



**FUDGE**

*It All*

*Merry*

*Fudgin'*

*Christmas*

**KATE TILNEY**

# FUDGE IT ALL

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MERRY FUDGIN' CHRISTMAS

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# ONE

## ALEXIS

Shaking off the snowflakes from my coat and hat, I push open the front door of the little coffee shop on Main Street. And all hell breaks loose.

Christmas Hell, to be more precise.

Jingle bells ring from the door handle, at the same time the motion triggers an animatronic Santa Claus that seems to appear out of nowhere.

“Gah!” I cry, jumping out of the way before St. Nick can jab me in my hip with his thrusting motions.

I cover my pounding heart and gulp deep breaths of air. Stunned as I watch in wide-eyed horror as Santa wiggles his hips back and forth in a way that would make Elvis blush. All the while he belts out a “HO HO HO.” After each third “HO” he wiggles his eyebrows.

“What a creep,” I mumble.

Santa isn't the only one there to scare—I mean, greet—me. A stuffed Grinch pops out of a chimney like a Jack in the Box. From the speaker above, a recorded child's voice says, *“Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings.”*

I grimace as a puff of fake snow blows in my face. “I forgot about you. I forgot about all of you.”

How could I have? The owners have been taking out customers with their Christmas decor since I was in Pampers. Plus, I used to meet my high school boyfriend here for a cup

of coffee every day before school along with the occasional study session. I should have remembered.

Then again, I haven't been home for the holidays since college. I must have repressed the memories of how over the top the shop's owners get with their Christmas decorations. They're no doubt buried along with the rest of my spirit for the holiday season. Deep, deep, deep in the recesses of my little grumpy heart.

I'd give into the cliché urge to say, "Bah humbug" if that wasn't a little too Christmasy for my current state of mind.

With a sigh, I brush the soap mixture from my coat along with the lingering bits of snow. I step around the over-the-top display and groan.

"A line. Of course, there's a crazy long line."

I consider turning on my heel and walking back outside. But my mom makes terrible coffee at home. I once tried to make a pot myself, following the directions on the canister, and she accused me of trying to give her a heart attack with such a high dose of caffeine.

If I want to drink something stronger than her mild bean water, then I have no choice. They're the only place that sells real coffee in town. I'll just have to stay and tough it out. I'm going to need a mega dose of caffeine to get through the day.

Not to mention get me through the next two weeks.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I take my place in line. My agent Doris's name appears on the screen, and I wince.

Great. What could she want to talk about now? She's the one who suggested I take a little break from my pseudo-Hollywood life. She's the one who suggested I go home to "rediscover the holiday spirit." Her words. Not mine. Cue the eye-roll.

Unless... unless the reason she wanted me to "take five"—again, her words, not mine—was because she's about to drop me. It... wouldn't be a total shock. After all, I've hardly made a big splash in my acting career since she booked me ten years ago. My biggest roles to date have been playing the best friend

of the heroine in those cheesy feel-good made-for-TV movies plus a few guest spots on TV shows every year.

Even most of those have been cable, and not network appearances.

Maybe this is it. Maybe this is the moment Doris tells me it's time to do what I've been debating whether or not to do since I finished filming my last part on a TV Christmas movie. Maybe, she'll tell me as gently as possible, it's time for me to give up on my dream and find something else.

How will I ever tell my mom?

For a second, I consider letting the call go to voicemail. Standing in line at a coffee shop in my hometown is hardly the place to take a break-up call. I could get out of line to take the call, but there are already five more people behind me. Plus, I've established that I really need some caffeine.

And if I wait to respond to her call later... Well... I'm sure the therapist I can barely afford would have a thing or two to say about avoidance.

Avoiding this call won't change its outcome. I might as well deal with it now.

Gritting my teeth for the second time in as many minutes, I raise the phone to my ear.

Doris is gushing before I can get out a greeting. "Alexis, my dear, how is that quaint hometown of yours treating you?"

I give a tight-lipped smile instinctively, even though she can't see it. "Great. It's good to be back."

I'm not a liar. I'm... acting. That's what I do.

"You've no doubt been in touch with a certain young man from your past." I can practically envision her wiggling her eyebrows, even as I want to cringe. "One who spent a whole fall clearing people's yards so he could buy you tickets to see *The Nutcracker* as an early Christmas present, even though he hates ballet."

Oof, this is why you should never—never, ever—have a little too much wine at one of your agent's parties. You might



get a little loose around the lips and end up telling her all about your high school boyfriend. The one you broke up with because you were moving to Hollywood, and he was staying in town. The one you still dream about some nights, and wake up the next morning with an ache in your chest. An ache so deep, it's as if you can still see him in your rearview mirror. Staring after you as you drive away with your packed-up car, tears blurring your vision.

Because once you inadvertently share that kind of personal story with your agent, you will have it repeated back to you. Often.

"I haven't. And I'm not planning on it ." I stare at the back and broad shoulders of the tall man standing in front of me in line. "Doris, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Oh, you. Always down to business." There's a shuffling of papers on her end. "I know you just left to take some time off at home—"

Oh, boy. Here it comes. The break-up.

"—but I just had something come across my desk for you."

"Oh." I blink. This is not what I expected. "Do you need me to come back?"

"No, dear, there's no need to come back until the new year. But I do have a homework assignment for you."

Color me intrigued. This role must be more in-depth than the usual fare. Despite the foul mood I've carried around with me for what seems like weeks—but is probably closer to months—an ebb of hope is brewing inside of me.

"What's the role?"

"Oh—" she chuckles. "I suppose I should've started with that. This isn't a role. It's a writing opportunity."

"Writing?" I frown. "But I haven't written anything in years."

"That's not true. We both know you had an active role in rewriting three of your last Christmas movies."

That's true. Once on location, we ran into issues with scripts. With the screenwriters unavailable to make the trip, and with me being so bored in my roles, I'd worked with the directors and producers to spruce up the scripts.

I do like writing. I'm just not so sure what kind of an opportunity this might be.

"But I—"

Doris cuts me off. "The studio was impressed with your updates. They'd like you to pitch a movie."

"They want me to pitch a movie?"

"Yes, a holiday movie for next year. They're looking to have a treatment in their hands a few days before Christmas."

A few days before Christmas. "That's less than a week away."

"I know, it's short notice. But I think you're up to it. The best part is, if they like your script, they'll give you a part in the movie."

A part in the movie. "A leading part?"

"That's the impression I got." There's a ping in the background. "Oh, sorry darling. Must dash. I'll email over the details. I look forward to reading your ideas in a couple of days."

She disconnects before I can say anything.

Slipping my phone into my purse, I numbly move forward in the line processing everything she's said. A TV studio wants me to write a Christmas movie for them. Well, they don't want me to write a whole movie, just the outline.

On the plus side, this could be the break I need. A leading role. At last! Not to mention a screenwriting credit. I always wanted to be a slashie—an actress/writer.

On the downside, I only have a week. And I'm feeling about as Christmassy as the Grinch at the beginning of the story.

Oh, boy. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I'm at least happy to discover I'm next in line to order.

