

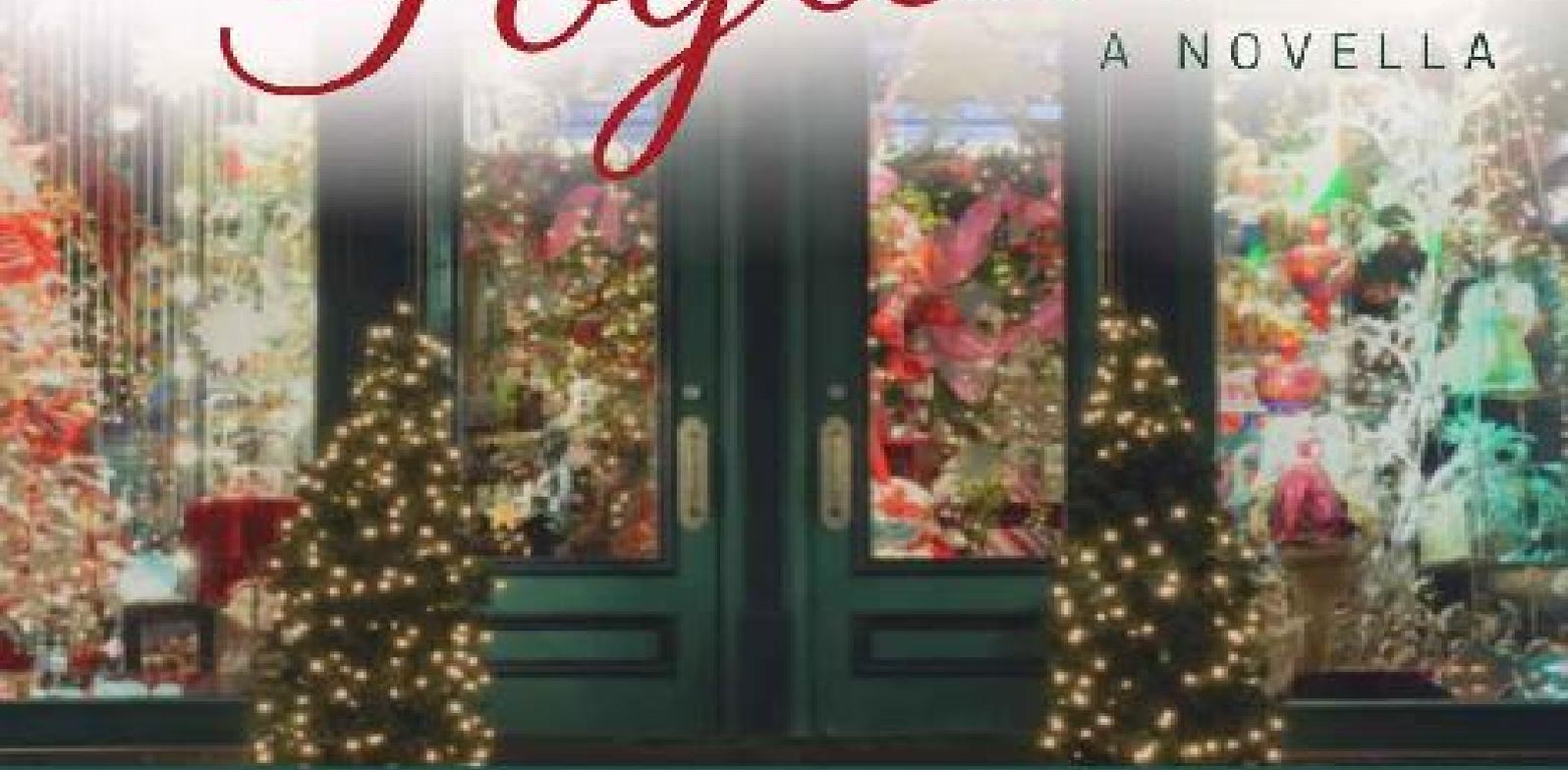


DREAMS IN



Toyland

A NOVELLA



JANINE ROSCHE

DREAMS IN TOYLAND

A CHRISTMAS NOVELLA



JANINE ROSCHE

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CHAPTER 1



*P*eyton Hammond had zero patience for shoplifters at The Toy Boutique, even if they were tall, dark, and a teensy bit handsome. She peeked around the cascading display of stuffed bears, puppies, and unicorns to see the man still lurking about, shoulders hunched. Although the hood of his sweatshirt shielded much of his face, the line of his strong nose and brow brought every Tom Hardy villain to mind. Not to mention those full lips. The guy was probably used to getting away with petty theft. Well, he hadn't met Peyton.

His hand once again slipped from his sweatshirt pocket to touch the display of fairy toys. He rolled one on the palm of his hand. He glanced back at the cash counter, where Peyton had been standing one minute ago. Now his hand was empty. The fairy figurine *Eliazonda* had probably ended up deep in that pocket with who-knows-what-else.

The shop was no stranger to slick hands, but for the most part the offenders had been teenagers on a dare or young children angry that their parents had said no to buying a plush.

But a grown man? No way. She had a hard enough time getting profits at this store as is, and she wouldn't let this guy move her one step closer to losing her family's dream.

"Excuse me. Miss Peyton?" The dainty voice accompanied a tugging hand on her skirt. Alice Winterbourne's Kewpie doll eyes peered up at her. In her hands, she held a box of hand-whittled dinosaur models—one of Peyton's favorite creations.

Dropping to her knees so she could look the preschooler in the eye, she forced all worries about dreams, store closings, and shoplifters to the back of her mind. “Merry Christmas Eve, Alice. How may I help you?”

“I wanna get these dinos for my little brother, but Daddy doesn’t know how much they are.”

“The price tag is right here on the bottom,” Peyton said, gingerly turning the box in the young girl’s hand. “\$84.99.”

“That’s what Daddy said. Then he said no one in their right mind would pay that much for chunks of wood. But I know Teddy would love these dinos.”

Splinters of wood might have pierced Peyton’s heart straight through. She’d put three late nights of work into each of those sets and given herself blisters in the process. Eight months later, all four boxes remained on the shelf, gathering dust while publicly displayed, much like Alice’s family had been this past year. Teddy, Alice’s brother, had the same cancer as Peyton’s sister. Fortunately for the Winterbournes, thirty-some years of research and advanced treatments helped him survive what was once unsurvivable. The whole town had rallied to help pay the hospital bills, because heaven knows Angus Winterbourne couldn’t afford them. With a lump in her throat the size of an ornament, Peyton opened the box and held all five dinosaurs in her hands. “Why don’t you choose the one Teddy would like best. You can just take it.”

“That ain’t right,” Angus cut in, taking Alice by the hand. “We’ll find something else.”

Peyton knew good and well that everything in her shop was priced above Angus’s pay grade at the laundromat. Quality wasn’t cheap, and children deserved the best, safest, and most imagination-inspiring toys available. And if those toys weren’t available, Peyton would make them with her own two hands.

The girl’s eyes sparked with hope. “Maybe Santa Claus will bring them to Teddy. Or Handsel will!”

At the mention of Handsel's name, Peyton drew her bottom lip between her teeth. The mysterious gift-giver of Kedgewick Creek had been the subject of speculation for decades—one more thing that made her hometown simply majestic at Christmas. Whoever Handsel was, he or she accepted requests from Kedgewick Creek residents who needed help pulling off big Christmas-morning surprises. All one had to do was write a letter describing the needed help and place it in an envelope addressed "Dear Handsel." From there, the post office would somehow get it to the right person or group of persons. Many folks in town had been blessed by the tradition over time, including Peyton. In 1999, Handsel had helped Peyton's parents set up a sewing room and workshop for her in what had once stored bins full of her sister's stuff, all while Peyton had been sound asleep upstairs. What a bittersweet morning that had been.

Too bad this dinosaur set wasn't one of the toys donated to the Dear Handsel organization in the Kedgewick Creek toy drive. Peyton surely would have noticed if one of her creations had been purchased. Sadly, Teddy would not be receiving this tonight.

"Alice, best not get your hopes up," Angus said. "It's too late to write a letter to Santa, and Handsel is too busy helping others who need it more."

Tears pooled between the little girl's dark lashes, threatening to drop on the Tyrannosaurus her focus held.

Peyton put the dinosaurs back in their box, except for the T. Rex. She placed that one in Alice's hand and folded the girl's fingers around it. "I've got a ton of extra Tyrannosaurs in the back. Take it. I insist."

The back-and-forth between Peyton and Angus was inevitable. Finally, Peyton ushered the father and daughter out the door and etched a mental reminder to pick up her whittling knife and a walnut block tomorrow to complete the now T. Rex-less set behind the counter.

With that settled, she returned her attention to the shoplifter. Funny enough, the shoplifter was studying *her*, only

to look away when she caught his gaze. Why was he still wearing his hood? It might be cold outside, but her shop was nice and toasty. Of course, his hands remained in his pockets along with whatever he'd taken. Any smart criminal would have made his escape by now. Unless he'd planned to rob her blind—wait until the last customer left at closing time, then empty her register while holding her at knifepoint.

The image was all Peyton needed to yank out her phone. She scrolled through her contacts, stopping on Officer Stillman's name. He said he'd stop by before she closed anyway. Plus, he'd made it clear ever since the Christmas Ball that he would do just about anything to make her happy—a nice change, since she'd spent her entire life bringing joy to others, regardless of what it cost her. She could picture it now. He would saunter in, wearing his cop uniform and swinging his handcuffs. The shoplifter would spend Christmas Eve in jail, and Officer Stillman—or Blaine, as he insisted she call him—would be her hero.

And wouldn't that make her parents happy?

Peyton cringed. There she went again.

“Stillman,” he answered gruffly. A man like he was didn't have time for greetings like “Hello.” And he probably didn't have time to glance at his phone screen to see her name either.

“Blaine, hi. It's Peyton. Are you close by the shop? I have a situation here.”

“Are you in trouble?” His voice rose in pitch and urgency.

“No. Well, I don't know. I've got a shoplifter.” In the silence that followed, she snuck a peek over her shoulder and accidentally caught the criminal's eye once again. *That's right. I'm onto you, Mr. Grinch.* Still, Blaine didn't answer. “He's an adult male. Caucasian. Looks like Tom Hardy.”

“Who?”

“An actor. He played Heathcliff in the BBC's *Wuthering Heights*...which you probably haven't seen. Nevermind. He's in a black hoodie, and he's probably six foot ... wait, how tall are you?”

“Six foot two.”

“This guy’s about six foot even, then.”

“You’re sure he’s stealing?”

Peyton winced at the subtle accusation, but quickly brushed it off. What if she was wrong? She couldn’t extend happiness to everyone she met if she spoiled an innocent guy’s Christmas Eve. But if the future of her family’s store relied on her paranoia, then it was a risk she had to take.

“Never mind,” Blaine said. “I’m in front of the Kedgewick Creek Playhouse. I’ll be there in five.”

She ended the call and slipped the phone back into the apron pocket where she also kept mini candy canes for all the children.

The hooded man shifted from one foot to the other as he stared at her. The guy could use a shave. Maybe he was homeless. Based on the dark circles beneath his eyes, he was probably into drugs. Blaine would nail this guy on multiple charges. Kedgewick Creek would be better off, Peyton told herself, hoping that belief might remove the niggling feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Five minutes, Blaine had said. She could delay him for five minutes. Talking a person’s ear off was a gift of hers.



*H*e was a louse. No, he was lower than a louse. More like an amoeba on the backside of a louse. Why else would Joey Kiljoy, of all people, find himself skimming the aisles of a mom-and-pop toy store on Christmas Eve, hoping to right his wrongs? This gift should’ve been his first priority when he arrived in North Carolina. Still, he’d waited until Christmas Eve, using it as an excuse to come in here. Man, he really needed to get his act together or he’d wind up in an even more pathetic situation than he was already in.

You don’t have all night, Kiljoy. Make your move. Still, he fidgeted with the inner lining of his sweatshirt pocket until his

fingers gripped the only thing that could help him now.

“Welcome to The Toy Boutique.” Her.

It was *she* that approached *him*. Perhaps this wouldn't be so hard.

“Are you looking for something in particular?”

If that wasn't the question of the night. This was crazy. He had way too much on his plate to be trying this. He should've found his courage to speak to her when he'd first seen her at that Christmas Ball, decked out in a cute costume dress. Or outside the community theater a week later with her eye-catching red curls cascading down her back. Or in The Daily Press a few days ago. Each time, her light-up-a-room smile nearly made him forget who he was and why he was in this tiny North Carolina town in the first place. Like a creep, he'd followed her to this shop. A *toy shop*, of all places. Peyton Hammond was her name, according to his grandfather. Like a creepier creep, Joey had looked her up online. There wasn't much there. It seemed she lived a quiet, low-profile life. According to the single newspaper article he found, her family opened this store twenty-seven years ago. She'd just taken it over in the past few years when her parents retired, and this year she'd helped put on the local toy drive to benefit underserved families.

And if she didn't look the part of a small-town toy shop owner, with her kind eyes, freckled nose, and near-constant smile, then no one would. Of course, that smile had been missing once she'd seen him enter her store tonight. He'd been debating ever since on whether to follow through with his plan. But now she was speaking to him, as if the angels orchestrated this, their first conversation.

“I'm Joey.”

A blink. That's all he got in return. Where was the joy she usually radiated?

“Oh. You didn't ask my name. Yes, I need help.” More than he'd first thought, apparently. “I'm looking for a gift. It's

uh, for my niece. She's extremely picky about her toys, so I haven't found a gift for her yet."

Jingle bells strung from the front door jangled as an older woman entered the shop.

Peyton seemed disappointed but returned her attention to him. "What does she like?"

"Dolls, mostly. I was going to get her a Susie Fussbucket, but she specifically said she didn't want one of those."

Peyton scoffed. "Smart girl."

Joey pressed his lips into a tight line. According to reports, Susie Fussbucket was on the Christmas list of at least one kid in forty-six percent of American households. The hit toy was the latest to create a mad frenzy, much like the Easy-Bake Oven in the '60s, Cabbage Patch Dolls in the '80s, and Tickle Me Elmo in the '90s. Susie was impossible to find, leaving many parents in a lurch and praying for a Christmas miracle. Rumor had it that even the North Pole's elves couldn't meet the demand. If anyone could get his hands on one, though, it was Joey. Yet he needed something truly special for this gift.

