only lights, but on closer look, the snowy blobs on the lawn turn out to be a row of inflatable Santas, bent over from the weight.

“What have you done?” I cry. “It’s so Christmas-y!”

“I went overboard, is what I did,” Ethan admits with a rueful grin, giving the closest Santa a kick to knock off the snow so that it rears upright. “Dad always had a few lights and this sad snowman that wouldn’t stand up, but Rufus is still so into Christmas that I wanted to do something for him, with me being home and everything.” He clears another one and a six-foot-tall Santa appears.

“You have *six* Santas.”

“I know. But they’re all different. See—” He attempts to brush off a third. “This one has an elf with him. Rufus picked him out. I like to think it’s him and me.”

I can’t stop smiling. Christmas was never a big deal with Ethan’s family, and he used to join my family’s festivities with reluctance. But now...

Looks like some things have changed.

“I love them,” I say softly. The wind drives the snow in every direction, but instead of hurrying to get inside, I help Ethan clear the Santas. “The lights are pretty.”

“You can see them from the road when it’s clear. Which it isn’t about to be anytime soon.” As he heads to the porch, he reaches a hand behind him, and I take it like no time has passed.

I don’t think Ethan even realizes what he’s done until he drops my hand to unlock the door.

I brush off the snow before I follow him inside. “I’m glad you’re not trying to get through to my place tonight.”

Think of the snow, think of the driving. *Don’t* think about how I’m at Ethan’s. *Don’t* think about how Ethan and I—

Don’t think at all.

The open space—kitchen, dining and sunken living rooms combining to make one great room—hasn’t changed much, but it feels different. There is evidence of Rufus everywhere: PlayStation and controllers on the coffee table, a Flash comic book on the table, boots and shoes against the wall.

School pictures of Rufus have been added to the collection on the walls—another generation of Pike children.

Ethan’s child.

But the biggest surprise is the enormous tree in the corner opposite the kitchen. “Wow. That’s some tree.” Every branch holds some kind of ball or ornament.

“I blame Shae for that.” Ethan laughs. “She went totally crazy decorating it, and Rufus was right there with her. She’s like me—first Christmas that she isn’t running off across the world somewhere, so she’s taking advantage of it.”

“You were never big on the holiday.”

Ethan shrugs. “It’s different now. Rufus makes it different. I want to make an effort for him. Dad was always here for me, and I guess I want to be the same way for my son.”

The words *my son* slam into me with the force of the storm outside. But instead of making me sad, pointing out everything I’ve missed out on with him, and pulling out the resentment and hurt, it does the complete opposite.

It’s *hot*.

Ethan gets a hundred times more attractive when he talks about Rufus.

“He’s a lucky kid.” I turn away so he can’t see the flush on my cheeks. The flush comes from my increased heart rate pumping more blood because I still find Ethan Pike incredibly good looking and I am alone with him.

“I’m the lucky one. He’s amazing. Smart and funny and considerate. He wants to help me deliver the presents tomorrow, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course.” I should say more about Rufus, ask about him, so I can listen to Ethan talk about him more, but my brain feels fuddled, like I’m half asleep.

“I think that was the right call,” Ethan says, taking my coat from me. “You can crash in Ellie’s room. She’s left a few things, so there’ll be something for you to sleep in, or maybe I can find something of Shae’s. She’s not here, and neither is Emmett, but she’d be cool with you borrowing anything you

need until I can get you home in the morning. The plow should get through first thing..." He finally trails off and I realize that his non-stop monologue is because he's nervous.

Just like me.

"That's fine." My voice is a squeak. Great. Ethan can't stop talking and I can't make a sound. It was easier outside in the snow.

"I have a pair of scrubs lying around that might work too."

"It's fine," I interrupt before he can give an inventory of the closets in the house. "I don't need anything to sleep in."

Ethan raises his eyebrows.

"I mean," I hasten to add. "I can sleep in my shirt. Or my pants. Maybe not my pants, but my shirt is fine."