"Could I please get an iced Americano"—I know it's snowing outside, but cold coffee forever—"and, a piece of your fudge."

Their famous fudge, I do remember. And if I'm going to get myself in the holiday spirit enough to even consider Doris's wild plan, I'm going to need every bit of help I can get. Starting with fudge.

"Oh, I'm sorry." The clerk's face falls. "We just sold the last piece."

"Oh." I try not to sound too disappointed. "That's fine."

And, to be honest, not unexpected. Considering the state of my life, it's only natural someone else just bought the last piece of fudge.

"Did you order some fudge?"

The hairs on the back of my neck stand upright in response to the question. Not to the question so much as the voice it no doubt belongs to.

Trying to ignore the way my heart is pounding in my chest, I slowly turn and come face to face with Rob.

My high school boyfriend. The one who worked all Fall to buy us tickets to *The Nutcracker*. The boy who took my V-card. The only guy I've ever loved.

And now he's standing in front of me, a smirk on his lips, a sparkle in his dark blue eyes, and a piece of fudge on a plate in his hands.

## TWO

### ROB

Alexis's dark eyes grow wide, and I can feel my heart pounding in my ears as recognition dawns on her beautiful face.

She's here. I can't believe she's here. I can't believe the pipeline of moms didn't tell me she was back in town the second she arrived. Either the most reliable source of communication in our small town is slipping, or they were trying to spare my feelings.

Knowing my mom, Alexis's mom, and all the other moms in between, I'd put money on it being the latter. Well, the joke is on them. Because Alexis and I bumped into each other on our own. And my heart, well, besides beating a little faster than usual, it's fine.

I swear.

"Hey," she says, at last, blinking.

"Hey, yourself."

She holds out her hand while I reach forward for a hug, causing us both to freeze and swap motions, her leaning in for the hug and me trying to shake her hand. It's enough to cut through the tension. With a quick glance at each other, we burst into laughter.

Still chuckling, I lightly place a hand high on her back and lead her toward the pick-up counter.

“When did you get back?” I ask, handing her the coffee she ordered.

“Late last night.” Our fingers brush as she takes the cup.

I pretend not to notice the way the hairs on the back of my arms stand upright. It’s just static. It doesn’t mean I still have any feelings for Alexis. We’re just... friends now. Surely after all this time, we can be friends.

“And you’re back through Christmas?”

“New Year’s.”

That’s almost two full weeks. And why that makes my heart speed up again, I don’t know. I don’t care to know.

“It’s good to see you.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Great. Two minutes into our first meeting in almost a decade, and I’ve already made things weird. As if the hug or handshake dance wasn’t weird enough.

Instead of making an excuse to leave, some of the tension pinching in Alexis’s eyes seems to go away. “It’s good to see you, too.” She gives a short laugh and motions to the counter. “Even if you did take the last piece of fudge.”

“Do you want it?” I slide it her way. “It’s yours.”

“I couldn’t possibly.”

“Sure you could.” I nudge it even closer. “You just pick it up, carry it over to your table, and take a bite.”

“I mean, I couldn’t steal your fudge.”

“Consider it a gift.”

When she still hesitates, and the line to pick up orders starts to get a few people deep, I take my fudge and coffee order and step to the side. “I guess we only have one choice.”

She arches an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“You’ll just have to share it with me while we play catch-up.”

She purses her lips and I let out a sigh. “I promise, I won’t do anything too weird.”

Her lips twitch with the hint of a smile. “Okay. Let’s take a trip down memory lane. But I’m only doing it for the fudge.”

“Of course.”

I can fight my own smile and I lead her toward one of the most private of the empty tables. We’ve already caught more than a few stares from our overly curious neighbors. I’d guess our moms are already being informed that this reunion is taking place.

“Here.” I set the plate in the center of the table and hand her a fork. “You do the honors of taking the first bite.”

She accepts the fork and cuts off the tiniest bite of fudge and slowly raises it to her lips. My eyes linger on them longer than necessary. I watch them curl up in satisfaction as she closes her eyes and lets out a barely audible moan.

It’s a sound that instantly makes my gut—and a certain appendage below—tighten.

Her eyes open and, catching my stare, her cheeks flush slightly. “I forgot how good it is.”

“No one makes a better fudge.” I shrug. “At least not here. I bet you have your pick in L.A.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve never found better. Not even there.”

Before I can stare at her again, I pick up my own fork and take a bite of my own. “So, where should we begin? Jobs? Hobbies? Love lives?”

She rolls her eyes at me, but, with a grin, we start the conversation with the easiest topic: our jobs.

She tells me about the trajectory of her acting, which I don’t admit to following closely on her IMDB page. I tell her about how after almost a decade at the local fire station, I’m the newly appointed chief. She tells me about the script she’s been asked to write, and I tell her about how we just renovated the station.

We cover our hobbies next. She still crochets when she's stressed, and I play baseball in a summer league.

We gloss over love lives. She's single. I'm single. Neither of us has been close to marriage or kids.

As we share the ins and outs of the past decade of our lives, the conversation becomes less tentative and more relaxed. By the time she takes the final bite of fudge—at my urging—it feels almost like old times.

Almost.

“And... I guess that's it.” Shrugging she sets her fork down on the empty plate and leans back in her seat, her knee accidentally brushing against mine as she does. “Now, all that's left is for me to somehow come up with the inspiration to write a Christmas movie. Though, God knows I'm the last person who should be doing that.”

“Really? I can't think of anyone better. You were always the queen of Christmas when we were younger.”

Alexis eyes me curiously as if I'm walking around with fudge smeared in my beard. Which, come to think of it, is highly possible.

I freeze and smooth my gloved hand over my beard. “What? Do I have something on my face?”

“There's nothing wrong with your face.”

My hand falls to my side and I let out a low whistle. “What a compliment. No wonder you get paid the big bucks to write those romantic scripts of yours.”

She rolls her eyes. “I wasn't paying you a compliment.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“And I don't get paid the big bucks. If I did, I wouldn't be here now.” There's enough ice in her tone to make me ease up. As much fun as it is to tease Alexis like I did when we were younger, she's not in the mood.

It begs the question... Why?

“Look.” I clear my throat. “I didn't mean—”

“It’s okay.” She gives me a tight-lipped grin. “I know you were messing around. It’s not your fault I’m feeling grumpy.”

I give a short nod to let her know I’ve heard her. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask why she’s grumpy. Especially now. Christmas used to be her favorite time of year.

But even though we’ve barely seen each other the past decade, and only from a distance, I can still read her face. Right now her face plainly says she doesn’t want to get into it.

Alexis sighs and leans her shoulder against my arm for a fleeting moment. “Don’t let my bad attitude sour your day.”

“It won’t.”

Especially not when her casual touch has my heart pounding like we’re kids again.

I know she’s only back in town for Christmas. I know we’re squarely in the friend zone. That doesn’t mean we can’t have a good time while she’s back.

A good time. I don’t know what’s going on with Alexis. But I do know she looks like she could use a good time. I’d be glad to show her one while she’s back.

When I stopped by the coffee shop on Main, I thought I’d leave with my caffeine fix and a little holiday cheer.