Peyton's stare drifted down to his midsection, suspicion pooling in eyes that matched the hot chocolate he'd filled his thermos with right before he left Grandfather's house. Had the shopgirl seen what he was hiding? Great. "I don't sell those dolls anyway. I prefer to sell high-quality toys, not mass-produced imagination killers."

Hold up. Wait a jingling minute. "Imagination killers?"

"Forget it. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sure the Kiljoy juggernaut has good reason to put all their eggs in that basket, or should I say fussbucket. Just watch, though. That doll will end up taking down that whole company."

Joey straightened his spine, standing to his full height. "What do you mean?"

The girl shrugged, clearly not having any clue who he was. "I know something they don't."

Chills radiated down his spine, and it wasn't because he was cold. This toy store was hotter than the Heat Miser's volcano home. "What's that?"

"You'll see. Give it a couple of days, then everyone will know."

"How? How will they know?"

"All it would take is one video on social media, and they'd lose the customers' trust." She looked to the door again, as though she was expecting someone and they were running late. Maybe a boyfriend or that guy she'd danced with at the ball.

Fine by him; he wasn't exactly feeling a spark between them. More like one of those drag-your-feet-across-the-carpet shocks. But if he could keep her talking, maybe he could find out about this supposed secret she knew. "A social media post from you?"

"No. I'm not on social media. Others would happily do it for me."

"Like who?"

"Other independent toy store owners. With how much our small businesses have suffered thanks to Kiljoy Toyz and their online monopoly? They couldn't blow the whistle fast enough ... *if* they knew what I know." She pointed to the small wooden fairies Joey had been eyeing before. Their astronomical price tag nearly made him choke on his gum. "I saw you looking at the Eliazonda fairies. Would your niece like those?"

"Maybe, although I don't feel like taking out a second mortgage for them." The words slipped out before he could stop them.

If Peyton was offended, it didn't show. "That explains an awful lot."

What was she talking about? This wasn't going well. At least her *niece* comment reminded him about his other reason for this stop. He still needed a gift. "What about that doll?" He nodded to a rag doll poised on a shelf above the cash register.

“That’s not for sale.”

“That’s a shame. My niece would love it.”

Peyton’s face brightened a touch. Now that was the girl he’d been drawn to ever since he arrived in Kedgewick Creek. Too bad he’d already determined this was a waste of time.

Or was it? What if this was simply a wise business decision? If he was able to find out what Peyton knew about Susie Fussbucket and Kiljoy Toyz, he may be able to stop it from being made public.

He sucked in a cool wintergreen breath that chilled his windpipe. “Would you like to go on a date with me?”

Peyton stepped back, brows knit close. Her rosy lips seemed to tangle on several words at once. “I don’t even know who you are.” Her gaze now roved up to his forehead.

How had he not yet removed his hood? No wonder she was suspicious of him. He was dressed like the Ghost of Christmas Future.

He yanked the hood down. “I’m, uh, Joey.”

“You already told me that. Joey what?”

The centerpiece of the shop, a grand wooden clock, ticked loudly in Joey’s head as he wrestled with the shame his last name held in this town, and especially in this place—an independently owned and managed toy store.

One more tick set off the resonating chimes—seven of them, to be specific—then a lullaby played, and two doors opened below the clock face. Two smiling bears appeared from one door, spinning and dancing to the music, before disappearing into the second door.

“Joey Kiljoy.”

Her brows shot skyward.

“Care to empty your pockets?” The policeman appeared out of nowhere. A stone-cold presence in a shop bubbling over with warmth. The guy crossed his arms, clearly pushing out

his biceps and peeking at Peyton to see if she noticed. She didn't seem to.

Not that it mattered. Joey recognized him. Peyton Hammond's dancing partner from the ball was a cop? Joey's chances with her slipped to practically nil. "My pockets? Why?"

"I got a report that someone with your description was stealing from the store."

Joey looked over one shoulder, then the other. The other customers in the store were too focused on their own last-minute shopping to accuse him of this absurdity. The only one who'd paid him any mind was currently staring slack-jawed at him. Without taking his eyes off Peyton, he emptied his Dungarees' pocket of his wallet, phone, and keys.

"Stop. I made a mistake," she said.

"Christmas Eve?" the officer continued. "You sure picked a great day to steal from this hardworking woman, didn't you?"

"With all due respect, officer, I wasn't stealing."

"Your sweatshirt pockets too. I don't have all night."

Peyton touched the man's arm. Practically caressed it. "Blaine, don't."

Joey had his answer.

Why would this woman want to go on a date with the man putting her shop out of business anyway? The man whose business she was looking to ruin right back?

"It's fine. Happy to comply." If embarrassment was bound to be his lot, then he'd embrace it. He tossed the breath spray on the counter.

The cop laughed through his nose. "Is that Binaca? Where are you from? The eighties?"

Joey kept his focus aimed at Peyton, and she shifted beneath it.

“Blaine, forget it. This is Joseph Kiljoy. I’m pretty sure a multi-millionaire wouldn’t need to steal something from my little ol’ shop.”

Now Joey was the one shifting his weight from one foot to the other beneath her scrutinizing gaze. Wealth wasn’t something he’d ever been comfortable with. Not that he’d liked poverty any better.

“Then why is he here? Dressed in head-to-toe black and acting as though he has something to hide? Or does he get his kicks by visiting the small businesses he’s destroying?”

Joey swallowed hard. However, it wasn’t the cop’s icy glare that gave him chills. It was the glimmer of sadness passing over Peyton Hammond’s face. “Am I good to leave, officer?”

The guy leaned forward, his eyes sharp. “Oh, I highly suggest it.”

After scooping up his belongings, Joey turned his steel toes toward the door and, careful not to even brush against the shopkeeper, made a quick escape. What a waste of time. As if he didn’t have a million things to do tonight and two dozen people counting on him to not mess this up, his grandfather especially.

The gift.

He came to a jarring halt beneath the streetlight dressed with a gaudy wreath. He still hadn’t gotten a gift for the only female in his life, and it looked like that would be true for a long time to come. Of all the people to deny a Christmas present ...

A quick scan of the shops surrounding Mistletoe Square made the rock in his stomach fall even more. Almost all the lights were out. Only The Toy Boutique remained open, and he definitely couldn’t go back in there.

CHAPTER 2



“Merry Christmas Eve, Momma. Got any snow?” Peyton peered out the front door to the street that had been bustling hours ago. But at nine o’clock, the Kedgewick Creek villagers were nowhere to be seen.

“Baby doll, we live in Arizona, remember?”

“Of course, I remember. This shop reminds me every day. But miracles can and do happen, right?” Peyton flipped the sign on the door to read *Closed* to any passersby, chewing her lip all along. She’d hoped to sell more on this last day before Christmas. The need for a miracle seemed to be taking over all aspects of her life recently.

“Tell me about those big plans of yours. And spare no details. They better be special, considering you turned down our offer to fly you to Phoenix for the holidays.”

She didn’t want to keep lying to her parents, but how could she tell them the real reason she had to stay in North Carolina? After all, they’d trusted her with the store’s future when they retired. The truth would absolutely break them. And she had seen far too much of their brokenness in her twenty-seven years. “You know... a little of this and a little of that. Nothing too exciting. Except I have a date tomorrow night.”

The shriek pierced her eardrum before she had time to pull the phone away. Her mother’s excitement would still be ringing in her ear when Blaine picked her up for dinner and a movie.

“Now don’t start planning the wedding yet. It’s one date.”

“One date on Christmas night. It’s bound to be magical. Who is he?”

“He’s a policeman—just moved here a few months ago from Asheville.”

“You know, I’ve always wanted you to marry a first responder. Such heroes.”

“I do know that. You tell me all the time.”

“What’s he like?”

“He seems nice. Maybe a bit overconfident.”

“I thought you liked confident guys.”

She did, until they took advantage of her self-sacrificing ways. Maybe Blaine would be different. He’d stood so tall when the Kiljoy Toyz owner waddled out of the store. Okay, so waddled wasn’t the right word, but the guy wasn’t exactly Mr. Swagger. Tired green eyes that may be nice-looking if he actually took care of himself. And skin so pale Frosty the Snowman looked like a Baywatch lifeguard in comparison. Then there was that scruffy facial hair that was too short to be called a beard and too long to be called stubble. If wrong-side-of-the-tracks had a look, he had it.

The worst part was admitting to herself he was still attractive in his unkempt state. What would he look like cleaned up and smiling? He could smile, right? Heaven knows if Peyton had that much money, she’d be smiling a whole lot more than she was tonight.

“I should get going. My friends will be here soon. I love you, Momma.”

Friends. It wasn’t a lie if she counted Ralphie and his family from *A Christmas Story*. Her parents wouldn’t be the wiser and could be free to enjoy their Christmas without worrying about their only living daughter.

Fifteen minutes later in her over-the-store apartment, she plugged in her pathetic tabletop Christmas tree only to find that the bottom half of the tree remained dark. Great. She

settled onto her loveseat, prepared to lose herself in the Christmas classic and a delicious glass of eggnog.

She took a sip and a heave rose up her torso as the eggnog curdled in her mouth, smacking her with a sour taste. As she let the foul drink ungracefully dribble back into the glass, she was thankful she lived alone, even on Christmas.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and ran to the bathroom to brush the taste away before her ramen noodle dinner made a not-so-merry reappearance. Crest to the rescue, she finished the toothbrushing with a drink of water from the faucet. A strange sound pulled her from the nog nightmare and she straightened, turning off the water.

Something outside her bathroom window yapped as if it had just seen Santa's sleigh. Had one of her neighbors gotten a puppy? She rushed to the window, tamping down her own excitement. Her life could use more puppy breath and kisses, for sure. Maybe she could dog-sit occasionally. Outside, in a perfect halo of light from the streetlamp, a tiny white fluffball hopped and pounced on something she couldn't see, right there in the street below her window. No one, neighbor or otherwise, could be seen.

Before the pup got hit by a car, Peyton had bounded down the steps, through The Toy Boutique, and out the shop's front door.

The pup, a Labrador if she wasn't mistaken, popped up when Peyton neared. He raced to her clumsily, led by oversize paws and nearly tripping on its floppy ears.

"What are you doing out here all alone, you cute little angel?" She lifted the squirmy guy—no, girl—and cradled her against her chest. "No collar. No tag. Just a red bow? Someone's going to be sad their present ran away."

Eyes that reflected her own settled on her nose.

"Ouch! No bite!" Peyton wagged her finger at the pup, before feeling her nose for blood. Finding nothing but puppy-chow-scented saliva, she moved the puppy down to her waist in case any other facial features looked like a squeaky toy.

“Let me grab my boots, and I’ll try to find your new family. They’re bound to be searching for you, even with that awful biting habit of yours.”

No sooner had she returned to the sidewalk after donning her boots and coat than did a man’s voice call out.

“Puppy! Come!”

“Over here!” Peyton called, searching the street for the man with seriously impaired dog-naming ability.

Movement steered her sights toward Mistletoe Square. A dark figure quickly passed by The Daily Press, and Peyton headed that direction. Whoever it was seemed to be in either a panic or a hurry. Perhaps helping them get on with their plans would help her feel better about not having any of her own. She was cutting through the town’s gazebo, when recognition donned, and not just for her.

Joseph Kiljoy, still dressed completely in black, stood in the street, staring at Peyton as though she hadn’t called the cops on him earlier. The twinge of guilt she’d felt the moment she’d realized her mistake returned in full force.

Why?

She didn’t know. He was the one stealing her business and keeping her in the red. He was the reason she’d likely be shuttering her doors in the new year. In this story, he was the villain. Joe Fox. Mr. Potter. That guy from *Die Hard*.

“This puppy yours?”

“Sort of,” he stammered, pushing back his hood again. “I mean, I’m responsible for it.”

Peyton held the puppy out, refusing to put even one more step of effort toward helping him.

He hurried up the steps as quickly as he’d raced out of her shop earlier and accepted the puppy into his arms.

“Your sweet little puppy bit my nose.”

His intense eyes softened a touch. Lit only by strings of lights, his skin looked healthier, the bags beneath his eyes less

noticeable. “I’m ... I’m sorry. How badly?”

“Badly enough for me to sue you for a few million. You’re good for it, right?”

A long stare drilled her until the awkwardness triggered her pursed grin.

“Is that a joke?” He studied her face.

“Yes, I’m joking. I’m not after your money.”

“Can I get you ice or something?”

She nearly chuckled, until she saw the seriousness in his expression. The brooding man lived up to his name. “So, Joseph Kiljoy, I’m guessing you’re here to see your grandfather for the holidays. Is this girl for him? He doesn’t exactly seem like the type to love puppies.”

“Uh, no. He’s more of a cat guy.”

Despite it all, she laughed, which took the guy by surprise. “Oh, you’re serious. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“Okay.” Peyton took one step back, then another. “Why did you come to my shop today?”

“To get my niece a gift and to ask you on a date.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve heard your shop was one-of-a-kind, and I’d hoped I’d find the perfect thing for her.”

“No, why did you want to ask me out?”

He shrugged. “I’ve seen you around.”

“So?”

“You’re always kind and joyful. I mean, not around me. And we’re in the same industry. We have a lot in common.”

“Oh, I doubt that. Well, you’ve got your dog back. Have a good Christmas.”

“You never answered my question.”

She summoned her best quizzical look, despite knowing full well the question to which he was referring.

“About if you’d like to go on a date with me.” So strange, his combination of shyness and forwardness.

Peyton gathered her nerve and prepared to level him. Instead, what dribbled out was anything but strength. “You and your company are the reason my entire future and my family’s dream is hanging in the balance.”

She’d expected haughtiness. After all, ever since he’d taken over control of his grandfather’s Kiljoy Toyz seven years ago, the online seller of cheaply manufactured toys exploded in popularity. They were essentially the Amazon of the toy world. Meanwhile, The Toy Boutique was the claw machine at the supermarket. Yet, Joseph seemed genuinely taken aback by her statement.

“I guess I know your answer, then.” He shuffled his feet. “No, right?”

“Joseph—”

“Joey,” he interrupted her.

Peyton heaved a deep breath, and her eyes scanned the roof of the gazebo for something, anything, that would get through this guy’s head. “It would take the angels themselves coming down and thrusting us together to make me say yes to —” Her search ended on greenery hanging in the center of the gazebo, directly above their heads.