He smiles ruefully at my miserable expression. "It's weird, isn't it?"

I give him a shaky grin. "Little bit."

"And we were doing so well."

"It's being here." I sweep my arms to encompass the space. "I spent so much time here and it's...it's strange. In a good way."

A lifetime has passed since I was right *there* teaching Ethan the basic essentials of cooking an egg, cuddling with him on the couch *there*, studying the pictures of younger Ethan and Emmett and Ellie hanging on the wall right *here*. I turn away, blinking furiously so Ethan can't see the tears filling my eyes.

I missed Ethan with an ache that often paralyzed me, but I never realized how much I missed his family as well.

Ethan's brow furrows like he's thinking. "Do you, um, would you like some tea?" he asks politely. "If you need to warm up? If you still drink it before going to bed?"

A cup of tea before bed has always been my nighttime ritual. And Ethan still remembers...

"I still do. Tea would be nice."

I stand awkwardly by the dining room table as Ethan moves to the kitchen. "Mint, right?"

I catch my breath. "Yes. Please."

"You were the only one I knew who drank the stuff, and then Shae came along. She likes all sorts of weird teas and coffees."

"I haven't met her, but I saw her at Pepper's one morning. She seems nice," I say to distract myself from the sight of Ethan moving easily at the counter. Gone is the boy who could barely boil water for pasta and never managed to make me a decent cup of tea, no matter how many times I gave him instructions.

When did he get so comfortable in the kitchen? Who taught him how to make tea? Not Darcy. She never drank anything hot. What other women have passed through his life?

I step away, over to the living room, to put some distance between us, to help fight the urge to ask. To demand to know everything and everyone who he was involved with.

It is none of my business.

But what if I want it to be?

Ethan

I TAKE TWO CUPS of tea over to Davis, who stands before Dad's wall of DVDs. Seeing her there is like I've stepped back in time. The silky sweep of strawberry blonde hair is shorter, but the curve of her bottom is as sweet as it always has been.

Davis may look good in scrubs, but nothing beats a well-worn pair of jeans hugging all the right places.

I need to stop looking. Because when I look, I want to touch—to slide my hand into her back pocket like we're back in high school walking down the hall.

"It must have been sickening how cute we were together," I say.

Davis turns, surprise in her blue eyes. "Why do you say that?"

"I was just...thinking..." *Looking*, I correct. *Wanting*.

Do I want to pull her close, feel her arms twine around my waist as she tilts her chin, waiting for my kiss?

She would close her eyes in advance. It's how she'd tell me she wanted to be kissed.

Davis's gaze drifts to my lips like she has similar thoughts.

I set the tea on the table and settle uncomfortably on the couch. Davis moves warily toward me, like a hesitant puppy wanting a treat. "Ethan..."

"Just having tea," I assure her. "Mint for you, some nutty stuff for me."

She takes the seat beside me. "Smells good."

You smell good. She has the same Davis scent that used to linger on my pillow. The night we broke up I slept with that pillow in my arms all night.

"How is your dad?" she asks, pursing her lips to blow on her tea.

God, I had no idea it was going to be so difficult to be alone with her. It was easy at the concert, and even in the car with the snowy roads to distract me from her closeness. Now, it's just her and me on the couch.

"He's good," I say, pulling back from the *déjà vu*. "I think it was tough for him when Ellie got married, but then Shae started coming around. He always said this place needs a woman's touch to make it a home."

"He never met anyone? After your mom..."

"Not that I know of." I keep my tone brisk because the last thing that can spoil this little whatever it is with Davis is talk

of my mother.

“And then you came home,” Davis says, sipping her tea as casually as if we’re two spinsters sharing a pot. “Why *did* you come home? You had a year left of your residency, so why disrupt it?”

It was a disruption, but a worthwhile one. “Rufus. Ellie moved out, Emmett’s got Shae now. It had always been a family decision to raise Rufus, and when the group got smaller, I needed to pick up the slack. Dad has done so much for me, and I can’t ask him for more. And coming back here wasn’t a hardship. I always planned on coming home, working at the hospital.”