I didn’t expect to find the one who got away. Cliche as that sounds, it’s who Alexis is to me. After all this time, it’s who she is and who, I suspect, she’ll always be. Even if she’s only home for the holidays.

So I’d better make it count while I can.

“You said you need inspiration for your Christmas script. Right?”

She eyes me cautiously but nods. “I do.”

“Then how about I take you somewhere guaranteed to fill you with a little Christmas spirit?”

She gives a short, humorless laugh. It’s so unlike the rich, soulful laugh she used to have. It’s missing that signature



spark in her eyes. What I wouldn't give to see both the soul and the spark back in her laugh.

“Come on. It's the last I can do for an old friend.” I give her a playful nudge. “It'll be fun.”

“That's the sort of thing your mom used to say before roping us into doing something we definitely didn't want to do.”

“And at least half the time it ended up being fun.” I lean against her again. “What do you say? Is it worth the risk?”

She scrunches up her face to consider and then—with a short laugh—shakes her head. “What the heck. It's all content.”

# THREE

## ALEXIS

The smell of my mom's homemade lasagna and—if I'm not mistaken—apple pie greets me when I get home that evening.

After a day spent with Rob, visiting the holiday market, seeing the way he's decorated the firehouse for the holidays, and stopping in to say hello to his mom at the town's toy drive, I'm feeling... lighter. And hungrier.

I won't go so far as to say I've rediscovered the spirit of the season. But I'm definitely feeling less animosity toward it. As for time spent with Rob... It's been nice. Really nice, and that's all I'll say. We were having a really good time catching up and pretending like no time had passed until he was called into the station to respond to a fire on the outskirts of town.

My mom opens the oven and my mouth waters at the stronger scent that flows out of it. My stomach rumbles loudly enough, my mom would've heard my entrance if she didn't have that special radar all moms seem to have. The "I have eyes in the back of my head" radar. You know it's an expression. But then your mom knows you did something that there's no way she could have known any other way so you have to wonder.

Equipped with said radar, Mom doesn't spare me a look as she sets the pan on the table and returns to the kitchen island to finish a salad.

"I was wondering if you were going to grace us with your presence."

I stop myself from rolling my eyes, but only because I'm sure Mom would somehow detect it. "I told you I'd be home for dinner."

"Hmm. You also told me you were going to be working at the coffee shop."

"I was." I set my bag down on a chair and crane my neck to sneak a closer look at the salad in progress.

"What was this I heard about you going to the holiday market? I also heard you were getting pretty cozy with Rob?"

I gasp. "Who told you that?"

"You forget, sweetie, this is a small town. Everyone knows everything." She gives me a pointed look. "Please tell me you aren't going to break that boy's heart again."

"It's not like that." My gut twists, even as I protest. "We're just... hanging out."

"Hmm..."

"It's all innocent. I promise."

With a sigh, I reach for one of the pinecones sitting in a basket in the center of the table. Wincing, I immediately regret it as I find my hands covered with glitter. I should have known. Most of my mom's weekly craft and wine nights with the other women her age in town almost always include crafts centered around glitter.

Setting it back, I wipe my hand on my jeans, belatedly hoping it'll come out in the wash. "He's helping me do research for work."

That makes Mom perk up. "Are you going to film another Christmas movie? Isn't it a little late in the season for that?"

"It's for a future Christmas production." I hesitate a moment, not sure how much I want to tell my mom.

She's always been supportive of me and my career. Especially after I started booking small parts in the movies she and her friends love to watch. But...

That doesn't always mean she understands what I do, or why I'm still trying to build a career in Hollywood after so many years of barely keeping it going.

"Doris"—I ignore the way mom grits her teeth when she hears my agent's name. I've always suspected there's a bit of jealousy there—"asked me to work on a holiday script that she can pitch for me to star in."

Mom's eyebrows shoot up. "You mean, you'd actually be the lead."

"Hopefully."

She nods in approval. "And spending time with Rob is helping you do this?"

"He's showing me around all of the Christmas activities and festivities in town." I shrug, not wanting her to read into it any more than that. "He thought it might inspire some ideas for a Christmas movie set in a small town."

"You could get plenty of inspiration for writing movies set in small towns if you moved back."

"Mom, please."

She throws up her hands and goes back to the salad. "It was just an idea."

Only, it's not just an idea. She'd also love nothing more than for me to move back in town, have a couple of kids, and start baking cakes and cookies for fundraisers at the school and church.

It's not because she doesn't support me or my dreams. It's because she wants me to be happy, and those are the things that have made her life happy.

And... as much as I hate to admit it, I've sometimes wondered what might have happened if I'd stayed. Not often. Just, occasionally late at night after another mediocre audition or another disappointing callback.

In those weak moments, when I'm alone in my lumpy full-size bed in my crappy studio apartment that sits over a

restaurant that makes the world's worst pizzas... My mind wanders down the path of what if.

Would I still have studied screenwriting and acting? Or would I have gotten a more practical degree in college?

Would I still live in my old childhood bedroom or have a little house of my own?

Would I be married, with a couple of little kids running around said house? And would their father—my husband—look like a certain brown-eyed firefighter?

Suddenly uncomfortable with the route I've allowed my thoughts to take, I shift in my seat. "You never told me Rob was the fire chief."

"You never asked."

I gape at her. "I always ask how he's doing."

"And I always tell you he's well."

I can't help but scoff at that. "You tell me every detail of every story that comes up during your bridge night, but you don't think I might care to know what's going on with him."

"Alexis, honey, what do you want from me?" She sets down the knife and gives me a harried look. "You've told me dozens of times that you aren't moving back, that you want to build a life in L.A."

"Yeah, so?"

"I didn't figure you wanted to hear about the boy you left behind or the man he's become." She shakes her head. "I thought it... might make things harder for you."

I start to protest but stop. Because... She isn't wrong. I can't say what would have happened if she'd given me play-by-plays of Rob's life through the years. But I can't say it would've made things any easier for me to know when I was living so far away.

"He's a good young man," Mom says.

My heart hitches. "I know he is."

“He’s really made our little fire department here in town into something special. Did you know they do a toy drive?”

“I saw it today.”

She frowns for a second but shrugs it off. “Well, they also have state-of-the-art equipment. They’re always helping to answer calls outside their area.”

“That sounds... impressive.” And unsurprising, because that’s the kind of person Rob has always been.

“You know, just tonight they responded to a call for a major house fire.”

“I heard.” Because I was standing right there. My mom undoubtedly heard from whoever told her Rob and I were taking a trip down memory lane today.

“Poor people. Three children, all under the age of five, and the whole place went up in flames. They barely made it out.”

“Oh my God.”

“Alexis, your language!”

I shake off the comment. “Did everyone make it out okay?”

Did all of the firefighters?

“It doesn’t sound like anyone was hurt.” She brings the salad to the table and sits down across from me. “But they lost everything. Their clothes. Their furniture. Their tree and all of the presents underneath it. And just a week before Christmas.”

“That’s...” I shake my head because there aren’t really any words for just how terrible and heartbreaking that is. “Do you know if anything is being done to help?”