Before she could distract him, he also glanced up. But where most guys would jump at the chance to kiss her without permission, Joseph’s cheeks took on a reddish hue. It was a good look on him, she hated to admit.

“Don’t want to break tradition, especially in Mistletoe Square.” She stepped forward and planted a big smooch on the puppy’s head. The pooch didn’t even react, just continued chewing on the red ribbon she’d managed to untie from her neck. What did react, was Peyton’s heart rate after catching a whiff of the man’s cologne. The barely-there scent whispered of spices—clove and cinnamon—and tapped a nutcracker

waltz of warmth through her. Far too welcoming. Blaine didn't smell anywhere near this good, and he doused himself in cologne.

"I should go," he said.

"I'm not keeping you."

He began to turn away but stopped. "If what you say is true, I sincerely apologize for any trouble my business has caused yours." A few heavy steps, and he left her alone in the gazebo to scratch her head.

"So weird," she muttered beneath her breath. She started for home, but too many questions rolled through her brain. The answers were disguised in all black, holding a puppy, and heading suspiciously toward the industrial side of town where no one lived. No one. What was he up to?



*S*mooth, Joey. Smooth.

He couldn't spend any more time thinking about that woman. He had a big job to do, and he was already behind. Now, if only the puppy would stop her whining.

"I trusted you to stay close without being in your crate, but you didn't listen, did ya?" He tried for a stern look but the puppy already owned him, and she knew it. He'd only taken custody of her this morning. In another eight hours, she'd be in her new home. She was, after all, a Dear Handsel gift. Joey was just the delivery boy. And man, would it help if he'd swallowed his pride and trusted someone for help. He'd run himself ragged these past two weeks, and he looked it.

Another whine. The pup pawed at the lock on the crate while giving him her best sad eyes.

"Unless you plan to help me load this truck, you need to be quiet. I'll get you out when I'm done." He'd worked himself into a sweat, carrying all these gifts into the unmarked truck. All that was left for this load was the castle. The large, awkward-to-carry-with-two-people, impossible-to-carry-with-

one castle he'd spent all day yesterday assembling so some little prince or princess on Swamp Stop Lane could wake up Christmas morning to something magical. He'd already dragged the thing to the back of the truck, but getting it *on* the truck was not going well.

Joey opened the castle door and stepped inside the play structure. He got low and dug the fingertips of his left hand between the pink plastic and the pavement. He could barely reach the other wall. The castle wasn't too heavy, but he'd have to perfectly balance it on his outstretched fingers, or he'd risk dropping and breaking it. This would be so much easier with two people.

Meanwhile, the puppy yipped and yapped.

“Stop laughing at me, dog. I didn't laugh when you tried to jump on the couch and fell.” Joey sucked in a breath, then lifted, only to have the castle teeter, then bump its front on the ground. He readjusted—too much since on the second attempt, the castle fell back. The urge to growl was growing. The title line to Andy Williams' “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” mockingly ran through his head. How his grandfather had single-handedly run the Dear Handsel organization for thirty years was beyond his grasp, just like this stinkin' playhouse.

Another readjustment and another try. This time, the castle lifted with ease, keeping steady, even as Joey stood and inched the first wall over the lip of the truck's cargo hold. It became easier after that. Once the majority of the castle's weight was on the truck floor, Joey dipped beneath it, escaping through the open floor, and backing out. A final shove settled the castle next to the rest of Handsel's first load. He pulled down the door and secured the lock.

Now to grab his coffee and tablet.

“Ohhh!” More a noise than a word, the sound shot from Joey's throat when he'd nearly collided with the woman standing right behind him. “Peyton? What are you doing here?”

“Helping you load a castle.”

“I mean, what are you doing at this warehouse at nine forty-five at night?”

“Trying to figure out what shady dealings a stranger is doing in my hometown. I don’t have to ask. It’s pretty obvious with all these presents. You’re either Santa Claus or Handsel. So unless you’re hiding a big belly under that sweatshirt, I’m assuming the latter.”

“I’m not Handsel.”

From the way she cocked her head to the side, she didn’t believe him. She traipsed over to the Load 2 area and slid her hands over the mane of a rocking horse that had fortunately come already assembled—one less thing he’d had to do to prepare for this night. “I dropped this horse, along with the other toy drive items, here three days ago. Via email, I was given strict instructions of how and when to leave them so they wouldn’t get stolen. So you’re either Handsel, or a thief who cracked the code. I’ve already made a fool of myself claiming you’re a thief once already tonight. I’m not doing that again.”

Joey threw his hands up. His grandfather had never once been spotted or caught delivering the gifts. Joey hadn’t even started the delivery process and he’d already failed. Failure wasn’t something he’d experienced for a long time. Peyton Hammond had shown it to him twice in one night.

“You know, for years, I’ve been trying to discover Handsel’s identity. And before you ask, no, I don’t have anything better to do. I never once considered it might be someone from out-of-town. I certainly never thought it would be a Kiljoy. I mean, your grandfather is sort of a Scrooge McDuck, if you know what I mean. And you ...” She looked him up and down.

He suddenly wished he were in one of his suits, prepared for a board meeting, with a fresh shave and a good night’s sleep. Attention wasn’t his favorite thing, but if he was going to catch anyone’s eye, he wanted it to be Peyton Hammond’s and at a time when he wasn’t living on caffeine and junk food.

Especially now that she had information he needed to protect his business's interests. "Go on. Why hold back now?"

"I know a lot about your company. Ever since you took the reins, you've been all about profit. I'd never guess charity work would be high on your to-do list."

Joey tried to temper the sting with the reminder of her earlier words and the pain he'd seen in her eyes. Her family business was struggling to survive, so she reached for a scapegoat. Who better to don the fleece and guilt than an online giant? "If that's what you think of me, then you have no reason to think I'd play Handsel, especially for people I don't know, and in a town that holds such prejudice against my family. Honestly, I'm only helping someone out and I've got to go." He shut down the lights in the warehouse and slid the door, prompting her to exit the way she'd entered. He locked up and lifted the dog crate. At least he'd have someone to keep him company tonight.

From what he could tell, Peyton's eyes never left him, even as he climbed into the cab. "How about you let me give you a ride back home?"

"I'll be fine. It isn't far. A couple of hundred yards."

"My mom used to say ten yards is too far for a woman to walk alone in the dark."

"The empowered female in me is glad your momma isn't here."

"Yeah, but her offspring is. As much as you think I'm your enemy, I can't leave you alone out here."

She crossed her arms and lifted her chin until her stubbornness was on full display. This whole thing—the date rejection, the competitor barbs, and her very presence—would be a whole lot easier to deal with if he didn't find her quite so pretty.

"If you're out to prove you've got enough moxie to handle dangerous situations, then accept a ride from this stranger. It's a win-win situation. I'll know I'm helping you out, and you'll know your empowered femininity waved off common sense."

“Oh, yes. A scary stranger who makes millions selling toys.”

Joey squeezed his eyes shut, clamping his teeth against a retort. When he'd calmed enough to look back at her, she was gone, but a moment later she yanked open the passenger door. “You don't have to rub my wealth in my face. It makes me wicked uncomfortable.”

“You know what makes me *wicked uncomfortable*?” she said with an exaggerated Bostonian accent. “Thinking about the moment I'll close my shop's doors for the final time because all my customers' money is sitting in your bank vault.” She settled into her seat, keeping the dog crate on the bench between them

He started the engine. “You make it sound as if my business model was to steal from the little guys. It wasn't. From what I can tell, you and I sell very different products.” He refrained from explaining the foolishness of selling high end toys in a modest Appalachian town. From the wavering look on her face, she was debating whether to insult him again.

“I didn't recognize you. I've seen your picture in Forbes. You look—”

“Careful, now. I'm pretty sure it goes against southern manners to insult someone's appearance. At least to their face.”

“Tired. That's what I was going to say. You look tired.” Was that a glimmer of concern? No. Couldn't be. “I've always marveled over all the good Handsel does for our town. Have you been doing all that work on your own or do you hire it out?”

“I can't talk about it. My friend—”

“What friends do you have here other than your family? Please. If I'm wrong about your family, I'd like to know.”

“You *are* wrong. My grandfather may not have always been the friendliest guy but he's different now. This Dear Handsel—it's his way of making up for—”

“So it *is* him? Your grandfather is Handsel? Like, since the beginning?”

Joey squeezed his eyes shut and sucked in a heavy breath.

“I’m sorry for interrupting. Go on,” she urged.

“Handsel is his way of making up for all the pain he caused early on in his life. All that would be for nothing if people discover his identity. That’s why he doesn’t hire folks to help. But he’s getting older, and he needed me to take over this year. So I did. And yes, it’s been tiring.”

“Handsel is a Kiljoy.” As if chewing on the fact made it more true. “Now two Kiljoys. You don’t even know us though. And yet, you’ve spent weeks here?”

“Exactly. I’ve spent a few weeks here, watching all the town’s festivities from afar. I’ve grown to appreciate it. It’s different from Boston, but it’s nice.” The truck rounded Mistletoe Square. “Um, I don’t know where you live.”

“Above my shop. You can pull up here.”

He did as she asked, then looked past her to the quaint storefront. “Peyton, again, I apologize if my company has caused yours harm. I wish you’d believe me.”

“Why does it matter if I believe you or not? It doesn’t change anything.”

“It might make you tell me what the deal is with Susie Fussbucket.”

“Oh, that’s why you’re sorry?” She brushed a hand in his direction.

He caught it and gave it a friendly squeeze, despite the burn in his chest at the touch. “Peyton, I’m sorry. Period. End of sentence. But before you knew my last name, you were convinced that toy would be my company’s downfall. I can’t ignore that.”

“It’s probably nothing. Not worth bringing up really. And you have work to do anyway.” She pulled her hand out of his and grasped the door handle.

He didn't believe her. It was something all right. She'd looked so smug talking about it earlier. He wouldn't get any more information out of her though. He'd simply have to pray whatever *it* was didn't have the repercussions Peyton was hoping for. What a shame. If circumstances were different, maybe they could be on the same team. "Wait. Before you go," he started, with no finish in mind. "Please don't tell anyone about Handsel's identity."

"I won't."

Joey believed her. Not that he had any choice. "Merry Christmas, Peyton."

"Merry Christmas, Joseph."

"For the last time, it's Joey to you." He tried to reign in his smile, but it was no use. He'd no doubt seen Peyton Hammond at her worst—they being rivals and all—yet that spark of hers had set the gears of his heart in motion. What did Newton say? Objects in motion stay in motion?

She rolled her eyes, then paused a few seconds. "Hey, about that date? Obviously, I wouldn't go since, you know, you're my industry rival and all that. But the other reason I can't go is that I'm seeing someone. Okay, I'm *starting* to see someone. We haven't actually gone on a date yet, but we will tomorrow."

"The cop?"

She nodded.

"That makes sense. I saw you two dancing at the Christmas Ball. He was the one you were smiling at."

"You were there?"

"When I first came down to Kedgewick Creek, I wanted to help my grandfather. To be honest, I didn't understand why my grandfather cared so much about the town. He suggested I go see the people I'd be helping."

"And you saw me?"

"You were wearing a white and blue dress with puffy sleeves. Whenever you spun—"

“I didn’t spin. I twirled.” She winced. “There I go, interrupting you again.”

“I don’t mind. Whenever you twirled, the skirt would spread wide and these blue hearts appeared at the hem.” Joey hadn’t been able to take his eyes off the living, breathing doll. “Anyway ...”

Peyton didn’t move. She simply stared at Joey. With her good looks, she couldn’t be that surprised that a man had noticed her. She was either completely creeped out, or they were having a moment. Like a *moment* moment. One that ended too quickly. She broke free from her trance, opened the door, and climbed down. “Well, have a good night.”

“You, too. And I’m sure you won’t share the sentiment, but it was nice to meet you, Peyton. Insults, theft accusations, and all.”

Her smile nearly melted him. That cop was a lucky guy.

While Joey watched Peyton walk to the shop’s front door, the puppy whined.

“I know, girl. I kind of liked her too.”

Rather than heading into the shop, Peyton froze. After a few moments, she banged a uey and returned to the truck. She yanked open the door, spooking the pup. “How are you planning to get that castle out of the truck?”

A chuckle shook his chest. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“You know, I don’t have anything going on tonight. If you want, I can help you deliver that to the family’s home. Just that one.”

Joey raked his fingers through his hair. The extra time with her could warm her up to him. She might feel more inclined to share her Susie Fussbucket knowledge. On the other hand, the extra time could warm him up to her even more than he already had. When it came down to it, there was no other option. “I’d be a fool to turn down that offer.”

CHAPTER 3



“They just give you a key to their home and trust you to not take what you want?”

Peyton’s words were met with a sharp *shhh* as Joey pressed his finger to his lips. He opened the second gate to the backyard, making an opening large enough for them to carry the castle through.

“Sorry. I’m not used to being quiet.”

“I’m discovering that,” he whispered with a contagious smile. He motioned for her to retake her position.

Peyton checked behind them, making sure none of the Hennesseys’ neighbors were reporting a burglary. At least if they did, Blaine would be one of the responding officers. She worked her hands between the grass and the bottom of the castle, thankful last week’s snow had disappeared, then lifted.

As they carried the toy through the backyard, her thoughts wandered back to Blaine. What a great guy—willing to pull a double shift on a holiday. If he was called to check this out, he’d see this was all innocent. Joey would continue with his deliveries, and Peyton would get to sneak a few minutes with Blaine. Maybe he’d give her another hint about what their date might entail. It had been a while since she’d been on a date. This year she’d had to hunker down and focus on the shop, not relationships. She hadn’t missed dating. It seemed she always gave too much and got too little in return. But her parents were beginning to worry she was lonely. She couldn’t have them doing that.

They set the castle on the patio by the double French doors, and Joey withdrew a tagged key from his back pocket. “To answer your question, I think people trust Dear Handsel with house keys, expensive gifts, and being in their house while their children are asleep because of the organization’s thirty-year history. It doesn’t make sense to me, but I grew up in Boston.”

“Yeah, your accent gave you away. In Kedgewick Creek, everybody knows everybody. Trust comes easily—maybe too easily in this case.”

“There’s also quite a bit of legal jargon both parties agree to.”

“I bet there is. How do you know where to put the stuff?”