“You had to know I was here.”

“I’ve never wanted to hide from you, Davis. I’ve apologized as much as I can. I’m ready to move on—”

“Move on?” Her eyes are so large in her delicate face.

“Or not move on. I don’t know what you want, Davis.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to spend time with you.” I rush in before she shuts me down, because it’s now or never. We’re talking; she’s listening. She’s *here*. And that’s what I want—for Davis to be here with me. It feels right.

“We had fun tonight,” I add, trying to slow my heartbeat. “I like seeing you at the hospital. Do you really think I need to come to the ER as much as I do?”

A tiny smile curves the corner of her lips. “I wondered about that.”

“That’s all I want. For now.”

I watch the movement of her throat as she swallows. “And then what? If we spend time together. You make it sound like something else will happen.”

“There are things I’d like to happen,” I admit.

“Like what?”

“I’d like to brush the hair out of your face when you wear it down. I’d like to rest my hand on your waist, just where it curves into your hip. And I’d like very much to kiss you.”

Her eyes drift closed for longer than a blink and I don’t hesitate. Leaning in, I tip up her chin, taking a moment to just *look* at her before I brush my lips against hers.

“Are you sure?” I breathe.

“I missed you,” she whispers, and then her lips press against mine.

Her mouth moves under mine, fingers twining in my hair. The soft noise from the back of her throat makes my heart tighten with an almost painful tug as I pull her closer.

I’ve tumbled back in time.

Chapter Nine

THERE IS KISSING. LOTS of kissing. Kissing that makes me forget where I am or what has gone on for the last fourteen years. Kissing that makes me feel like I'm back in high school, giddy from a boy's touch.

Not just any boy. Ethan.

Ethan kisses me like no time has passed, like he said goodbye to me the night before, like I'm the same girl he once knew.

I want to be that girl again. I want to be that girl *so much*.

There is talking between the kissing because the kissing breaks something within me, breaks it in a good way. I *see* again; I don't let the hurt and the years distract me from who he is.

He's my everything.

We talk about Rufus, about our experiences in school, in the different hospitals Ethan has worked at. I talk about my father's death, living with my sisters again.

We gossip about the other doctors.

We laugh.

It's the laughing that shifts something inside of me. Of the things I've missed, laughing with him might be the thing I've missed most. It's like I've forgotten how without Ethan to remind me.

There is more kissing, there is laughing as we push each other away, soft sighs as we reach for each other again. There is remembering and reminiscing and becoming reacquainted.

Long after my tea is cold, with lips swollen and eyes shining, I rest my forehead against his chest. "We should go to bed."

"If that's what you want." His eyes are half-closed, his hair mussed from where I ran my hands through it. My stomach leaps just from the sight of him—from the feel of him with me again.

From being able to *feel* again.

I've been numb for so long. My life has been a black-and-white movie or hot chocolate without the whipped cream—good without it but so much better with the added bonus.

"Separate beds," I remind him.

Ethan leans his cheek against my head before he helps me to my feet. "I know."

It would be too easy to spend the night with Ethan, but there needs to be more talking, when I'm not distracted by the touch

of his lips, when we're not sitting by the light of the Christmas tree, with forgotten cups of tea on the table.

I take those cups to the kitchen and set them in the dishwasher while Ethan unplugs the lights on the tree. The snow falling outside gives the room a glow. I meet him at the bottom of the stairs. He's smiling at me, dimple on display, but there's something about his eyes...

"Do you know I saw you when I came for my interview?" he asks, surprising me. "I went through the ER because that's how I've always gone into the hospital, and you were right there, in control. Triage was full and you were everywhere, giving orders, taking names, and looking amazing."

It's the longing in his voice that stills me.

"I always knew you'd be a doctor, and over the years, I'd ask Emmett about you, but that was the first time I saw it. Saw you, in all your glory, and everything came back in a rush. Studying together, how you'd quiz me, how you'd get upset if I beat you in a test, but you'd pretend to be proud of me."