“I’m sure the Red Cross is offering assistance.” Mom slides a slice of lasagna onto my plate. “If you’re really worried, I know who you can call.”

And I know, too. In fact, my fingers are itching to reach for my phone right now. I’m sure Rob is busy, but I wouldn’t take

much of his time. Tonight, I just want to hear his voice and make sure he's okay.

## FOUR

### ROB

I can only shake my head in admiration—and a bit of amusement—as Alexis and I step into the bar a few nights after the fire.

Strands of red and green lights mix with twinkling white lights through the air. Instead of smelling like old beer and cheap whiskey, like usual, there's a warm blend of cinnamon and nutmeg.

And every person is dressed in the loudest and most obnoxious of ugly holiday sweaters.

“What?” Alexis pulls a face when I chuckle. “Is it too much? Because if it's too much, we can take down some of the decorations or skip the karaoke battle.”

Grinning, I give in to the urge to take her hand in mine and give it—what I hope comes off as—a friendly squeeze.

“It's not too much.”

“But—”

“It's perfect.” Unable to resist, I raise her hand to my lips and lightly brush my lips over the back of the knuckles. “I'm impressed. If you stick around for long, my mom might have to relinquish her crown as the head party planner in town.”

Alexis's cheeks flush, and I wonder if it's from the praise or the feel of my lips across her skin.



Then again, it could also be the ugly Christmas sweater she's wearing. It's the required costume, or uniform if you like, for tonight's party. A party that is less of a celebration and more of a benefit to gather supplies and raise funds to give a Christmas to the family displaced by the house fire earlier this week.

I'd been surprised, and more than a little pleased, when she called me later that night. I could be mistaken, but she'd sounded relieved to hear my voice.

Then she told me her idea about wanting to do something to help and... well, I'd once again been pleased, but less surprised. Alexis might think that she's changed and become more jaded since moving to L.A. to pursue her acting and screenwriting career.

But she can't fool me. She still has every bit as much heart as she did when we were kids, and she organized a car and dog wash as a fundraiser for our local animal shelter.

It's good to see the flush in her cheeks, the excitement in her eyes. She'd seemed so tired, so defeated when we met that day in the coffee shop. Now, she's looking and sounding more like her old self.

Selfishly, I'd like to think I had a hand in bringing a little merriment back into her life.

Heart clenching at the thought, I give her hand another squeeze before releasing it. "Should we mingle?"

"Oh... probably."

We share a small smile and make our way through the crowd. Someone hands us cups of spiked eggnog, the signature drink for tonight's festivities, while someone else gives us gingerbread cookies.

I do my duty by shaking hands with and talking to the VIPs in the room, including the mayor and town manager. But as I do, I never let my gaze linger far from Alexis.

With every old acquaintance she meets, her eyes light up. She gives a sweet, almost shy, smile to everyone who congratulates her on her latest TV guest spots.

When we finally have a moment to ourselves, I lean closer so she can hear me speak. As I do, I catch a whiff of her sweet vanilla scent. “For someone who came to town all out of Christmas spirit, you’ve sure made up for it tonight.”

“Yeah, well.” She gives a shrug, even as she restrains a smile. “If you throw up a few Christmas trees, some pine boughs, and a whole bunch of lights, anything will look festive.”

“I didn’t mean the decorations, though they’re great.” I wait for her to meet my gaze. “I met the whole event. This”—I gesture to the bar crowded with people we’ve known our whole life along with plenty of new faces—“is what Christmas is about. A community coming together to show one of our own some love when they need it most.”

Alexis puts up a hand and bites her lip. “Stop, or you’ll make me cry.”

“Oh, Lex... I’m sorry.”

She blinks rapidly, and darts glances around like she’s looking for a place to escape.

At least I can help with that. I take her hand once more and pull her into a back room where they store the kegs. Once I close the door behind us and flip on the light switch, I tug a bandana out of my back pocket and hand it to her.

“Here.”

She accepts it gratefully and—still blinking rapidly—blots around her eyes where tears have formed.

A dull ache swells in my chest even as I struggle to breathe. She’s so beautiful. Even when she’s trying not to cry.

“Thank you,” she says once she has the tears at bay. “I don’t suppose it would help the effort too much if I was a blubbering mess the whole time.”

“Then again...” She shakes her head and sighs mournfully. “I suppose some people might expect to see me cry on cue after all of the sappy TV movies they’ve seen me in through the years.”

I can't help but grin. Alexis always had a flare for the dramatics. That's why I wasn't surprised when she packed her bags and moved to L.A.

Again, I wasn't surprised, but I was sad. More than sad. I was punched in the gut, knocked off my feet devastated. But I couldn't ask her to stay. Not when it meant asking her to give up on her dreams.

"Problem?" I ask because she's clearly waiting for me to say something.

"No, no problem." She sighs again, this one even louder and more drawn out. "It's just... it's just..."

Shaking my head, I bite my lip to keep from laughing. "Get on with it."

Her sparkling eyes meet mine. "It's just no one should look as good in an ugly sweater as you do."

I blink. "What?"

"It's called an ugly sweater party for a reason." She runs a hand up my shoulder, over the knit material of the sweater I dug out of the back of my dad's closet. She leaves a path of warmth and anticipation everywhere she touches. "You're supposed to look ridiculous."

"And I don't?"

"You look ridiculously good-looking."

My heart thuds a little faster. With all of my senses alive, there's one that stands out among the rest. The desire to feel her lips on mine. The desire to find out if she tastes as good as I remember.

"How much of the spiked eggnog have you had?"

"Not much." She purses those lips, torturing me even more. "Just a couple of sips, which is a shame. Because it's really good."

"Did you do any shots or have a road beer on the way?"

Her brow knits together. "No, of course not."

“Are you taking any medications that might interfere with alcohol in any way?”

“No.” She watches me even more cautiously, apparently perplexed by the way I’ve taken control of our script now. “Why do you ask?”

“I just wanted to see if you might be under the influence of anything that might inhibit your cognitive reasoning skills.”

“I’m not.”

“Good.” Then, before I can overthink it, I pull Alexis into my arms and brush my lips over hers.

It’s just a light kiss. Gentle and chaste. The kind you’d give to greet a friend. But the soft gasp that escapes Alexis and the roaring fire in my belly isn’t the reaction of a kiss between friends. They’re the reactions of two lovers, reuniting after time apart.

A warning alarm sounds in my head. We’re stupidly moving past the point of the friend zone. And friends are all we can be this time around.

I start to pull back, but Alexis slides a hand up my shoulder and leans toward me. Deepening the kiss. With a groan of my own, I wrap an arm around her waist, enjoying the softness of her body lightly pressed against mine. Savoring her sweet taste.

There isn’t much I don’t remember about my relationship with Alexis. I remember the movie we saw on our first date. I remember how fast my heart raced when I held her hand for the first time. I remember how hot and bothered we got the first time we kissed.

I remember all that and a million other little moments.

I don’t remember her tasting this good. I’m sure she did. But like a fine wine, Alexis’s taste has only grown more robust and full with time.