“We get pretty detailed instructions for each order. I can show you on my tablet when we get back to the truck.” With barely a sound, Joey slipped the key in the lock and made a quarter turn. With a twist of the door handle, warm air flooded over Peyton, drawing her closer to the doorway until she bumped into Joey. He grinned. “Hang on a second.”

She waited while he reached up and unlatched the other door. The interior of the house was dark, but this appeared to be a basement. It also appeared that even with both doors open, this mammoth castle wouldn’t fit.

Joey ushered her inside with a slight touch on the small of her back. He pointed to a corner of the room, then leaned in close. “They want it set up in that corner of the cellar with the door and bow facing the stairs. Let’s go.”

She grabbed the crook of his arm. “What if it doesn’t fit?”

“It’ll fit.”

Peyton suppressed the urge to argue. He’d find out soon enough.

“It doesn’t fit,” he said five minutes later, after they’d tried every angle to get the plaything inside the doors. “Stop laughing.”

She couldn't help but snicker. So Mr. Toy Magnate wasn't great at everything. "If you'd listened to me before, I could have saved you some time."

"Like I'm supposed to trust your judgment? You're wearing a dress in the middle of winter for moving things."

"You told me to change into something black."

"So?"

"This dress and these tights are the only black things in my wardrobe."

"I don't believe you."

"Black is way too somber. I only have this because it's my funeral outfit. The way I see it, colorful clothes are one small way I can bring joy to this world."

"You already work at a toy shop. I saw you today ... with the little girl wanting those dinosaurs for her brother. You speak joy to all your customers—at least everyone other than me. Isn't that enough?"

Peyton thought a moment. "Maybe I do it for myself, then." She clamped her lips together. No need to spill her soul to some guy she just met. And they surely couldn't remain standing in a castle, which currently sat wedged in the door frame. She raised her chin to look over the castle's back wall and into the basement. "Is that a workshop area over by the stairs?"

Joey squinted. "Looks like it. Do you have an idea?"

"Yes, but I need to get over this wall. Could you help me?" Did he have muscles under those extra large clothes of his? She couldn't tell, but she'd gotten the sense that, with a bit more effort, he could've pushed the castle through the frame and taken the entire wall with it. He'd simply chosen not to. Controlled strength. Not the most unattractive quality in a man.

"What do you need me to do?" he asked.

"Um, give me a boost and don't let me fall on my head."

“Sounds good.” He moved behind her and placed light hands on her shoulders.

“Yeah, that’s not going to work. Grab my waist and when I jump, you lift.”

“What about your dress?”

“Hansel has no time for modesty, does he?” She waited until finally, his large hands gripped just below her rib cage, firmly but not hard enough for her to momentarily lose her breath. He probably thought she’d never been in a man’s embrace before.

He dropped his head until his breath touched her ear, and her eyes nearly crossed. *Think of Blaine, Peyton. Think of the shop and Kiljoy Toyz. Think of your parents. Don’t think about this New Englander.* She curled her sweaty palms over the top edge of the playhouse.

“One, two, three.”

Peyton jumped and tried to push herself up with her hands. It was unnecessary though, since Joey had lifted her high enough to bend her stomach over the wall. Before she could be completely humiliated at her current positioning relative to his face, she twisted her body until the wall aligned with the center of her torso, from her sternum down to the place she hoped her dress and tights still covered. He adjusted his positioning, steadying her and holding her tight as she maneuvered her legs over the other side.

“Hey,” he said, when their faces nearly touched forehead to forehead. “Don’t let me forget to thank you.” Goodness. He was almost charming.

Peyton slid down. When her toes hit the floor, she wasted no time. She went to the workbench and, quietly as she could, opened each drawer. Using her cell phone’s flashlight, she searched for the right tools. Once she held a large flathead screwdriver in one hand and a rubber mallet in the other, she returned to the regrettable situation. Peyton worked herself into the slim space behind the door. Using the tools, she began removing the pins from the hinges of the French doors.

Luckily, they slid out easily without her having to pound too hard with the mallet. Once the doors were removed, the castle was able to slide through, and the two carried the castle to its spot.

While Peyton tied an enormous bow on one of the towers, Joey rehung the doors. Before long they were back at the truck on the quiet street, and Peyton was holding the puppy on her lap. Yet the adrenaline still pumped through her. She'd helped Handsel deliver one of the surprises. How would she ever fall asleep now?

"You're good with that puppy," he said.

"That puppy ... She needs a name."

"She isn't mine."

"You're going to be spending all night with her. She should have a name."

"Fine." He eased the truck into gear and pulled onto Swamp Stop Lane—a funny street name considering it serviced the higher end homes in town. "What do you suggest?"

She smoothed her hand over the whitish-blond back. "Something Christmassy. Like Angel. Ooh, Gloria. Ribbons? Holly? Babe?"

"Like the pig?"

Peyton guffawed, startling the puppy. "No, like *Babes in Toyland*."

"What's that?"

It took all her self-control to not slam the gear shift into *Park*. "You've got to be kidding. You've never seen *Babes in Toyland*? Or even heard of it? You're a toymaker!"

"Maybe that's a good thing. It sounds like a show one might see on the Vegas strip."

"Absolutely not. *Babes in Toyland* started as a Victor Herbert stage show, then it was turned into one of those movies that gets remade every thirty years. Most people love

the one with Laurel and Hardy. And, don't get me wrong, I love Keanu Reeves—”

“Who doesn't?” Joey quipped.

“—but the 1986 version isn't great. My favorite movie is the one from 1961 starring Annette Funicello. That blue and white dress I wore to the Christmas Ball was a replica of one she wore in that movie. It took forever to sew that frock.” Peyton squealed. “That's it! Her name should be Annette. Annette *Furicello*.”

“Sounds good to me.”

A memory from last Christmas ice-skated to the forefront of her mind. A silly moment from a conversation between her and her parents about the future of the toy industry. Peyton's attempt to stifle a giggle resulted in a most unFunicello-like snort.

“What's so funny?” Joey asked.

“Just remembering something. The last time your name came up in conversation with my parents, I nicknamed you Barnaby.”

“Who's he?”

“The villain.”

“Aww, I see.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes. Peyton couldn't imagine what he was thinking. He'd once again shielded his face with his hood to protect the Handsel identity from anyone who saw into the driver's seat. But she'd caught that sheepish grin of his once or twice—enough to nearly make her forget they were competitors.

“I couldn't have delivered that castle without you,” Joey said as he turned onto Kringle Street. “Is there anything I can do to thank you?”

She chuckled. “I'm guessing that going out of business isn't an option.”

“According to you, that’s going to happen anyway. Because of Susie Fussbucket?”

“When I told you that, I didn’t know who you were.”

“And now that you do, you wish you hadn’t given me the heads-up?” He threw a hand up. “I get it. But I do hope you know I never planned to put anyone out of business. Especially a shop like yours. In fact, if there’s anything I could ever do to help you, I hope you’ll reach out. And I’m not saying that so you’ll tell me what Susie’s big flaw is.”

“I appreciate that. If I survive this season, it would be nice to have a friend in the industry.” A friend who might be able to share secrets of his success if she played this right.

He nodded to the toy shop. “Here we are. Go watch *Babes in Toyland* for me.”

“Or ... maybe I could keep helping you. I mean, that was the most fun I’ve ever had in this dress.”

“You had a pretty low bar.”

“True. But you did say you couldn’t have done it without me. So how about it? Do you need a partner in crime?”



“Come on, Peyton. I like Annette and all, but this is embarrassing.” Joey stood outside the truck, holding the confused dog with her back against his chest and her paws splayed out in front of them.

Peyton snickered but continued wrapping her long scarf around Joey’s back, beneath his arms, and across Annette’s belly. “What does it matter? I’m the only one who will see you.”

Because the castle delivery had taken longer than expected, they decided that the puppy should come along for the longer stops, just in case it got too cold in the cab. That presented quite a problem, since the homeowners wouldn’t be so happy to discover a dog had been exploring and possibly

marking her territory in their house. Peyton's idea? To use her scarf to bundle Annette to Joey as if she were a baby human. The only solace was seeing how Annette tried to bite Peyton's fingers with every wrap.

She finished tying a knot behind his neck, then stepped back to admire her work. "You two are adorable. If you had done this earlier, I might have said yes to that date."

"No kidding?"

Letting the question hang, she handed him two large totes filled with presents from the toy drive. Four families had been nominated from the community to have their entire Christmas covered by the donations. The first of those homes loomed before them. Peyton carried a box that was bigger than she was toward the front door. Before he followed, he whispered to Annette, "You be good, or I'll throw in an extra gift to this family."

Annette whimpered.

"And don't tell any of your friends about this. You don't exactly look cool either."

Ninety minutes later, they'd knocked out delivering to the first three families benefiting most from the toy drive. Peyton was nowhere closer to sharing what she knew about Susie Fussbucket. Joey couldn't help but get more and more frustrated.

"What's it like to have millions of dollars?"

Peyton's question burned through Joey's \$10 T-shirt and set his skin on fire. Pretty impressive, since this home was absolutely freezing. Annette may have been warmer in the truck. Then he would've been able to wear his sweatshirt, since the wrap didn't fit over that extra material. He'd have to hide some cash in a drawer before he left, so the young single mother wouldn't have to worry about the heating bills. The town had already blessed the family like crazy, except Barbie dolls and train sets wouldn't keep them warm.

"Do you always talk this much?"

She smirked, but he was completely serious.

“I’ve never had more than two thousand dollars in my bank account at any point in time.” Peyton’s voice was so quiet, Joey had to scoot closer to hear her, especially when the presents they were placing beneath the tree crinkled at their touch. “I wonder what it would be like to not have to worry about money.”

“It’s not as comforting as you may think.”

“I doubt that.”

“Any peace that comes from having money is washed away by the realization that others don’t have enough.”

Peyton harrumphed and inched away from him. She lifted a ball-shaped gift. “So why did you allow the town to buy these gifts? I know for a fact that people gave money for that toy drive even though they didn’t have any. You could have single-handedly paid for all these.” She stashed the last gift beneath the branches then stood as straight as a toy soldier.

The urge to touch her shoulder strengthened when he saw the tears glistening in her eyes. Why did this girl get to him so much? His mother always said he was a sensitive one, but with Peyton, he seemed to feel everything she was feeling threefold. “That’s my grandfather’s doing. He knew that people are happier when they’ve given to others. It drives him nuts that people call whoever they think is behind this ‘Handsel.’ He considers Handsel to be those who request help to give presents to their loved ones. As for me, well, anything I say in my defense will make me sound even worse to you.”

“What does that mean?”

Now Joey was really sweating. “You already think I’m a sheisty, profit-hungry shark. Before you knew who I was, you judged me for how I was dressed. What good would it do to tell you that I take care of my employees in the form of bonuses, educational opportunities, fair wages, great benefits, flexible work hours, child care subsidies? Or that I tithe ten percent of my personal earnings to the churches in my city? That I volunteer in an afterschool program and coach youth soccer? Or did you not bother to read that far in the Forbes

article?” He took a deep breath and stood. “Time to go. Annette’s tired.”

Peyton stayed silent. She just followed him quietly out, even stopping and waiting silently as he took two hundred-dollar bills out of his wallet and slipped them inside the overflowing junk drawer.

Searing pain cut across the heel of his hand. He caught a yelp between his teeth and yanked his arm back. What had he hit? A knife? Who keeps a knife in a junk drawer? Immediately the sliced skin filled with blood. He held back a curse he was used to hearing in Boston, yet hadn’t heard once in Kedgewick Creek. The last thing this family needed was to find blood all over their kitchen on Christmas morning. He bounded over to the spool of paper towels and wrapped a few sheets around his hand.

“Are you okay?” Peyton stared wide-eyed for several throbs of his heartbeat before seeking out the offending object: a pair of scissors that she brought to the sink and placed beneath hot water.

“Give me a minute.” Joey left her to sanitize them. He needed the cool wintry air before he passed out. Once he got back to the street, he leaned against the truck door, not caring anymore if someone recognized him. Annette wriggled in excitement. Joey pulled the scarf’s knot over his head, loosening it enough for him to free the puppy and place her on the grass to run in circles like a wind-up toy on the fritz.

Soon, Peyton slipped through the shadows of the side yard and came to him. She took his bundled hand and gently unwrapped it. “Let me see.”

Joey couldn’t look. Blood always made him woozy. And while the wound still hurt like the dickens, it helped to couple the pain with Peyton’s soft touch. Couldn’t he stay angry at her for five minutes? Of course not. He was already wishing he hadn’t been so sharp with her, hadn’t lost his cool.

“It’s bad. I should take you to Asheville for stitches.”

“No, I need to keep going.”

“Joseph,” she said, moving closer, “you can’t. You need to get this looked at.”

“I’ll go in the morning. I need to push on.”

“Well, you are at least going to let me clean this and bandage you up. My shop isn’t too far from here. I have everything we need.”

“But I—”

“Don’t fight me, Joseph Kiljoy, or I’ll drive you to the hospital.” She opened the passenger door and nodded for him to climb in.

He was in too much pain to fight.

CHAPTER 4



By the soft light of the toy shop's counter, Joseph Kiljoy didn't look like the big bad wolf or a millionaire. He was by all counts, Joey, the shy guy who'd fumbled their first meeting yet still had the nerve to ask her out. Confident but not arrogant. A big change from guys she'd dated before. A big change from Blaine.

"You may not need stitches after all. These butterfly bandages may be enough." Peyton turned Joey's hand in hers, admiring her first-aid work and trying *not* to admire the intimate warmth of his skin. "Let me wrap it, then we can get back to work."

"Thank you for this," he said. "I don't deserve it after going off like I did."

"I think it served me right. I haven't been very fair to you. Just because you were raised with a silver spoon—"

"I wasn't, though," Joey said. "How much do you know about my family?"

She shrugged. "Just what I've heard around town. Your grandfather started Kiljoy Toyz in the seventies and had a lot of success. He was the richest guy in town, but he was a recluse, especially as he got older. I know he had one daughter—your mother—but she moved away to raise you in Boston. Then, when he sold the company to you, you changed the business model and took it from modest success to Mariah-Carey-All-I-Want-for-Christmas success."

"You don't know about the falling out?"

Peyton shook her head.