"It wasn't pretending," I protest.

"I worked so hard putting you behind me because I couldn't handle the guilt, but that day, it all came back. I remember how it felt to love you."

The words seem to echo in the room.

"And I'd like to feel that again."

My limbs have frozen in place. If I don't move, if I don't breathe, Ethan won't take that back, won't tuck it back inside

like the words never existed.

“Say something,” he begs.

It takes three swallows to gather enough moisture in my mouth to speak. “I don’t know how to do that,” I confess, even though every cell in my body is telling me to jump back into his arms. “I don’t know how to feel anymore.”

“You do, but it’ll take time to remember. We’ll take it slow. One day at a time.”

Is that what I want?

Yes. “Yes,” I say.

There is more kissing at the bottom of the stairs before he takes my hand to walk up. “You’ll be okay in Ellie’s room?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I’m just across the hall,” he reminds me.

“I know exactly where you’ll be.”

“And we’ll go to the hospital together in the morning?” He looks hopeful and a bit wary.

Just like I feel. “I think I should go home and change first,” I admit. I’m not ready to make this public yet. If this is even a thing. If it’s—

Ethan pulls our joined hands to his mouth and kisses the back of my hand. “Whatever you want.”

It’s been a long time since someone considered what I wanted.

At the closed door to Ellie's room, Ethan pulls me close and drops a kiss on my forehead. "If you think you'll be lonely..." he husks.

I breathe in the scent of him. "Not yet," I whisper.

"Whatever you want," he repeats.

You. I want you, but I can't have you yet.

I smile and turn the doorknob as Ethan backs away, giving me a little salute as he heads to his own room.

I shut the door behind me, leaning against it as my face breaks into a giddy smile.

This was nothing like I expected the night to end. This was...

I don't know what this was, but I want more of it.

Maybe there's a way.

I slide my hand up the wall, searching for the switch. When the room floods with light, everything happens at once.

A figure sits up in bed. "What the hell?"

I scream.

Ethan

DAVIS'S SCREAM HAS ME running into a whole lot of confusion.

I push open the door to find a figure pulling away the blankets over her head and I see short blonde hair mussed from sleep. "What the—Darcy?"

Footsteps. "Mom's here," comes a voice from behind. "If that's what the screaming is about."

"Rufus! I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow afternoon?"

"Rufus wanted to come back so he could help you deliver some presents." Darcy's voice is clogged with sleep. "Your dad wouldn't let me drive back to the city in the storm."

"So she stayed," Rufus adds, trying to see into the room. I push him towards his room just as Dad's door opens, and he sticks his head out.

"Problems?" he asks in a sleepy voice.

You could say that. “All good,” I assure him. “Sorry to wake you.”

Dad only nods and with a bemused smile, shuts the door to his room. “Back to bed,” I instruct Rufus.

“Did you mean to wake up Mom?” he demands. “Did you—*oh?*” His eyes widen as he backs up.

“I didn’t wake her,” I quickly tell him. This is going to be complicated enough without him thinking Darcy and I are a thing.

“Who else is here?”

“Bed.” I point to his room. “I’ll explain in the morning.”

“I would hope so,” Rufus says in a tone that is entirely too mature for his thirteen years. “This should be good.”

I point again and step into the room. Davis hugs the wall, eyes wide with confusion. “I didn’t know she was here,” I tell her.

“Obviously,” Davis says with a hint of a smile. The smile reassures me, makes me think this is all going to be okay. And then my gaze drifts to Darcy.

With the mussed hair and the sleepy eyes, I can’t read her expression. All I can think about is what Davis and I were doing downstairs, all the while Darcy and Rufus, not to mention my father, were sleeping up here.

It’s something straight from my teenage years.

“It’s good to see you.”

My head whips back to Davis. Davis said that. Davis who is now *smiling* at Darcy.