Time. It’s been too much damn time since I last held her in my arms like this. It’s been too damn long since I’ve felt this complete. It’s a bittersweet thought, given the circumstances.

Alexis is only here for the holidays. After, she'll go back to Hollywood, breaking my heart all over again if I let her.

Oh, who am I kidding? She's going to rip my heart out one way or another. Why deny both of us this kiss?

I angle my head to deepen it when someone pounds on the door. "Alexis, Rob, are you in there?"

We pull back, staring into each other, our chests rising rapidly up and down.

The pounding continues. "Alexis. Rob!"

"Yeah, give us a second."

The person on the other side sighs. "You better not be hooking up in there. We're about to start the karaoke and the two of you are up first."

I arch an eyebrow, and Alexis gives me a guilty look.

"Karaoke?" I ask.

"I thought we could set an example for everyone else and get things started."

I take a slow, deep breath through my nose which does a little to calm the lust churning inside of me. "What are we singing?"

"Feliz Navidad."

I cock my head to the side and shrug. "I suppose it could be worse."

She snorts. "That's the spirit."

Rolling my eyes, I take her hand and give a lingering look to her lips, which are still swollen from mine. "Come on. Let's go entertain your audience."

## FIVE

### ALEXIS

My heart is thrumming as I slide into the passenger seat of Rob's truck after everyone else has long since left the party. "I can't believe how generous people are."

"Sure you can." He clasps his seatbelt and reaches across the console to take my hand. My thrumming heart skips a beat as his warm, calloused fingers link with mine. "After all, you were the mastermind."

"Stop, you're going to make me blush—or worse, cry—again."

"We can't have that." He squeezes my fingers, sending a fresh shiver down my spine. "Not when you just saved Christmas."

"I didn't save Christmas."

"Sure you did. For one family."

My stomach does a little somersault at his words and the way his dark eyes pierce mine. It reminds me of how he used to look at me right before he'd kiss me. He had the same glint in his eyes when he kissed me in the storage closet. My pulse quickens and I squeeze my thighs together at the memory of his strong arms wrapped around me while his lips drove me insane...

I clear my throat and tug my hand from Rob's. That kiss was a one-time thing. We were just caught up in a moment of Christmas spirit. It can't go anywhere. Not when I only have

about ten more days left in town. Then we'll both go back to the lives we've built. The very separate lives we've built in very distant places.

Still grinning, Rob starts the truck. Heat flows out of the vents though I'm still too flushed with excitement from the party—and, undoubtedly, lingering desire—to have noticed the cold.

Buckling my own seatbelt, I lean back in the seat, willing my heart—and my libido—to calm down. “I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight. I'm still buzzing from it all.”

“We don't have to call it a night.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “We just closed down a bar. Don't tell me the other ones stay open even later.”

“I wasn't thinking about getting another drink.”

The need inside of me churns again imagining what else there is to do late at night when everyone else is asleep. My gaze flickers to his mouth and down his body. The ugly sweater he's wearing is at least a size too small for his broad shoulders and muscular arms and chest.

No. Stop it. We just discussed this, Alexis. There's no point letting my thoughts go down that path when we're only going to be friends with Rob now.

Some friends bone though, right.

I shake my head and clear my throat. “What did you have in mind?”

“How about we drive around a little while to check out the Christmas lights?”

My heart skips a beat. “Like the time...”

I trail off, neither of us needing me to say what we both remember. Our senior year of high school, Rob planned out a whole Christmas date night. He made us a big thermos of hot cocoa with plenty of marshmallows. He packed enough cookies and fudge to make us sick. And he planned out a holiday lights tour of our town and a few of the communities nearby.

It had been nothing short of magical.

And when we parked for a little break...

My cheeks flush with the memory. "I'd love to see the lights this year."

Rob pulls out of the bar parking lot and heads down Main Street. He flips on some Christmas music as we inch slowly down the streets, watching with the same wonder of kids as the soft glow of lights reflects in the snow.

"This has always been my favorite time of year here," I whisper.

"I remember." He grins at me and reaches for my hand. Even after all this time, my hand feels so right in his. "You always loved Christmas so much and so hard. It's why..."

"It's why I wanted to make Christmas movies so much." I press my lips together forming a sad smile. "They were fun for a while. But year after year of being told I wasn't good enough to play anything but the sassy or sweet or sweet and sassy friend... It takes its toll. You start to think you aren't pretty enough or funny enough or talented enough. You start to believe you aren't enough, period."

Rob pulls the truck to a stop on the street outside our school and turns to me. "Alexis, you are enough. You've always been enough. It doesn't matter what anyone else says, I see you. And you're exactly who you should be, and you're perfect the way you are."

His words wrap around my heart and flow through me. It's almost as if he's giving me a hug.

Without thinking, I release the buckle on my seatbelt and lean across the console to press my lips against his. He starts for a second, but immediately relaxes into it, moving his mouth against mine. Drawing us both into a searing kiss.

He urges my lips open and our tongues meet. I moan into his mouth, pressing my palms against his chest, savoring the heat that radiates from him.



With a groan of his own, he slips out of his own seatbelt and pulls me closer. His strong, hard hands rove over my body, molding to the sides of my breasts. Even through the scratchy ugly sweater, his touch makes my body tingle.

Leaning closer to him, I slide my own hand up his firm thigh, drawing closer to a place I used to know well. He moves one of his own hands between my thighs. I instinctively angle my legs to give him more access.

A light suddenly flashes in through the window and there's a knock on Rob's door.

Gasping, I pull back, my hand accidentally bumping against Rob's most sensitive spot. He winces and grits his teeth, even as he rolls down the window.

"Hey, chief," a police officer says. I'm too embarrassed to look at him more closely to see if he's anyone I recognize. "Everything okay here?"

"Great," Rob says in a clipped voice.

"Yep," I add, equally strained.

"It sounds like the two of you put on one heck of a party tonight. Raised a lot of money." I can hear the humor in his voice. "From the look of it, you're having a nice little after-party."

"We were just heading home," Rob says.

"See that you do."

The flashlight disappears and Rob rolls up his window, silencing the deep chuckling from the cop.

Neither of us says or does anything for a moment. It's a shame we were interrupted when we were, but it's probably for the best. If we're going to do this, it shouldn't be here in his truck.

Because there's no denying it. Whether it happens tonight or tomorrow or in another week, it's going to happen. When we're around each other, Rob and I are like two magnets. Nothing—not even the best of intentions—can keep us apart.

I cast him a sidelong glance. “How far away is your place?”

“My place?” He blinks and understanding lights his eyes. “It’s not too far. About twenty minutes without traffic.”

“I don’t think we’d hit much traffic at this time of now.” I bat my eyelashes and grin at him, my body still tingling from his touch and in anticipation of what else awaits. “That is if you wouldn’t mind having me over for the evening.”

He takes my hand and brings it to his lips. “There’s nothing I’d love more.”

## SIX

### ROB

#### ROB

With Alexis's hand firmly in mine, I pull up the drive to the house I built on a piece of land outside the town. Even this late at night, the moon and stars give enough light for her to see it.