“My mom and grandpa never got along. They’re both as stubborn as a December night is long. I have a touch of that, as you’ve seen. Nowhere near as bad as they do. My grandpa wanted my mom to get her business degree, so she could take over the business one day. She decided the smarter option was to follow a rock band around the country. When she ended up pregnant with me, my grandpa called her a fool. She moved to Boston to take up with my father, which didn’t last long.” Joey rubbed his chest with his non-bandaged hand. “We were poor. So poor. All those organizations I give my time and my money to were the ones that helped me. I didn’t have many toys. Ironic, since my grandpa was a toymaker. I had no contact with him until after I graduated from high school. I made the decision to come to Kedgewick Creek and meet him. Family—it means a lot to me. I wasn’t going to let my mom’s decision keep me from that. He helped me with college and internships. I accepted what she refused.”

Her throat tightened around the words she wanted to say. *I’m sorry. I understand. I’m sorry I judged you.*

“When I took ownership of the company, I recounted my childhood. No child should have to go without toys to play with. That’s why I went with the business model I did. I know the toys we make are cheaper, although I prefer the word ‘affordable.’ Call me naïve but I thought I was making the world a better place. I never thought that my success might harm places like this.” His gaze trailed up to the train track suspended from the ceiling and the model train slumbering at the late hour.

“Joseph, I didn’t understand it before. What you’re doing is admirable. You make me question what I’m doing here with eighty-five-dollar dinosaur sets.”

“No, Peyton. You’ve built something amazing here. Magical, even.”

“It wasn’t me. This”—she nodded her head toward the hickory clock—“was my parents’ doing. Like you, I inherited it.”

“I bet it was fun growing up in this place.”

Peyton pulled her lower lip between her teeth. “You’d think so, but not really. My parents opened this to honor my older sister. She passed away from leukemia before I was born. She was only three.”

“That’s terrible. I’m sorry.”

“This shop was supposed to make them feel better. I think I was supposed to, also. Peyton Joy Hammond. But no matter how hard I tried to bring them joy, it wasn’t enough. I’ve spent my whole life in the shadow of someone I never even had the chance to meet.” Her focus fell to their hands. His, newly bandaged, held hers and his thumb caressed her wrist. Her breath escaped on a slow exhale. “I’ve never told anyone that before.”

A smile that might have been considered sly in any other scenario moved over his lips. This guy, when clean shaven and well rested, could easily take advantage of a trusting girl. But would he? She didn’t think so.

“Where are your parents now?”

“They handed me their dream and retired to Arizona.”

“I see. You know, dreams are funny things. In the right circumstances, they can be life-giving. In the wrong circumstances, they become shackles.”

On the face of the old clock, the minute and hour hands aligned. Twelve chimes rang out, slow and steady. The two dancing bears appeared, twirling and dancing to “Teddy Bear’s Picnic.”

“Can I show you something?” she asked.

“What?”

“My dream.” Peyton glanced at Annette, sound asleep on the wood floor, then led the way through the aisles of puzzles and games. Even with what she’d just disclosed to Joey, her chest swelled as she took in what her family had built. Who was she to let it all fade away?

She pushed through the door to her small sewing room and workshop, nibbling her bottom lip. Why did she even care what Joey Kiljoy thought about her craft?

Yet the way his eyes widened at the sight of her handmade toys on the shelves? It was enough to make her blush.

He stepped forward and touched the dress of the angel doll—a replica of the one he'd asked about for his niece earlier. “Do you make these?”

“I’ve made everything in here. I call that doll Angel Phoebe after my sister. She is what I’ve always seen in my head when I picture her in heaven. I have nine of them made, each one stitched and embroidered by hand. I’m hoping to start making others with different skin, eye, and hair color, so children could choose one that looks like someone they lost.”

“Peyton, these are ... you’re crazy talented. And you do the woodwork, too?” He grasped a wooden dinosaur, studying its design before putting it down next to a marionette she’d carved from poplar. “This is all starting to make sense.” He picked up a marble from the base of an impeccable marble run and dropped it into the spire at the top then followed its path down the chutes and slides until it spun to a stop at the bottom.

“Here’s the thing: I like running the toy shop. I do,” Peyton said. “But I *love* designing toys that spark imagination, spur on child development, and maintain heirloom quality. The only problem is that no one will buy them.”

“Hey, I wanted to buy this angel earlier. You wouldn’t sell it to me.”

“Angel Phoebe is more personal. I haven’t been able to put a price on it. Besides, I can handle someone not wanting to pay \$85 for a set of wooden toys, or \$105 for this marble set. But I couldn’t hear you or someone else tell me this angel isn’t worth the value I give it. It would crush me. Then how would I be able to spread joy to those around me?”

“What if I said this doll is indeed worth it, and it should be given to others to enjoy? Like in my case.” He pressed his lips into a hard line. “My niece ... she’d find joy in this.”

Peyton lifted an angel off the shelf and carried it to Joey, pressing it into his arms. "Then take it."

"No, I can't do that," he said, pushing it back toward her. "Not without paying you for your time and materials."

Peyton took a step until only the doll separated them. "I insist."

He bent his head, looking down at her far too intensely for their mutual good. On his breath, a hint of Binaca remained. Powerful stuff. He arched a brow. "I don't normally like to talk about this, but I'm a millionaire, remember?"

"Not so humble now, are you?" she asked, pressing her knuckles into his stomach. She'd tried not to notice his broad shoulders and muscled torso when she'd wrapped him and Annette in her scarf that first time. Yet there they were. Competing with his biceps to turn her into a fumbling mess. As nice as he'd looked donning a suit in Forbes, she liked him more in just a slim-fitting T-shirt and dark jeans. If he were made into an action figure, she'd definitely keep him in stock.

"Humility only got me a rejection with you. Maybe if I was more like that cop, you'd give me a chance."

Peyton's mouth felt like she'd swallowed sawdust. Blaine. She'd forgotten about her date with the guy. She'd forgotten what it was about him she liked as well, probably because of how close she and Joey stood. Before she could put space between them, he beelined past her, leaving her to clutch the angel on her own.

"Where did you get this?" Joey grabbed the arm of the Susie Fussbucket doll, yanking it from its spot on the ground behind her workbench. "They're nearly impossible to find. Where did you get one?"

"From last year's Professional Toy Seller Symposium. They had that raffle for everyone who bought a ticket. I won."

"That's how you know whatever you know about her?"

Peyton nodded.

Joey turned the doll over, then upside down. “I don’t know what the problem is. On her television show, she teaches about manners, kindness, and friendship. This doll is the result of a master collaboration with Tot Habitat TV to bring her into every home. She’s every kid’s best friend. I can’t see any way she could be seen as political or prejudiced or—”

“Make her talk.” Peyton gestured to the squeezable abdomen and prepared herself for the worst.

He didn’t hesitate.

“Hi! I’m Susie Fussbucket!” the doll announced with the same, sweet preschool-aged voice from the television show.

Beneath a quizzical brow, Joey eyed her.

“Again.”

“Can we be friends?” This time, the last word warbled a bit and sank to a deeper octave.

Joey shrugged. “Sounds like she’s running low on battery strength. Low battery life isn’t a huge deal, is it?”

“It might be in this case. Squeeze her one more time.”

Joey obeyed. What came out of adorable, innocent, and precious Susie Fussbucket’s voice box was more likely to be heard after closing time at a bar. And though Peyton had heard the doll say the word several times, her ears and cheeks still burned.

As for Joey, his jaw fell, leaving his mouth as wide open as a Nutcracker’s. Finally, he shook off his daze. “Did she just say what I think she said?”

“Yep.”

“Sweet Marley’s ghost, I can’t even figure out what she’s *supposed* to be saying.”

“Me neither, but it’s probably something less ... anatomical.”

“I would hope so.” Joey placed the doll on the table between him and Peyton. “Has it always sounded like this?”

There's no way that would have gotten through quality control."

"All I know is it sounded fine at the symposium. I brought it back here and put it in that corner for, what, seven months? Last week, when I picked it up again to see what all the hysteria was about, I noticed it. I think you're right. The battery is low." Peyton turned to the closest storage cabinet, removed the bin of batteries, and brought them to the table. She separated the Velcro to access the battery compartment. "There's probably nothing wrong with the sound file, just the frequency. Since frequency is affected by battery power, that's why the sound is distorted. Small Phillip's head, please." Peyton held out her palm like a doctor in the surgical ward.

After fishing around in the tool drawer, he placed the screwdriver in her waiting hand. A few turns loosened the screw enough for the battery compartment to pop open. Peyton removed the three off-brand AAAs and replaced them with Energizers. She hurriedly tightened the screw and squeezed the doll's tummy three times. The last time, the offensive word was replaced by an invitation to play and a giggle.

"I'd say that's more developmentally appropriate for young kids. I no longer feel like I need to shower."

"True, but this is bad, Peyton. If this is what every Susie sounds like when her battery gets low, we're in for it. What if kids start running around saying that word because they learned it from Susie. You know how parents get when toys misbehave. Kiljoy Toyz will be boycotted. And the Susie Fussbucket show might be cancelled because of this. We'd lose Tot Habitat's trust. Losing that partnership, combined with this recall, could very well doom my company ... my grandpa's company." Joey placed his hands flat on the table, closed his eyes, and let loose a shaky breath.

Peyton didn't feel much like laughing anymore. Now that she knew the face behind Kiljoy Toyz and its mission, this failure wasn't something she wanted to celebrate. Instead, she put one hand on Joey's back and the other on his forearm, then waited for him to process it all. Finally, she spoke. "What are you going to do?"

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.” He dipped his chin to look her in the eye. “Thank you for telling me, Peyton. You didn’t have to. You could have waited for a video from an angry mom to make the social media rounds. You could’ve made the video yourself. But you didn’t. I appreciate that more than you know. At least now, I’ll be prepared.”

The longer he gazed at her, the more it seemed sugarplums danced in her belly. Way more pleasant than expired eggnog, but still not entirely welcome. “So what now?”

“I think Handsel needs to get on with the show.”

CHAPTER 5



“*E*w. Your breath smells like kibble and who knows what else.” Peyton avoided kisses from the determined puppy. “She needs that spray of yours.”

Joey shook his head. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“Probably not,” she said with a flirty grin before turning back to peruse the photos hung on the garage wall.

How long was their *never* anyway? Until sunrise. He didn’t dare imagine any longer. “I stole that breath spray from my grandpa, by the way. If you were working, and if I could work up my nerve to speak to you, I wanted to have fresh breath. Not that it helped. Plus, it almost got me arrested.”

“And you’re never going to let me live *that* down.” Peyton twirled with Annette in her arms, dancing with her to music he couldn’t hear.

“Not until you change your mind about the date.”

“I admire your persistence. I really do. How’s the bow coming along?”

Joey fluffed the ribbon loops. “As good as it’s going to get.” He climbed down from the Jeep Wrangler and, rather than swinging the passenger door, pressed his hip against it until it clicked closed. “Whoever Elissa is, she’s going to have a great Christmas.”

“Oh, I bet. There’s nothing like a little Appalachian off-roading.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Hmm. I should take you sometime.” She maneuvered her chin, unsuccessfully attempting to keep Annette from chewing on her red curls.

Rescuing her hair, he accepted the puppy into his arms. “Look at that. You’re already breaking down.”

She rolled her eyes, giving him time to admire their rich amber color.

In this light, they were less hot chocolate and more poured coffee midstream before it hits the cup. Joey wanted to immerse himself in their warmth. “We should get on the road. The next stop is a town over.”

“I thought Handsel only operated in Kedgewick Creek.”

“Typically, he does. But this was a special circumstance. I couldn’t deny the request.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was the romantic in me. You’ll see when we get there.”

Together, they left the garage and Joey keyed the code into the automatic door closer. Fortunately, they didn’t have to be quite so careful about noise since the garage was separate from the house. After the door met the driveway, he put the puppy on the ground. He’d learned his lesson though. Now the puppy was fully leashed.

They walked down the street to the dark dead end where Peyton had parked the truck. They’d traveled separately so Joey could transfer the Jeep from the warehouse to the family’s garage. He rather liked strolling with her, especially the way her sleeve brushed his with almost every step. He also liked that this year-round Christmas town valued light displays. The colorful glow emanating from every house brought Peyton’s features to life. Boy, she was pretty. It made him wish he’d taken some time the past two weeks away from the bustle of Dear Handsel to get a haircut, or at least a shave.

One light display flashed in a seemingly erratic pattern. A small sign read *Tune to 88.3*. Withdrawing his phone, he searched for the radio station on his music streaming app. Mariah Carey's voice sounded fuzzy but was fortunately clear enough for the melody and words to be heard. "All I Want for Christmas Is You." Well, if that didn't confirm the desire of his heart in blinking red, green, blue, and white, he didn't know what could. They paused to watch the show and let Annette find a patch of grass to do her thing.

A brisk wind swirled around them, and Peyton, in her dress and tights, side-stepped closer to him until her back sought warmth against his chest. But the song ended too soon, prompting Peyton to continue to the truck.

Reluctantly, he and Annette followed.

"How did Dear Handsel come about?"

Handsel. Not exactly what he was thinking about right now.

"Well, according to my grandpa, he started the tradition to deal with my mother's disappearance. I guess if he couldn't make Christmas magical for his only daughter, then he wanted to help make it magical for others. It started with him delivering surprise gifts to his employees, back when Kiljoy Toyz had its small headquarters down here. People got wind of it and the requests for help grew every year."

"I don't understand. If he is so generous and kind, then why does he keep to himself? Why not come be part of the town festivities instead of hiding behind a legend?"

"Part of it is I don't think he feels worthy of it. Like he failed as a father to my mom and a grandfather to me."

"I'm sure he did the best he could. Didn't his wife—your grandmother—pass away a long time ago?"

"When my mom was a teenager."

"Maybe if he told everyone he was the one behind Dear Handsel, we could all show him how appreciative we are. He'd see he didn't fail. That he is worthy of community."

“I don’t know. There’s other stuff too. But I can talk to him about the community part.”

“Please do. I’d love to meet him one day.” She allowed Joey to open the truck door for her, then gently accepted his bandaged hand as she climbed up. “You know, those of us in the land of toys, we have to stick together. It can get ugly out there.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Joey hefted the puppy off the ground and onto Peyton’s lap. “May I ask you a question?” He waited until she nodded. “What is it about that Blaine guy that made you say yes when he asked you out?”

“Hmm. He seems nice. Dependable. Protective.”

“All good traits,” Joey agreed.