“It’s good to see you, too,” Darcy says with surprise.

What the...? “Rufus, back to bed,” I order.

“That’s kind of hard if there’s going to be more screaming.”

“No more screaming.” It’s more of a request than a promise, and I look to Davis and Darcy in turn.

“Sorry about that,” Davis stammers, her cheeks pink.

Rufus peers into the room. “Hey, Dr. Tilson. Merry almost Christmas Eve.”

“Hi...”

“Okay.” I give Rufus another, less gentle, push toward his room. “You—back to bed. It’s late.”

“Or early. Night, Mom. Dad. Dr. Tilson.” I don’t miss his grin as he ambles back to his room.

Or the smile on Darcy’s face. “He called me Mom,” she hisses with delight. She claps her hand over her mouth and there are actual tears in her eyes. “First time!”

“That’s great,” Davis says.

What’s happening here? Now I’m convinced I’ve been thrust back in time, except Rufus wasn’t around back then and I have less hair. “I’m confused.”

“Go to bed, Ethan.” Davis smiles at me, back at Darcy. “I’m going to talk to Darcy.”

“But you need somewhere to sleep. If you want to stay in Emmett’s room—”

“She can stay here with me,” Darcy offers. “Kind of like old times.”

“I can stay here. It’s fine.”

How is it fine when less than twenty-four hours ago, Davis didn’t even want to hear Darcy’s name?

What did I do to her downstairs?

This is far beyond my ability to understand. I take a step back into the hall with no idea what to expect from the reunion. “Okay, then. I’ll just...go...to bed.”

Chapter Ten

Davis

E THAN DISAPPEARS AS QUICKLY as he appeared, which leaves me with Darcy, sitting in the middle of the bed.

“Hi,” I say. Darcy looks older and tired—neither of which is surprising. Nor the way she looks at me warily, like a kitten unsure if she’s getting a treat or getting locked in a cat carrier for a trip to the vet.

“Hey.” She slides over to the far side of the bed and flips the covers back. “Room for both of us, I guess.”

“Yeah.” After a moment’s pause, I undo my jeans and slide them off, folding them on the dresser at the end of the bed. “I’ll turn the light out.”

Once the room is plunged into darkness, I crawl into the bed beside Darcy.

Even with the time that’s passed since I’ve seen her, there’s still a strange level of comfort lying in bed with Darcy. Of familiarity. I wonder if she feels it too.

“Got enough room?”

“Lots, thanks.”

There’s an awkward pause as we lie beside each other and my eyes become used to the dark. We are two grown women sharing a bed; awkward enough, but definitely strange when you add in how long it’s been, and the fact this is Ethan’s sister’s room, still with pale pink walls and tired stuffed animals.

“So, you and Ethan back together?” Darcy breaks the silence.

I wait for the sound of anger or disappointment, but nothing. Darcy sounds curious, and maybe—possibly—happy?

“He didn’t say anything when I saw him yesterday,” she adds. “Not that he has to. There’s nothing between us. Never has been, just... Rufus.”

“I know. I mean, I know *now*. I know that you didn’t mean... anything.”

A sound like a choked sob comes from beside me on the bed. “I didn’t. Truly, Davis, I—”

In the dark, the sincerity in Darcy’s voice rings true, sparking something inside me, something that’s been untouched for years.

“I know. We don’t have to talk about it.”

For years, I’ve thought about confronting Darcy, letting the bitterness and accusation spew between us. But I don’t want

that now.

I don't need it. I don't need anything but to be here.

There's a rustle of sheets and then Darcy's hand closes over mine. I breathe deep through my nose and let the tear trickle out of my eye. "I do have to apologize, though. It wasn't my best moment. I'm sorry, Davis. I never meant to hurt you."

"I know. But it's my own fault. I gave up on you and Ethan. I was so tired of fighting with my parents..."

"I know. It was hard on you." Her delicate sniff suggests I'm not the only one with tears on my cheeks. "I was sorry to hear about your dad."