She sucks in a breath. "Rob... it's... incredible." She turns to smile at me, her hazel eyes dancing. "It's just like you always said it would be."

"Yeah." Warmth spreads in my chest. When I used to talk about buying some land up in the mountains outside of town and building a house, I always pictured sharing it with her.

At the time, I assumed it would be forever. But she had dreams of her own. Big ones I could never ask her to give up. I'm proud of her for chasing after them.

It's enough to share my own little dream come to life with her right now. Even if it's only for tonight.

"Come on." I squeeze her hand. "How about I give you the official tour?"

We walk up the steps to the porch that wraps around the house. She pauses to admire the two Adirondack chairs perched on either side of the door.

She slides her free hand over the wood, and the hairs prick up on the back of my neck as she does. "Did you make these?"

“With some help from my dad.”

“You were always good with your hands.” Her eyes flash with a spark I’m all too familiar with.

I take a slow steadying breath and push open the door. Flipping on a switch, I welcome her inside.

Alexis’s face lights up as she looks around the large living room. She admires the stone fireplace and the built-ins that I also made with my dad.

Her gaze falls on the shelves of DVDs. I can tell the second she sees them, and I grimace inwardly. I forgot about them.

“Rob...” She moves toward them, her lips parted. “These are...”

“All of the movies you’ve been in.” I clench my jaw, my insides coiling tightly. “At least all of the ones that are available to buy.”

She glances up at me, her eyes shimmering. “You bought them?”

“Of course. I swear, I’m not stalking you or anything.”

“I didn’t think that.”

“I’ve just... always wanted to support you however I can.” I wince. “Does that sound lame?”

“No.” Her bottom lip quivers. “It sounds incredibly generous and sweet.”

“I’ve always believed in you. I’ve always known you can do whatever you put your mind to. I’ve always wanted you to chase your dreams.” I cradle her cheeks in my hands. “But don’t think for a second that I haven’t missed you.”

Her eyes dart back and forth across my face. Her throat moves as she swallows deeply.

“I’ve missed you, too.” Her voice is so strained, my heart aches. “So much. Sometimes I wonder what... What if... Maybe I should have...”

“Shh.” I slide my thumb over her cheek, catching a tear before it slips down. “Don’t ever doubt that you shouldn’t have gone to L.A. I know your career may not look exactly the way you imagined. But you’re doing it. You’re making it happen.”

“I’m basically a has-been.” She gives a short, humorless laugh. “I hope this screenwriting works out because I’m about to be too old to play anything but the friendly neighbor or the mom.”

“You’re not a has-been.”

“I—”

I cover her mouth with mine to silence her before she can say anything else. The kiss starts out hard and strong but soon softens into a sampling caress.

When I’m sure she’s done with the negative talk, I pull back and rest my forehead against hers.

“Alexis, I’ll always be your biggest fan. I’ll always believe in you. And, I say this without any expectation or agenda. I’ll... I’ll always love you.”

# SEVEN

## ALEXIS

### ALEXIS

Another tear falls from my eyes, caught by Rob with his thumb as his words echo in my ears.

*I'll always love you.*

“Rob,” I whisper, more tears threatening to fall. “Rob.”

“It’s okay.” He brushes his lips over mine. “You don’t have to say anything. I just thought you should know.”

Despite what he’s told me about having no regrets, I can’t quite shake off the fresh wave of regret that washes over me. It’s not that I regret going after my dream. It’s that I regret what I left behind to do it.

I could have tried to make a long-distance relationship work. Rob offered, but I thought it would be easier if we gave ourselves fresh starts.

Now... Now I’ll have to live knowing that all of my struggles could have been easier if I’d gone through them with the support and love of the best man I’ve ever known.

This time, I kiss him. It’s a soul-stirring, heart-stopping, toe-curling kind of kiss that only has one place to go. And it doesn’t take long for us to let it run its natural course.

Barely breaking his lips from mine, Rob guides me back toward his bedroom. “I’ll give you the rest of the tour later.”

“Mmm.” I nibble on his bottom lip and capture it with a playful bite. “I’ll look forward to it.”

I slide my hands under his sweater and roll it up his hard chest, releasing his mouth only long enough to send it flying. My own sweater ends up somewhere in the hall, along with our shoes and our pants.

We leave a trail of clothing from the living room to the oversized bed in his room. We’re both in only our undergarments when we reach it. Rob flips on the light.

When I start to protest, he cups my cheek gently. “Please. I want to see you.”

If possible, my insides melt even more.

We kiss again. It’s both urgent and gentle as he eases me back onto the edge of the bed. He trails kisses down my cheek and neck. Down my chest, lingering briefly at my breasts.

I suck in a breath when he removes my bra and latches on to one of my nipples. I grab hold of his shoulders to keep myself upright, digging my fingernails into him.

His free hand makes long, languid strokes up and down my thigh. With each journey up, he makes it closer and closer to the apex of my thighs. Until he finds my heat. Pushing my panties aside, he strokes the seam, and desire builds deep within my core. Waiting impatiently for its release.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispers against my belly. Then he continues his journey downward until his lips join his hands in bringing me to pleasure.

He strokes me, gently. Bringing me close to the edge before guiding me back down again. It’s slow and teasing. And by the time he finally brings me to the point of no return, I’m practically begging for release.

It shimmers through me, shining like rays of light from my core until it bursts like a star.

It’s all I can do to whisper his name before I collapse back onto the bed, replete.

Rob slowly makes his way back up my body, pressing light, sweet kisses all over me as he does. By the time he rests next to me, his body curled around mine, I'm ready for more.

I slide my fingers into his dark hair and tug his mouth back toward mine. His hard length presses against my belly as our bodies push against each other.

And I don't want to wait anymore.

I tear my mouth from his. "Condom?"

He pants for a second and flashes a quick grin and a nod before rolling away from me for a moment to reach into his nightstand. I scoot up the bed, giving us more room before he returns. I take the foil from his hand and rip it open.

He groans as I glide it down his shaft and draw him to my entrance. He pauses, stroking my cheek and staring into my eyes. I reach up to link his hand with mine. Our fingers are gripped together, our eyes locked, as we come together at last.

His mouth forms an 'O' and I make a gasp of my own as I stretch around him, adjusting to his size. When he's fully inside of me, he waits again, giving me time.

When I'm ready, I nod. I move against him, encouraging him to begin the pace that will lead us both to satisfaction. Perspiration pops up on his forehead. I trail kisses over his cheeks and cling to his shoulder, feeling the passion reignite inside of me.

And when I next come apart, I take him with me. Both of us cry out as we find our release.

We stay together for long minutes, our breaths coming in gasps. I once again feel the threat of tears, but I blink them away. Eventually, Rob has to roll away. He pads to the bathroom and asks if I need anything to drink?

I shake my head and turn on my side, watching with admiration for his backside as he walks away.

When he closes the door, I turn my attention to the nightstand. A slip of paper catches my attention because it has



my name at the top. I lean toward it and read the bold letters written across the top.

“CHRISTMAS MAGIC TO INSPIRE ALEXIS”

And, underneath, there’s a list of all the different places to go and things to do that capture the Christmas spirit. Going to the market, which has a check next to it. Shopping for toys, which has another. Looking at lights.