“If I’m honest, I think I said yes because he’s the kind of guy that would make my parents happy. They don’t like that I’m out here alone now. Maybe if I settled down with someone like him, my parents wouldn’t worry. They could enjoy their retirement.”

Joey sealed his lips airtight.

“What’s that look for? Go on and say what you want to say. We don’t have enough time left tonight to hold anything back.”

“I was thinking, this woman has spent her past trying to bring her parents joy. She spends her present carrying her parents’ dream on her shoulders. Now she has the chance to decide whose joy, whose dream, she’ll spend her future chasing. I’m praying she makes the right choice.”

Thirty minutes later, Joey stood in a dimly lit room with his hand in a sack of rose petals. What was it about the feel of them between his fingers that made him long to touch Peyton’s hand again? It wasn’t the scent. Peyton didn’t smell like roses. More like gingerbread and mahogany. The scent of The Toy Boutique. He could make a home in that scent.

Peyton scooped another handful of petals. She placed one on the crown of Joey's head before returning to shape the second *M* in *Marry Me?* on the parlor's carpet.

When she wasn't looking, he slid the petal into the pocket of his Dungarees. A souvenir for later after this night with her was over. He hated having to be so quiet. If he only had five hours left with her, he wanted to use every minute to learn more about her. Except Handsel had been given strict instructions. In this small cabin, every sound carried, so silence was of the utmost importance.

He didn't need to hear Peyton's thoughts to know what she was thinking. He saw it in her eyes and the way her lips bloomed into a smile the moment he'd explain they'd be setting up a proposal. She was brimming with romance. Joey had to admit, with the white-and-gold tree lights illuminating the request for someone's forever, the whole scene *was* romantic. He had to fight the urge to pull Peyton against him and discover if she tasted of gingerbread too.

Of course, he wouldn't. He'd never stolen a kiss from a woman, so why would he start now? But maybe Blaine would.

Joey had to push past the nauseous feeling crowding his stomach. He could only hope the guy had good intentions. When Peyton reached for more petals, Joey took her hand and placed it beneath the box. He mouthed *I need to get the ring*. She nodded but kept staring at his mouth in the same way he kept hold of her hand. Finally, he broke away, slipping into the den, just off the parlor.

He'd been told he would find a bottle of champagne and two flutes inside the cabinet by the window. *Check*. Joey gathered the items, making sure not to clink the glass together. On the shelf directly above, the ring box sat behind a stack of books, which crudely stood out from all the novels, neatly arranged by color. With his uninjured hand, he reached behind the set of police procedurals and grasped the box.

Joey straightened and his focus landed on a framed picture of a policeman in uniform with a flag behind his shoulder. Was that ...? It almost looked like—

A gasp resonated through the cabin, and Joey knew Peyton had just made the same discovery. He found her in front of the fireplace, one hand clasped over her mouth and the other holding a silver-framed picture of Blaine and the woman who was about to become his fiancé. Quickly, after placing the bottle, flutes, and ring on the mantel, Joey turned Peyton to face him.

The faint light may have been tricking him, but she didn't seem sad as much as shocked. And perhaps a bit angry. Her hand fell from her mouth. Okay, *a lot* angry.

"Come on. I'll get you out of here," Joey whispered.

She nodded before replacing the frame on the mantel, facedown.

Behind them, the floor creaked. "I told you to be quiet." Blaine wore boxers and only boxers unless one counted the sweater of chest hair. "Peyton. I ...I ..."

"Deserve congratulations, apparently. This is all so beautiful—a great way to start your life with—I'm sorry, what's her name?"

"Beth." He looked behind him nervously as he said the name.

"You said you were working a double shift. I'm starting to think that maybe you haven't been completely honest." With a snarky glare, Peyton pinned her hands to her hips, cool and confident, as if she'd been training her whole life to put good-for-nothings in their place. Although, when she stepped back against Joey, he felt the tremors in her spine. He pressed his hand flat and firm on the curvature above her waist, hoping to lend any steadiness he could. The motion made his injury throb, but he didn't care.

Blaine hardened his expression and shifted his focus to Joey. "You. Of course, Handsel is a piece of northern trash. I want my money back."

"Nice try. Dear Handsel is free, you ..." Joey let the unkind word fade from his lips. This wasn't about him.

“Blaine, what’s going on?” The brunette from the picture frame stumbled in the room. “Who are they?”

“We’re leaving.” Peyton grabbed Joey’s hand and pulled him past the couple. Out the front door, she paused and poked her head back inside. “Oh, Blaine? In case it wasn’t clear. I don’t think I will go on that date with you. And Miss, I’m sorry. You deserve better and so do I, on Christmas and every other day of the year.”

At the truck, Peyton broke into what appeared to be a thousand shivers. “I hate confrontation. Hate it. I guess that’s what I get for ignoring my gut instinct all to make my parents happy. I can’t believe that guy. What a jerk, right?”

“Absolutely. You handled that well, Peyton. Better than anyone else could’ve.”

“I’m so angry. Not for me, but for that poor girl. I hope she’s smart enough to run.” Peyton paced back and forth, flexing her hands. “Ugh. I can’t stop shaking.”

“This may earn me a tongue-lashing like the one I just witnessed. I’ll take my chances, though. Do you want a hug?”

Peyton glanced up, and the anger melted.

Joey welcomed her into his arms. Some other guy may have concerned himself with the soft feel of her body against his, the closeness of her lips to his neck, or the way her nearness made his nerves hum with electricity. He did notice those things, of course, but no... This was about the girl at the Toy Boutique who had no reason to give up her Christmas Eve to help him, no reason to share her secrets and dreams, and no reason to trust him, her competitor.

But she had and she did. So he held her on that dark mountain road until she stopped shaking.

CHAPTER 6



With the temperature dropping by the minute, Peyton wouldn't be surprised if they'd see snow by the top of the hour. Truly, a blanket of white would be the single thing that could make this any more perfect. Annette lay sprawled across her and Joey's laps, watching for movement of any kind on the home's front lawn, but the night was still, with only the porch swing beneath them stirring. She breathed in the chocolate-scented steam rising from the mug she'd borrowed from Joey. This was a much-needed caffeine break. Once the adrenaline from catching two-timing Blaine had subsided, she'd nearly fallen asleep while setting up an art studio for a teenage boy, courtesy of his foster parents. As such, she welcomed Joey's suggestion that they test out their porch swing delivery while sharing his thermos of hot chocolate.

"Have you given any more thought to the Susie dolls?" she whispered.

Joey took a long pull from the thermos's cap, then swallowed hard. "I noticed at the house where we delivered the rocking chair there was a rectangular box covered in Susie Fussbucket wrapping paper addressed to *Abigail*. She must be one of the 'lucky ones' to get the doll." He chuckled. "More than two million sold this month. A recall would be a nightmare."

"I'd think your company does well enough to absorb that financial loss."

"To me, losing the public's trust costs way more than that."

“I get it. What are you going to do?”

“Right now, finish this hot chocolate with you and Annette on this swing. Then, we’ll speed through the last six stops. After that? I don’t know. What about your plans? Any chance you’ll pursue toy-making in the future?”

“Oh, I thought you were going to bring up the sudden availability on my calendar.”

He exaggeratedly yawned, stretching his arm over his head before dropping it around her shoulder. “Now that you mention it ...”

“Smooth. Real smooth,” she joshed, although she settled into his side, hoping he wouldn’t remove his arm now that the joke had passed. He didn’t. “I’d love to do that, but I’m not ready to give up the shop. I’ve spent my whole life there. I couldn’t bear to see it turned into a discount mattress store or something.”

“You know, if you want help setting up an online marketplace for your handmade goods, I could always spare a few minutes. Maybe folks in Kedgewick Creek can’t pay that much for quality, but others would.”

“You’d help me?”

“Of course. It’s time someone did something to bring *you* joy. I volunteer for that job.”



“Did you hear that?” Peyton put a soft hand on his arm, eyes trained on the stairs to the second story.

He paused to listen, but all he heard was the steady hum of the warm air blowing through the heating vents. Joey hadn’t expected to make it in and out of these stops with such ease. Engagement mess aside, they’d managed to stay unseen and unheard, even when Joey knocked over Santa’s glass of milk and Peyton tripped over an animatronic reindeer at the last home. Impressive, since they’d picked up their pace since the caffeine break. Get in, make the drop, get out, move on. It

became clearer with each stop that he and Peyton made much better teammates than competitors. Even Annette, in her puppy wrap, was a good sport, staying mostly quiet and biting at gifts, faces, and fingers minimally.

Joey, erring on the side of caution, kneeled and pulled down the kickstand of the pink bicycle with his hands rather than his foot.

Peyton was still attuned toward the staircase.

Then he heard it—a creak. Children shushing each other. Joey jumped up and, taking Peyton by the hand, fled to the hallway. Hoping to find a bathroom, he ducked through a doorway smashing himself against something hard that boomed like a drum when his knee hit it. Only it was too late to change course. Peyton joined him in what seemed like a laundry room, or rather, laundry closet. Once the door clicked closed, the term “too close for comfort” suddenly meant something literal, although sandwiched to her in pitch black didn’t make him uncomfortable at all. He couldn’t see her. Every other sense, however, was heightened to an extreme. The feather-softness of her dress where his hands held her waist. That toy shop scent she carried wafted so heavily in front of him, he could nearly feel the steam from fresh gingerbread against his lips. The small but sharp breaths she took when he bent his head nearer to her.

“Santa came!” a child’s voice rasped. “Look, Tyson! I got a big girl bike. You got a bike too!”

“Whoa! Race cars! Mine’s gots race cars on it!” a younger boy exclaimed. “Are they from Santa?”

“I dunno. I can’t read yet.”

Peyton’s quiet laugh, with its puffs of breath tickled his chin. Sweet Marley’s Ghost, she’d moved even closer. If he could only see those sweet brown eyes of hers filled with the same affection she’d had on the porch swing, then he’d know she wanted more than mingled breath. He could feel at ease knowing she wanted to be near him as much as he wanted to be near her. Oh, he could steal that kiss right now if he wanted. She’d have nowhere to go. She’d probably even be polite

about it and kiss him back—after all, she didn't like disappointing people. But that would shove him in a line of people who'd never considered how their wants, desires, and dreams might harm her.

As the children padded around and chatted about their other presents, Joey had surrendered all thoughts of kissing to the ceiling, praying they'd be replaced with that which is true, honorable, admirable, and praiseworthy. So when her hand traced a path from his shoulder, up his neck, and into his untrimmed and untamed hair, he might have collapsed if the washing machine hadn't been holding him upright. His mouth went dry, leaving him unable to wet his lips as she tugged his head down to hers.

Perhaps she sensed it, because the first thing she did was lick his bottom lip.

Except there was no gingerbread in that kiss. Only kibble.

Joey flinched away, once again drumming the washing machine, but the puppy kisses followed him with enthusiasm.

“Oh no!” the little girl said. “It's Momma. Go, Tyson, go!”

The moment they'd heard the last of the scampering footsteps above them, Joey left the last of his pride in that laundry closet, and together, they booked it out the front door.

CHAPTER 7



At 3:15 am, they loaded the final group of gifts. Before they continued to their remaining stops, they paused at Peyton’s apartment for some snacks, a heavier coat for her, and enough space to hide the fact she’d tried to kiss him. Had he pulled away because of Annette’s interference, or had he used that as an excuse not to kiss her?

Did he think she was only trying to make a move because of his money? The guy must have gold-digging women throwing themselves at him constantly. Why would he think Peyton was any different? Because she started liking him without a shave? He was smarter than that. Plus, she’d been on the brink of dating another man two and a half hours ago.

So why had she tried to kiss him? Because he had honest eyes, steady arms, and a way with words that made her feel as though she could do anything she wanted, free from the expectations of others? He’d liked her enough to ask her out earlier. Maybe getting to know her over the past seven hours had changed his mind.

Oh, goodness. She hoped not.

She parked in front of the next address—a quaint two-story with a dollhouse look. Fitting, since they were to deliver and set up a dollhouse beside the Christmas tree. “This must be it.”

Joey’s head rested against the passenger window. With his eyes closed and lips slightly parted, he looked more like a little boy than a wealthy businessman. In his arms, he cradled Annette, and her head drooped over his elbow. How many

hours had he given to this charity over the past few weeks, while still running his company from afar during the Susie Fussbucket frenzy? If she had to guess, it would be easier to count how *few* hours of sleep he'd gotten over that time.

Peyton removed her wool coat and placed it over Joey's legs and Annette's body. Then she pulled the scarf/puppy sling off the dashboard and bundled it. Carefully leaning over them, she cupped a hand under Joey's jawline that was more defined than his scruff made it appear. She tilted his head away from the window, just enough to place the scarf there, giving the fabric the new role of pillow.

She studied his face. Still holding his jaw with one hand, she brushed his chestnut hair off his forehead. He stirred enough for his lashes to give a peek at the green in his eyes. "You keep sleeping. I've got this one covered."

He sucked in a breath, ready to protest, she was sure, but sleep took hold of him before he could say a word. The urge to kiss his lips, his cheek, his forehead, was nearly overpowering. Instead, she dipped down and kissed Annette on one of her ears.

In two trips, Peyton carried the dollhouse, which indeed, was a miniature version of the real house, and all the accessories through the kitchen door as instructed on Joey's tablet. The entire house smelled of yeast and cinnamon. As Peyton placed the furniture and dolls in the various dollhouse rooms, a craving for a Christmas morning like this family's overtook her. Parents showering love on each other and their children with cinnamon rolls on the table, a fire in the hearth, and Christmas carols on their lips. Growing up, Christmas had been a sad time, with her parents remembering who was missing from their home rather than celebrating who remained. Perhaps that was why Peyton was so drawn to the Christmas Story. At the Nativity, joy was born out of mourning, hope out of weariness.

And not just then. Not only on Christmas morning either. Because of that night in Bethlehem, all who believed could experience that joy, that love, that redemption, forever more. Once Peyton finished with the dollhouse setup, she rose to her

feet and caught sight of the Bible on the center of the coffee table, open to Luke 2—the story of Christ’s birth. Yes, this was the future she wanted, and she was ready for the chase.



Joey double-checked the last bolt on the crib. He’d preassembled it at the warehouse, but he had to make sure nothing loosened during relocation. Peyton returned to the room, carrying a small mattress. He rose and took one end. Together, they lowered it onto the flat platform, then dressed it with the bedding that had been delivered with the crib—rainbows in washed out pink, yellow, and peach pastels. Yet even the brightest rainbows couldn’t match the light in Peyton’s eyes. What had happened while he took that short nap?