"I was sorry to hear about your mom."

Darcy gives a strangled sort of laugh. "I didn't expect any of this," she confesses. "For me to finally connect with Rufus... to see you...for you to be making out with Ethan downstairs."

I gasp. "How did you know?"

This time her laugh is genuine. "I could always tell." She gives my hand a tight squeeze.

"I'm sorry," I choke.

"I know," she says. "But let's not go there. There's no point and we've wasted enough time. Let's just..."

"Okay," I finish, wanting the same thing. Wanting to go back to the way it was.

But different. It will definitely be different.

"I missed you," she says.

“I missed you.” I draw a shaky breath. “A lot.”

“I know,” she says. “I’m missable like that.”

Ethan

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I expected in the morning, but it certainly isn't Davis and Darcy tumbling down the stairs like it's Christmas morning rather than the morning of Christmas Eve and a work day.

“Ready to put on the Santa suit?” Davis asks as I hand her a cup of coffee in a to-go cup. I got ready early because I knew Davis would want to get home to change before heading to the hospital. I thought she wouldn't want to be around Darcy, but then again, I never imagined they'd share a room last night either.

“As I'll ever be. Is it okay for Rufus to join us? He's still sleeping, which is good considering the late-night activity.”

“You mean Davis's shriek of terror last night when she saw me?” Darcy actually elbows Davis, like they're still fifteen.

“Do you blame me? I expected the room to be empty, and instead, you sit up like a dead person in a coffin.”

“Do you often see dead people sit up?” Darcy queries.

“More than you’d think, actually.”

They chatter and tease and it’s like the timeline has really shifted back to the early 2000s. Seeing the two of them together is as if nothing had happened.

It’s a good thing, but it’s a strange feeling.

It’s even stranger later, when I meet Davis outside the resident’s room, wearing the heavy red suit, and find Rufus in a totally dorky hat that I suspect he thinks is elf-like, flanked by both Darcy and Davis.

Davis greets me with a smile as wide as the one when I got pulled up on stage last night. It’s like the Davis of my past has caught up with the present Davis and kicked her aside.

I like it. Still a little strange, but I like it.

“Ho ho ho.” I jiggle my fake belly. “I think you need to find a new elf hat.”

“It was all I could find in the dollar store,” Darcy complains.

“I thought you had a flight to catch?”

“Later.” She gives a wave. “Davis asked if I wanted to watch, and I said yes, of course. I wouldn’t miss you with a belly and a beard for anything.”

“Wait until I show you the video of last night,” Davis says.

“You filmed things?”

Davis flushes, and I wonder how much bonding they really did last night. “At the concert.” She rolls her eyes. “His dance

moves have gotten better.”

“Well, they couldn’t have gotten worse.”

“These presents aren’t going to deliver themselves,” I say loudly over their laughter.

Rufus stands between them with a bemused smile on his face and holds up a bag. “I’ve got the candy canes.”

“And I’ve got the presents. They’re labelled with the kids’ names, so all you need to do is—”

“Davis.”

Heads turn at the authoritative tone.

“Ethan is just about to start,” Davis says automatically, somehow sensing the unasked question. “He needed me to help him get into his pants.”

Darcy’s eyes widen and I choke on a laugh. “Good to go now, Dr. Tilson.”

“Would you be referring to Big or Little Tilson?” Davis asks, still with a straight face.

“I, uh... I’m gonna take the presents over here...” I shuffle down the hall, Rufus and Darcy following me.

“All of you?” I look over my shoulder to see Dr. Tilson’s eyebrow rise almost to her hairline.

“Yes.” Davis’s voice is as clear and concise as if she’s speaking to a patient. “I thought you’d approve, since Christmas is for family, and they are a family. They’re *my* family, or at least they used to be. I hope they will be again.”

“Damn straight,” Darcy mutters.

“It is Christmas,” Davis adds.