There are more than a dozen items in all. More than half are Christmas experiences he’s already given me.

By the time Rob steps back out of the bathroom, tears are streaming down my cheeks.

“Hey.” He rushes toward me and scoops me into his arms. “Are you okay?”

“I’m perfect.” I wipe the tears away and kiss his hard jaw. “Just... hold me.”

His arms wrap around me, pulling me close to his chest. We don’t speak. My mind is racing, as ideas pop into my head

Eventually, Rob’s breathing slows, his steady, even breaths making his chest rise and fall, and me, curled up against him. While he sleeps, I piece together dozens of ideas until they come together to form a story.

A story worth turning into a movie that will give people all of the Christmas feels.

## EIGHT

### ROB

When Alexis goes strangely silent for a couple of days, I start to worry.

It's not that we had specific plans or anything. But she had this distant look in her eyes the morning after she stayed the night at my place that makes me wonder if she has regrets. Especially since she never answered any of my calls, and I haven't seen her around town.

Telling myself it's probably no big deal, and that I'm definitely overreacting, I pull my truck in front of her parents' house and sit. I have a cup of her favorite coffee and a piece of fudge with her name on it. I can knock on the door, tell her I saw them and thought of her, and once I get a visual that she is okay, I'll be on my way.

"That's still pretty fucking pathetic," I mumble to myself.

But it doesn't stop me from grabbing the coffee and fudge and making my way to the front door. Still shaking my head at myself, I ring the doorbell and wait. And wait.

Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, wishing I could kick my own ass, I wonder how long I should wait. I'll give it another minute and if no one comes to the door, I'll leave and pretend I never came here.

I count to sixty in my head. When I get to fifty-five, the door swings open. Alexis appears, her hair thrown up in a messy bun and an oversized Santa sweatshirt clings to her curves.

“Hey, you.” Her face lights up, and it sends an instant dart to my heart. “What a pleasant surprise.”

My shoulders immediately relax, and I feel a great weight lifted from my chest. She may be a professional actress, but I doubt she’d put on a show like this unless she meant it.

“I, uh.” I clear my throat. “I was at the coffee shop and there was a piece of fudge in the display window that looked like it needed a good home. Do you know anyone who might be interested?”

Her smile grows even bigger. “Oh my God. It’s like you’re reading my mind.”

She pushes the door open even wider and takes my arm, tugging me inside.

“Please excuse the mess,” she says, leading me into her old bedroom.

I glance around and start. “Whoa. Your parents haven’t changed much.”

“I know, it’s weird, right?” She glances around at the walls that are now a faded pink, but still covered with posters of the bands and movies she was obsessed with back in our high school days. “I told them they should turn it into something more useful—or even just take down the posters—but they’ve left it as a shrine.”

“They do love you a lot.” I meet her gaze, the cheeriness in her tone a welcome change from when we reconnected a week ago. “How’s everything going?”

“Really well.” She gestures to the desk in the corner, which is piled high with empty coffee mugs and notebooks. “I’m almost done writing the treatment.”

I blink. “You’ve been working?”

“Like crazy. I was so inspired after the fundraiser and... everything else. I’ve barely stopped writing to sleep.” She practically bounces around the room picking up dishes and clearing a space for me to sit on the end of her bed. “Here, let me take these back to the kitchen before my mom really takes

us back to high school and lectures me for leaving dirty dishes in my room.”

She disappears and I release a heavy sigh of relief. She hasn’t been avoiding me. She’s been riding a wave of creativity.

On my own, I continue my study of the room, grinning at the framed photo of us that’s now been unburied on her desk. The open computer screen catches my attention. I’m tempted to look, but—”

“What are you doing?”

I turn, guiltily. “Nothing.”

Alexis stalks into the room, a clean plate and a pair of forks in her hand. “Were you reading my script?”

“I wasn’t. I…” I grit my teeth. “Okay, I thought about it, but I swear I didn’t. I wouldn’t read it without your permission.”

She studies me closely, the frown still furrowing her brow. I don’t know what she sees. Maybe it’s the desperate plea in my eyes, but her face relaxes.

“Okay, I believe you.” She sets the plate down and folds her arms. “You can if you want.”

“Oh, I don’t think—”

“It’s not that I don’t want you to read it. I wouldn’t have come up with the idea without you. I just don’t want anyone snooping.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” She reaches for the laptop and motions for me to follow her to the bed. “But first, let’s get cozy.”

Not wanting to risk irritating her again, I follow her to the bed. She fluffs the pillows and we sit with our backs to the headboard like we did back in high school. She settles into the curve of my arm with the fudge in her hand and the computer in my lap.

Hesitantly at first, I start reading what she has typed up. It doesn't take long for the tension to disappear. I'm too caught up in the sweet, charming story she wants to tell. A story I can see traces of myself in.

She gives me a tight-lipped smile as I reach the end. "Well... what do you think?"

"I think... it's amazing." I glance down at her. "You're amazing. I can see you all over this."

"Well, I had a lot of inspiration thanks to a certain firefighter."

I can't help but smirk, feeling a growing urge to lean down and kiss her. Even if her parents might come back at any time and surprise us. That would be a real—and embarrassing—blast from the past.

A thought pops into my head. A dangerous one, but one I can't dismiss now that it's here.

I don't want this to be over after New Year's Eve. I don't want her to go back to Los Angeles and the life she's built so far away from me and everything we've shared.

I want Alexis to stay.

And I hate myself for even thinking of something so selfish.

She shifts in my arms and presses her lips to my chin. My heart—and other parts—swell at the sweet touch. "What are you thinking about?"

"The holidays." It's not a complete lie.

"Mmm. Do you still think I need some inspiration for my script?" Her eyes dance with the lights from the Christmas tree shining in them.

"You seem to be doing okay on your own."

"I wouldn't say that. I'd probably still be staring at the blinking cursor on my blank computer screen if you hadn't made it your mission to remind me of all the wonders of the season."

My lips twitch. “I think you might have surprised yourself if left to your own devices.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.” She slides her hands over mine, stroking them back and forth across my arms. “So, what else is on that Christmas to-do list of yours?”

“A Home Alone double-feature movie night. Making snow angels outside.” I rest my chin against the side of her head. “Going to my mom’s Christmas Eve Eve party.”

“The one where kids get to meet Santa and everyone eats their weight in cookies and hot cocoa?”

“The very same.”

“I’m glad to know she still does that.” She sighs contentedly. “We should go.”

“Are you sure? There’s a better-than-good chance we’ll be drafted into playing elves.”

“Is your dad still Santa and your mom Mrs. Claus?”

“Who else?”

She chuckles. “Then we should definitely go.”

“Wouldn’t this fall under the category of things our parents say will be fun, but turn out not to be?”

“Oh, one hundred percent.” She squeezes her arms over mine, hugging both of us. “But I have a feeling we’ll make it fun.”

## NINE

### ALEXIS

Rob enters his bedroom with a scowl on his face.