“How are you still full of energy but I was passed out in the truck for forty-five minutes?” Annette was still knocked out, swaddled like a child in Peyton’s scarf so she wouldn’t get too cold while she stayed in the truck for this stop.

Peyton bounced her shoulders up and worked her lips into a smile worthy of Christmas morning. “I’m more awake now than I’ve ever been, and I owe a lot of that to you and this night.” As one final touch, she placed a yellow teddy bear in the corner of the crib and draped the ultrasound pictures over the bear’s paw.

The sight was enough to tighten his throat and he didn’t even know this couple. Most of his friends were on their second kid already. Joey had been too busy building this company to go on more than two or three dates with the few women he found interesting. There was always something missing. Compassion. Drive. Resilience. Willingness to help others in need. Peyton had all of that and more. It was enough to make a guy consider easing off the gas. Although he had a feeling, thanks to Susie Fussbucket, that work was about to get even crazier.

On the far side of the house, a toilet flushed. “Let’s go,” he whispered, touching his lips to her temple, not so accidentally. They slipped out the back door, and he turned the lock seconds before light flooded out the window on their left. Rather than hustling back to the truck, Peyton tugged Joey behind a tree and peeped at the scene in the window frame.

A man around Joey’s age, wearing sweats and a T-shirt, stood staring at the crib.

“That’s Mitch. I graduated with him and his wife, Jen. They’ve been trying for a baby for at least two years.” Peyton’s eyes glistened.

Mitch covered his head with his hands, then turned. A pretty woman neared tentatively, only to have Mitch fall to his knees and hug her belly. Giving them their privacy, Joey and Peyton moved out of view of the window.

A tear fell past her lashes, and Joey met the tear with the knuckle of his uninjured hand. Peyton caught his hand, holding it against her cheek so that his thumb touched the corner of her lips.

“I choose *that* for my future. Joy. Happiness. Love.” She erased the distance between them. “I’m not sure how to do that exactly, but I think it starts with this.” She tilted her chin up and swept her lips over his, taking every ounce of his breath and leaving a richness money could never offer. When she pulled away, he followed, his flesh leading his heart like a lost puppy.

He captured her lips, holding onto their warmth on this cold night for a pleasingly long time. Her hand left his to trail down his side, allowing his fingers the freedom to tangle themselves in her curls.

“Oh, Joey,” she breathed.

He laughed. “That’s the first time you called me ‘Joey.’ I should’ve kissed you earlier. It wouldn’t have taken you so long to see me as a real person, not a picture in Forbes.”

“Or a grungy shoplifter?”

“Hey, I happen to love this sweatshirt. It’s warm on cold nights.”

Peyton slid her arms around his waist and anchored herself to him, making her point quite clear. He certainly wasn’t feeling the cold now. He knew full well he shouldn’t be starting something he couldn’t finish with Peyton. When dawn broke, he’d be facing a career catastrophe and his grandfather’s company may not survive the new year. What right did he have handing Peyton a present only for her to unwrap it Christmas morning and discover an empty box?

Yet, when Peyton reached for another kiss, he couldn’t deny her. He didn’t want to. As she confidently took the kiss to heavenly heights, all he could focus on was this moment in time that tasted sweeter than Christmas cookies, hot chocolate, and gingerbread combined.

CHAPTER 8



The nighttime hours were dwindling down, and by 5:30 am, lights in the homes of kids too eager to stay in bed began flickering on around Kedgewick Creek. Peyton, though exhausted, didn't want it to end. Frustratingly, every kiss she'd shared with Joey ended much too soon, either because they couldn't leave Annette in the truck for too long or because they had more deliveries to make. To make matters worse, the snow was beginning to accumulate so certain deliveries, like the portable basketball hoop for a curvy driveway, became a whole lot trickier.

This outdoor fairy garden was the last surprise before they had to take Annette to her new family. As sad as the thought made her, Peyton was excited for this one. All the pieces had been purchased from her shop. It also helped that a certain man with green eyes and a wickedly good kiss kept stealing glances and bestowing small affectionate touches. She reached across him for Eliazonda's tower, leaning closer than necessary and prompting him to nudge his way to her neck and place a tender kiss. If Peyton weren't already kneeling on the snow-covered ground, her knees might have buckled. Quickly, she set the tower in its rightful place in the fairy village, then turned into his kiss. For a guy as humble and shy as he was, he was quite assured in the way he moved over her lips. She'd nearly forgotten where and who she was when a furball jumped between them, grabbed Eliazonda in her jaws, and took off across the yard.

Because Peyton needed the scarf to serve as a blanket beneath her legs for this surprise, they'd had to give up their

trusty Puppy Björn. Like fools, they'd trusted that little stink to stay near them and NOT chew on \$30 fairies.

Joey jumped to his feet and gave chase. He moved with the ease of a professional athlete, not an executive who sat at a desk all day, yet Annette was small enough to dodge his grasp and hide beneath pine trees. Peyton joined in the tussle, acting more as a sheepdog, directing Annette back toward Joey until they trapped her between them. Suddenly, the puppy lost interest in her game. She dropped the fairy and scratched her ear with her back leg.

Seeing her chance to rescue Eliazonda, Peyton dove for it, as did Joey, resulting in an awkward mass of limbs as twisted up as a tangle of Christmas lights. Before long, Joey had heaved her on top of him, using his body as an insulator between her and the snow. He held up the fairy for her to see, a proud grin on his mug that she promptly met with a kiss.

Yet even in this moment, a heaviness continued creeping in. In fact, it was these sweet moments that made the heaviness feel unbearable.

“Joey, I don't want this dream to end,” she said.

“Me neither. I like you, Peyton. Your enthusiasm for life, your kindness, your passion for children and the toys they love.”

Cold as she was, her cheeks drew heat. To be seen and appreciated by someone with nothing to gain from her was like fresh batteries for her soul. “I like you too. I know you'll need to return to Boston after this, but we'll keep in touch, right?”

“Of course. I said I'd help you get your handmade toys online, didn't I?”

“No, no, no. You'll have enough to worry about. And so will I, with the shop on its last legs. Even so, this can't be all there is for us. God wouldn't do that to you and me. It would be like the three wise men following the Christmas star, all the way to Jesus, and Joseph saying ‘leave your gifts at the door.’”

She ignored the snarky look in his eye after her analogy. “I just mean, God will honor this, won’t he?”

“I hope so.”

Peyton gathered Annette in her arms so she wouldn’t try anymore canine thievery while Joey returned Eliazonda to her wintry fairy kingdom. Hopefully, the snow would continue before the fairy-loving child looked outside and saw the footprints and pawprints scattered throughout the yard.

Five minutes later, Peyton, Joey, and Annette snuggled on the bench seat in the truck, summoning warm air from the vents to take the sting away from their wet, cold clothes. Peyton yawned, too tired to even cover her mouth with her hand the way her mother had taught her.

“We’re not too far from my grandpa’s house. We can stop in and change into dry clothes. I’ll never forgive myself if you get sick from this.”

“*I’ll* never forgive myself if I fit into your clothes.”

“We’ll make it work. First, though, we need to talk.” Joey sobered a bit. “I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

Blaine and so many men and boys before him flashed before her eyes. No. Joey wasn’t like them. “About what?”

“About my family situation.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“I told you I needed a gift for my niece, and you gave me an Angel Phoebe, right?”

“I remember.”

“Well, I’m an only child. I don’t have a niece.”

Peyton’s mind raced with scenarios. “You have a kid? From a relationship in college or, or, a one-night stand? You could’ve told me.”

“No, I’m not a father. I—”

“You were trying to steal a prototype of my doll because you were under pressure at work to find another hit toy to

follow Susie Fussbucket, but once you fell for me, you couldn't follow through with it.”

“Peyton, no. What kind of movies do you watch?” He shook it off. “Never mind. Just let me explain, please.”

She pulled a pretend zipper across her lips and begged her heart to wind down a few dozen beats per minute.

“The gift I needed to buy was actually for my mother.”

“Mmmm.” Peyton dug her nails into her palm. She couldn't stay quiet with this much relief washing over her.

“When I first decided to pursue a relationship with my grandfather in college, she turned her back on me. For years I tried to bring them together, but like I said, she's stubborn. Seven years ago, I had finally convinced her to try and reconcile with her dad. She agreed but on her drive down here, there was an accident. She survived, although she had some damage to her brain.”

“Oh, Joey ...”

“She lives with my grandpa—has since she got out of the hospital. I was planning to have her live with me, but he insisted. He sold the company to me and retired so he could take care of her full time.”

Peyton counted the years she'd formed judgments about the Kiljoy family. Years they'd been dealing with tragedy of their own without any help from Kedgewick Creek. In fact, they'd been giving back to the town through Dear Handsel. She'd been so *so* wrong. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“Remember I told you about my grandfather's shame? That's part of it. He blames himself for the accident. He brings in therapists, physicians, and occasional help, especially in December, when he does the Handsel thing. He doesn't want anyone else to know about his mistakes.”

“That can't be easy though. It's just one more reason he should reach out to the Kedgewick Creek community.”

“That's what I keep telling him. He's getting older and her care is getting harder on him. That's why I had to take over

Dear Handsel this year. And it's why I've considered spending more time here in Kedgewick Creek." Joey checked his watch. "My mom and grandpa will be getting up soon. Would you like to meet them?"

"More than anything."



Annette pranced around Joey's ankles until she sank back on her haunches, sprang forward, then promptly bumped her head on the wall. Before Joey could drop to check on her, she shook her head and returned to playing.

"Silly girl," he said.

Across the hall, the bathroom door opened. Peyton stepped out in a pair of his mom's stretch pants and his Boston University sweatshirt, which had a tent-like quality on her. Her curls had been pulled in front of one shoulder. All he wanted to do was take her in his arms. Instead, he took her hand and led her to the living room. The Christmas tree he and his grandpa helped his mom decorate glowed all kinds of colors. Red bows had been trussed to many of the branches. Old-fashioned ornaments—the same ones from his mom's childhood—filled in the empty space. By all counts it was a gaudy, rainbow-colored mess, yet Joey loved it.

"My mom should be awake soon. Let's wait for her on the sofa."

They settled onto the corner cushions with Annette on their laps. In three blinks of Rudolph's nose, Peyton was snoozing with her head on his shoulder, her hand on his chest, and her trust in his heart. Such a great spot to be in. A guy could just close his eyes and rest.

"Joey!"

Before he'd roused his eyes to open, a body flung against his side, smelling like sunflowers—his mother's favorite lotion scent. "Merry Christmas, Mom."

"Is this our puppy?"

“No, sorry. I’m dog sitting it for the night.”

“Oh.” His mom’s face fell a touch, but only for a brief moment, because when her gaze found Peyton, she grinned mischievously. “Is this your girlfriend?”

The question had a teasing air to it, and Joey couldn’t help but chuckle. “Mom, this is Peyton.”

“Hello, Ms. Kiljoy. It’s nice to meet you,” Peyton said, still visibly trying to wake herself up.

“Joey, she’s pretty.”

“I know she is. Prettiest girl I’ve ever seen.” He caught Peyton’s eye, fully appreciating the blush he caused. “Other than you, Mom.”

Annette climbed into his mom’s arms and licked her chin, making her squeal with happiness.

“Look who’s awake,” his grandfather said. Already dressed for the day in slacks and a sweater, he wiped his hands on a kitchen towel. “Saw you two lovebirds and didn’t want to bother you. Decided to get the cinnamon rolls in the oven instead.”

“Cinnamon rolls?” Peyton’s words were barely audible.

Joey rested his hand on Peyton’s knee. “I guess that used to be the tradition when my mom was growing up. Cinnamon rolls on Christmas morning.”

“I call the middle one,” his mother said.

“It’s yours, sweetie.” His grandfather took Annette from her, then pointed toward the presents beneath the tree. She beamed with even more excitement. She leaped off the couch and claimed the powder blue bike helmet topped with a bow.

“Is this mine, Dad?”

“It sure is, pumpkin. That’s not all.” He disappeared around the corner and into the den, reemerging with a tandem bicycle the same blue shade as the helmet. “We can take this to the beach next month.”

His mother squealed with delight, and Joey thought his heart might just burst.

Peyton hugged Joey's arm. "Is this your doing?"

"No, this was all Handsel."

Afterward they watched Joey's mom open the rest of her presents, Joey's grandfather turned his focus on Peyton. "I'm sorry we don't have a present for you, Peyton. If I'd have known you were coming—"

"Being here with y'all is a present unto itself."

"Next year, I'll get you a gift that's twice as nice. I have a feeling you'll be back considering the way Joseph is pawing you."

"Grandpa, really?" Leave it to family to mortify a guy in front of a girl.

"Son, I've never seen you like this with a young lady. Go ahead and correct me if you want, but I'm placing my bet."

"Mr. Kiljoy, it would be an honor to visit again someday. Joey told me what you've been doing all these years with Dear Handsel. On behalf of the town, thank you."

Grandpa's gaze trailed to the tree where Joey's mom was holding the gift bag branded with The Toy Boutique's logo. "If anyone could understand the magic that toys bring to the world, it's you, Miss Hammond."

"Yes, sir."

"Now she has to stay for cinnamon rolls," his grandfather said. "To get rid of this *sir* garbage."

A shriek of joy filled the room. Joey's mom yanked the Angel Phoebe doll out of the bag and clutched it to her stomach. "She's the prettiest doll I've ever seen!" The smile on his mom's face could've lit all the homes in Kedgewick Creek.

Annette, having no idea what was happening, yet still wanting to be part of it, began running in crazed circles around the living room. She jumped and snatched a stocking by the

toe where it hung from the mantel. As she ran, candy, sunflower lotion, a necklace-size box, an apple, and an orange littered the carpet.

Joey took the opportunity to turn back to Peyton. “That’s why we need to get your creations out into the world. You want to bring people joy? I’d say you’ve found a way.”

CHAPTER 9



“*W*hat about Annette?” Peyton had a belly full of cinnamon rolls and a heart full of love after spending the last hour with the Kiljoys. She couldn’t have felt more welcomed if she were with her own family. However, the “night” had come to an end, and she was more than ready for bed.

“I can handle that last drop on my own,” Joey said.