Dr. Tilson’s gaze roams over us like she’s assessing an injury, and I fight to stand tall. It’s one thing for her to disapprove of me or Darcy, but if she says one thing about Rufus—

“Yes, I suppose it is,” she finally says. “Let’s begin, shall we?” And without another glance, she starts down the hall to the elevator.

Rufus trots along beside her. “Dr. Tilson, can I ask you something? What’s the strangest thing you’ve ever removed from a patient?”

Davis claps a hand across her mouth. “Should I rescue her?” I demand.

“No,” she scoffs. “She has to get used to him.”

“Oh, she does, does she?”

“I thought—maybe.” I stand close beside her and Davis’s eyes flutter closed. But just as I’m about to lean down and brush my lips against hers, they open. “I can’t kiss you if you’re Santa. That’s just wrong.”

“Depends on who’s watching.”

“I’m watching,” Darcy pipes up. “But I’m hurrying down the hall to catch up with Rufus and your mother.”

“Way to take one for the team,” Davis mutters. She doesn’t pull away as I slide my arms around her waist.

“Do you still hate Christmas?” I ask in a low voice.

“Not if I can spend it with you.” Looking into those eyes wide and liquid eyes give my heart a good squeeze.

“What are your thoughts on New Years? Valentine’s Day? Maybe Easter?”

Davis leans up on her tiptoes to press her lips against mine.
“Merry Christmas, Ethan.”

“Merry Christmas, Davis.”

The End

Readers are important to Authors. We love them. We write for them.

Do you know what else is important to authors?

Reviews.

Please leave a review where you bought this book and make me a happy writer.

Happy Reading!

Holly xo

Follow me!

Goodreads

Facebook

Instagram

Twitter

www.hollykerr.ca

Romantic comedy~Women's Fiction~Chick Lit Lots of Laughs. Lots of Love

Joining my mailing list is the best way to get to know me and find out more about new releases, sales, and other fun events. Plus, when you sign up for my mailing list, you'll get a copy of the short story, **Cupcake Connections!**

In Pain au Chocolate patisserie, cupcakes are becoming more popular than pastries. Reuben, the big, burly Scotsman, is an expert on sugar and sweets, but his love life has fallen flat.

And when one of the customers catches Reuben's eye, Adam decides to help him win her over. While planning a makeover for Reuben, Adam digs into Reuben's past and discovers that Reuben is doing just fine on his own.

Packed full of character cameos from Beautifully Baked, Unexpectedly Happily Ever After, and The Hidden Past of Pippa McGovern, Cupcake Connections is a sweet story about finding your own way.

Sign up now!

Looking forward to getting to know you

Holly xo

OTHER BOOKS BY HOLLY KERR

Suitor Science

Falling for The Suitor

Hating The Chemistry Teacher

Fraternizing with the Ex

Marrying the Billionaire Best Friend

Loving the Wrong Guy

Don't

Don't Tell Me You Love Me

Don't Want to Be Friends

Don't Stop Me Now

Don't They Know It's Christmas

Charlotte Dodd series

The Secret Life of Charlotte Dodd

The Missing Files of Charlotte Dodd

The Best Worst First Date Ever

The Hidden Past of Pippa McGovern

The Last Stand of Charlotte Dodd

Sisters in a Small Town

Coming Home

Hanging On

Stepping Up

Love and Alliteration

Perfectly Played

Beautifully Baked

Pleasantly Popped

I Saw Him Standing There

Unexpected

Unexpectedly Happily Ever After

Absinthe Doesn't Make the Heart Grow Fonder

Kid Lit

The Dragon Under the Mountain

The Dragon Under the Dome

Acknowledgments

Don't They Know it's Christmas was part of the Run, Run, Rudolph anthology in 2022. I needed something to submit and I wasn't quite finished with the Pike family yet, so *Ethan-and-Davis* was born. I'm definitely not finished with Rufus, and I'm sure Reuben will pop up in yet another of my books—who know, maybe even sister Ellie will get a book as well!

Thanks for reading and for following my characters like they're part of your family!