A frown tugged at Peyton’s lips as she ran Annette’s soft ear through her fingers. “I hate to say it, but that might make things easier. I’m going to miss her.” Only, Peyton’s eyes were glued to Joey’s in hopes he’d understand without her having to speak the words. “Before you bring me home, can we stop by one more place? It’s on the way.” She reached for a backpack she’d grabbed from the store earlier and withdrew the boxed dinosaur set from within. If her store was going under, she’d make sure she commanded the shovel.

After they arranged the remaining four hand-carved dinosaurs on the porch of the Winterbourne home, along with a note that they wanted to be Teddy’s friends too, Joey drove the truck past Mistletoe Square and parked in front of The Toy Boutique.

She allowed him to walk her to the sleepy shop, the lights in the window displays long since extinguished. The morning light sparkled on the snow, adding a magical element to the storefront. She could use a little of that magic now, as she faced the reality of their situation.

“What happens now?” Peyton laced her fingers through his.

“You’re going to sleep, and I’m going back to my grandfather’s to pack my stuff and catch the first flight back to Boston.”

“It can’t wait until tomorrow? Remember? My night is free now.”

“I would love to take you on a date, but I have too many employees to take care of to not take this seriously.”

Peyton forced a swallow. “What will that look like?”

“I’ve been thinking. I need to tackle this head on. I’ll issue a voluntary recall and have my engineers redesign the voice box. We’ll lose a ton of money, but hopefully, we’ll retain our customers’ trust that way.”

“I think that’s wise.”

“I’ll need to work with the analysts to figure out how we recoup those losses, and how we avoid these blunders in the future. What about you?”

“I’ll take a hard look at the shop’s year-end earnings and go from there. I’d love to save my parents’ shop, but if I can’t, that doesn’t mean that Phoebe’s memory is lost or that her life didn’t matter. Plus, I’m going to think about the future I want and what I have to do to get there, whether that brings anyone else joy or not.”

“That’s my girl.” Joey pressed a kiss to her forehead.

His girl. To think that twelve hours ago, she’d tried to have him arrested. She might have laughed if she couldn’t feel icicles needling her heart.

“Thank you, Peyton, for helping me keep Handsel alive. Because of you, people all over this town are waking up believing they are loved even more than they realized.” He studied her face, perhaps memorizing it the way she was memorizing his. Then, he kissed her.

She clutched fistfuls of his shirt in her hands as if such a move could keep him nearer longer. While she clung to his

kiss, dreading the moment it would end, he held close. He kissed her softly, lazily, like this was simply the first of ten thousand goodbyes interspersed with ten thousand hellos they may share throughout a life together. Before long, Peyton melted into all the promises the kiss whispered. By the time he did pull back, she was somewhere between dreaming and awake, with her heart at peace with whatever may come.

“Merry Christmas, Joey.”

“Merry Christmas, Peyton.” He pulled the door closed, and through the glass, Peyton watched him go.

She wrapped her arms around herself and turned to face her boutique. The dolls, stuffed animals, fairies, and yes, even that old hickory clock all peered at her and seemed to say it would all be okay. She would, for it was Christmas morning. Hope had overcome weariness and joy had replaced mourning. She took the first steps toward her apartment. A knock stopped her cold. The puppy bark that followed nearly collapsed her.

She hurried to the front of the shop and opened the door.

On the welcome mat, an envelope labeled *Peyton Hammond, The Toy Boutique* sat on top of Annette’s crate.

Peyton lifted Annette from her confinement then stepped out onto the sidewalk. The truck and Joey were nowhere to be found. The only kisses she’d be having under the mistletoe today would carry the threat of puppy teeth.

Once she brought her gift inside, Peyton opened the envelope and found a handwritten note:

Sweet girl,

We hate that we won’t be spending Christmas with you this year. We so wish you had chosen to visit us in Arizona, but we understand. You have a life of your own, with plans and dreams beyond our understanding. We’ve realized recently that we’ve never once asked you whether you wanted to take over the management of the shop. We’d just always assumed you would. Perhaps that’s why you chose to remain in

Kedgewick Creek for Christmas—to take care of the shop.

Knowing how fragile life is, we opened the shop so we could spend as much time with you as possible and to give you a magical place to grow up surrounded by teddy bear friends and dollies, so you'd never know loneliness. You were our dream—not the shop. If this shop isn't part of your dreams for yourself, do not anchor yourself to it. We'll understand.

You have brought us such joy through the years, Peyton. There is no way we could ever repay you, but perhaps this little one will help keep any loneliness you may feel at bay. Our home will always be yours, in Arizona or wherever else the road may take us.

*We love you. Merry Christmas,
Mom and Dad*

Peyton reread the note, still not believing how wrong she'd been about her parents' purpose for creating the shop. *You were our dream—not the shop.* She glanced around the space and this time, instead of seeing her parents' sadness over her sister, she saw her and Dad racing marbles down the wood flooring, her mother teaching her to sew ragdolls behind the counter, and late nights where they designed and set up the Christmas window displays as a family. Tears, joyful tears, rolled down her face, misting her vision so much she didn't even notice when Annette began chewing on her mother's stationary.

CHAPTER 10



In the green room, Joey paced back and forth, rubbing his sweaty palms together. Over the past seven years of running this company, he'd managed to avoid the New York City talk show circuit. Yet here he was, preparing himself to tell the nation that the darling Susie Fussbucket doll their children unwrapped four days ago was a ticking time bomb of vulgarity. Ever since he returned to Boston on the 25th, he'd charged Kiljoy Toyz's quality control department with testing the dolls.

Fifty dolls were tested. Six of those tested seemed to say the vulgar word Peyton's had said. Two more said a distorted version of that word. And one seemed to say a different curse altogether.

An eighteen percent Sigma rating was ridiculously high. He had no choice but to issue this recall, even if he had to pay for it out of his own pocket.

He paused in front of the mirror. He'd finally shaved, but those dark bags beneath his eyes remained. What would Peyton think?

Funny how spending one night with her had made her impossible to forget. He'd thought of her every waking hour—and most non-waking hours—since they'd said goodbye in front of her toy shop. Even though they'd fallen asleep talking to each other on the phone the last three nights, he was quickly realizing just how difficult this long distance whatever-it-was would be.

“Mr. Kiljoy, it’s time to get you on set,” the production assistant said, waving her tablet for him to follow her.

Before too long he was miked up across the table from Fatima Richardson and wiping his palms on his slacks as they waited to come back from commercial.

Signals were thrown between producers and techs. Then they were live. “More than one point four million children woke up on Christmas morning ecstatic to find a Susie Fussbucket doll under their tree. The hit toy has been sold out across the nation causing panic and, in some cases, outrage for parents unable to get the gift their child wanted most. But rumors have been swirling that those parents may be the lucky ones. We have the owner of Kiljoy Toyz, Joseph Kiljoy, with us to explain exactly what is going on with Susie Fussbucket. Welcome, Mr. Kiljoy.”

“Thank you for having me, Fatima.”

“There’s a problem with the doll. Can you explain how you discovered this?”

“A trusted friend noticed it after receiving an early model. It seems the problem exists when the battery runs low. The voice box distorts Susie’s words making it sound like she says something ... inappropriate.”

“Keeping in mind this is network television, could you give us a clue as to what that is?”

“Let’s just say that if Susie’s purpose was to teach Sexuality Education, she’d be ready to go.” He pretended not to hear the chuckles coming from offstage.

“Mr. Kiljoy, as far as we know, no one else has stumbled upon this. Can you explain your decision to come forward?”

“For more than fifty years, families have trusted my family’s company to provide affordable toys to the children who need them most. It seems that within that mission, quality has suffered. We want our customers to know we value that trust and will do everything in our power to honor that going forward.”

“What does going forward look like?”

“First of all, we are issuing a voluntary recall of all Susie Fussbucket dolls. Customers can return it to the place of purchase, where they will be refunded the full purchase price of the doll. If they choose to submit their information on our website, they will be given the first opportunity to purchase a second edition of the doll, which I vow, will not teach your children any words that will land them on Santa’s naughty list.”

Joey raised his chin, feigning the confidence people expected from businesspersons, except it was no use. He’d always be that guy who blundered asking a girl out on a date and cared more about his employees than fame or wealth. And he was fine with that.

He glanced at the closest camera and imagined Peyton’s face on the other side of the lens. “We’re also considering how we may partner with small, independent toy shops. By placing our products in brick-and-mortar stores, customers would be able to play with the toys before they purchase them to ensure the quality we are committing to. Through this enterprise, we could introduce our online customers to the unique, specialty items offered by toymakers around the country and the world they might not otherwise see.”

“The giant helping the little guys? That’s almost unheard of in our country. What made you decide that?”

Peyton’s face flashed before him. He cleared his throat of the emotion swelling within. “Let’s just call it Christmas spirit.”



*A*nnette Furicello had certainly made herself at home in The Toy Boutique. She especially loved to climb into the window display and watch all the people walking by. Even though she trampled the village and turned the Victorian train into a chew toy, Peyton didn’t have the heart to tell her no. Which was exactly why this New Years display was going to include a dog bed. Peyton pinned the sign to the window: *The*

year is young. Celebrate youth with toys that bring joy. Fortunately, Annette had nearly perfected housetraining, so the display wouldn't be showing off some not-so-joyful messes. Joey would be so proud of their little darling, if he were here.

She heaved a sigh, reminding herself for the umpteenth time that he had a life far away from Kedgewick Creek. Peyton got one hour with him on the phone late at night, when each of their current realities transformed into future dreams that often merged. That needed to be enough for right now. He'd been perfect on the morning show. Smart yet humble, and so handsome.

She'd tried not to put too much hope into the future. His business was his business. And her business? Well, it was strange. After learning in that note the real reason her parents opened The Toy Boutique and essentially getting permission to close it down for good, Peyton saw the shop with new, more appreciative eyes. Since Christmas Eve, she'd seen different folks around town that had been blessed by toys of all sorts, some of which came from her shelves. Alice Winterbourne gave her a big hug the day after Christmas, excitedly telling Peyton that Handsel had brought those dinosaurs for her brother after all.

Annette pounced onto the dog bed, then somersaulted over the pillowed edge onto Peyton's lap.

"Did you take a tumble?" She booped the puppy's nose, and she responded by pawing at Peyton's hand and yipping. "Are you going to be my date tonight? You'll probably think the ball drop is someone trying to play fetch with you."

Out on the street, a nice car pulled alongside the curb right in front of The Toy Boutique. Silver with—her heart nearly punched through her chest—Massachusetts plates. "He's back. Annette, he's back!" Peyton backed out of the display space and opened the front door. "Joey!"

He hurried around the front bumper of the car and practically skipped to her. Could men skip? Oh, who cared? He was here, his eyes green as the mistletoe in the town's gazebo. The dark circles under them had vanished. His skin

looked flush and healthy without so much as a five o'clock shadow.

She couldn't help herself. She cupped his strong jaw in her hand, caressing his smooth skin and longing to feel his kiss without stubble trying to scare her off. "You didn't tell me you were coming for New Year's."

"You know I like surprises."

She pulled him into the shop, kicked the door closed, and pressed close for a kiss.

"Hold on." Joey withdrew something from his pocket, turned his head to the side, and sprayed a shot of Binaca into his mouth. He turned back to her, cracking a grin.

Peyton burst into laughter, burying her face in his shoulder and savoring the way he held her against him.

A tiny body pushed between their legs. Annette jumped, pawing Joey's knee.

"Oh, you think he came to see you?" Peyton asked. "You can wait your turn."

Joey tucked a knuckle under Peyton's chin and gently tilted her face up until his lips embraced hers. Sweetness dripped from his lips and poured peace over her like warm icing over Christmas morning cinnamon rolls. Too soon, he released her from the kiss. "As much as I'd love to spend all evening doing this, there are other things we need to talk about." He bent over and lifted the over-excited lab to his chest. Even as Annette licked his neck repeatedly, he sobered. "With all these new changes I'm implementing at Kiljoy Toyz, I have to make some personal choices that will affect you."

Her usual abundance of words disappeared quicker than candy canes from a sweet tooth's Christmas tree.

"Over the next year, I'll be transitioning the headquarters back here, where it should have been all along."

"To be closer to your mother and grandfather? They're lucky to have you."

“Well, they aren’t the only reason I want to spend more time here.” He coyly stepped away, strolling deeper into the store.

“I’m flattered.”

“You? No, it’s merely a business decision. The Toy Boutique is the first independent toy shop I want Kiljoy Toyz to partner with. I am a millionaire after all. I must do millionaire things.” He molded his facial features into a haughty expression—that whole steal-ya-girl look he could pull off if he was that kind of guy. But she knew better.

“I don’t believe you.” Peyton fit her hands to her hips and cocked her head to the side until he broke into a laugh.

“Okay, you got me.” He placed Annette’s paws on the floor and patted her backside lightly so she’d scamper away. Then, with an awkward and clearly unpracticed swagger, he returned to her. “Peyton Hammond, the idea of living hours away from the girl that I am falling for is too much for me to bear. I want to see where this goes. I do want my company to partner with you, but only if you think it is what’s best for your company. I also took the liberty of doing a mock-up website to sell your handmade products. Again, only if that’s what you want to do.”

“Joey, you don’t have to do all this to help me.”

He gave her a peck on her forehead. “You said that you want to keep this shop around, right? What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t do everything in my power to help you achieve your dream?”

“My boyfriend, huh? Is that what you think you are?”

“A guy can hope.”

“I guess I could tolerate dating a rich guy. As long as you let me pay for dinner sometimes.”

“We’ll play it by ear.”

Peyton wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with the confidence of someone who knew what she wanted her future to be and who she wanted to spend her future with.

The clock chimed the nine o'clock hour, and by the time the bears had finished their waltz, Peyton knew her heart and her dreams would one day be stitched forever to this man.

“So, what’s next?” she asked.

“I was thinking that New Year’s Eve is a great chance for a first date. So how about it? Would you like to go out with me?”

“It would be a dream come true.”

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Prone to wander, Janine Rosche finds as much comfort on the open road as she does at home. This longing to chase adventure, behold splendor, and experience redemption is woven into her Madison River Romance and Whisper Canyon series. When she isn't writing or traveling, she teaches family life education courses to college students, takes too many pictures of her sleeping dogs, and embarrasses her four children and husband with boy band serenades.



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This Wandering Heart

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