From my perch on the bed, where I'm curled up with my laptop revising my script in the picturesque comfort of his cabin, I can't help but grin. "Uh oh. What's that look for?"

"My mom just sent me a photo of the costumes she wants us to wear for the party tonight."

I chew on the inside of my cheeks to keep from laughing. "Are you going to leave me in suspense or are you going to show me?"

With a sigh, he crosses the room and hands me his phone. On the screen, there are two felt elf outfits. One pink, the other green. They look like something out of an old-fashioned Christmas movie, or *Elf*. Which, come to think of it, took its visual aesthetic and feel from those old Burl Ives movies.

"I think they're darling."

"Great." He rolls his eyes and drops onto the bed next to me. "Just what every grown man wants to be. Darling."

"Oh, come on." I set my laptop aside and wriggle closer to him until he slides an arm around my shoulder. "You wouldn't mind if I thought you were darling."

"I'd rather think you were rugged and sexy."

"Don't worry, I do." I slide my hand across his whiskered jaw and lean up to take a nibble at it. "I'll think you're even

more rugged and sexy if you confidently wear that elf costume at your mom's party."

"Fine." He sighs heavily as if he's just made the biggest, most challenging commitment of his life. "But it better be worth my while."

I can't help but beam up at him goofily, my heart swelling as I think about the two of us helping kids meet Santa, who looks suspiciously like Rob's dad. Despite his grumbling now, I know Rob is a natural dealing with the kids. He always has been. It's how I know he'll be a good father.

My heart flips at the thought of that. I push the image of a little boy or girl with his smile and my sassy attitude out of my head.

"Maybe it already is." I trail my hand slowly down his chest until I reach the clasp at the top of his jeans, allowing my fingers to trace the outline of his hardness.

"Oh, baby." He groans, nuzzling my neck, sending ticklish shivers of delight up and down my spine, making me giggle.

He lowers his lips to the exposed skin at the top of my V-neck top, eliciting more laughter from me while he slides a hand around to cup my behind.

The placement of our hands and lips grows even more interesting when there's a loud knock at his front door.

I start and lift my head. "Should we get that?"

"Hmm mmm." He grazes his teeth along the curve of my neck, and the butterflies in my belly flutter. "It's probably the wind."

"Okay." I ease back and turn my lips to meet his.

The knock returns. Twice. And then the door creaks open. We both freeze, with his hand up my shirt and my hand down his pants.

"Rob! Alexis!"

"Shit," he hisses, sitting up so suddenly I bump my head on his chin.



“Ouch.”

“Sorry, baby.” He strokes my cheek, brushing a lock of hair back behind my ear. “I don’t know what my mom is doing here.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious.” My heart races and my stomach pitches.

Rob’s mom is pretty hands-on in all of her children’s lives, but not to the point where she’d show up—and let herself inside one of their homes—unless it was something urgent.

“Alexis!” another voice, one I recognize as my mom’s, follows.

We both scramble to our feet, adjusting our clothing as we do. Poor Rob still has a bulge in his jeans. I step in front of him to give him a little cover as we leave the bedroom. He rests a hand on my shoulder, accepting my offer of being his shield.

“Mom,” we say simultaneously.

I offer Rob a rue grin over my shoulder before turning my attention back to our moms who are sharing a smirk. “Is everything okay?”

“We’ve been trying to get ahold of you,” my mom says, her lips twitching. “We thought maybe you weren’t getting good cell reception up here today.”

“But maybe you were busy doing something else,” his mom says. “I’m sure something... Christmassy. To inspire your script.”

I can feel my cheeks burning bright red. “Did you need something?”

“Doris called.” For the first time, my mom doesn’t grit her teeth saying my agent’s name. “She loves your treatment or script or whatever you call it.”

“Oh.” I blink, somewhat bewildered. “That’s great.”

Rob squeezes my shoulder. “I told you it was amazing.”

“And the studio loves it too,” Mom says. “So much, they want you to come back to Los Angeles right away so you can pitch it to them tomorrow.”

I frown. “But that’s Christmas Eve.”

“I guess they’re really excited about it. They’ve ordered you a ticket for a flight out tonight.” Mom’s smile slips ahead. “I went ahead and packed your bag so we could head to the airport right now. I hope that’s okay.”

“That’s...” I trail off, and my throat suddenly feels thick and itchy. “That’s...”

“That’s incredible.” Rob releases my shoulder and steps out from beside me. “And much deserved.”

I pause, waiting for him to ask me to put off the meeting until the new year. To beg me to spend Christmas with him the way we planned.

But he doesn’t.

Instead, he gives me a friendly, but somewhat sad half-grin and a look that says this is it. This is the end of our brief reconnection over the holidays.

This is goodbye.

I clear my throat. “I’ll miss the Christmas Eve Eve party tonight.”

“That’s okay. This is bigger than that. This is... like... a Christmas miracle. You’re getting everything you’ve worked for. You’re getting your dream. Just in time for Christmas.” He presses a chaste kiss on your forehead. His next words nearly break my heart. “And we’ll be back here cheering you on while you do.”

# TEN

## ROB

“You don’t look very jolly.”

I glance up from clasping the buckle on the elf costume and scowl at my mom. “I said I’d be here. I didn’t say I’d be jolly.”

Mom perches a hip against a folding table covered with so many cookies, candies, and fudges, it’s a wonder the whole thing doesn’t collapse under the weight. “It’s sort of implied when you’re dressed up like one of Santa’s elves.”

“This is the last year I’m doing this.”

Her eyes sparkle with amusement. “That’s what you said last year. And the year before that.”

“Well...” My frown deepens even more. “I mean it this time.”

“That’s what you said last year.”

“I meant it last year.”

“Then why did I say yes when I asked you a few days ago?”

“I only said I’d do it this time, because...” I trail off as a lump lodges in my throat.

“I know.” Mom rests a hand on my shoulder and gives me a sympathetic tight-lipped smile. “You only agreed to help because you wanted to take a trip down memory lane with Alexis.”

I clench my jaw and give a short nod. There's no point in elaborating when Mom already hit the nail on the head.

She gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"What's there to say?" I start to shrug off her hand but stop. I'm thirty. Not three. I can't pitch a fit just because it feels like my heart is splintering into a million pieces.

And, damn it, if that doesn't make me sound like a sad sack.

I sigh. "I always knew she was going back to L.A."

"But you didn't know she'd be going back so soon."

"No, but maybe it's better this way." If I'm this torn up with her leaving today, I can only imagine how much more pathetic I'd be in another week. With another week of memories. Another week of feelings. "It would only be harder."

"And why do you think that is?"

"Why do you think?" I frown at my mom, sounding every bit like the spoiled child I just resolved not to be. "Because I'm crazy about her. Because I want to be with her."

As I say the words out loud, they register fully in my head and heart. I am still every bit as crazy about Alexis as I was in high school. Crazier, in fact. I'm in love with the girl she was then. I'm in love with the woman she's become. And I have no doubt I'll love the many brilliant, beautiful versions of her that there will be in the future.

I didn't set out to reintroduce Alexis to the Christmas spirit for old-time's sake. I did it because I want her to be happy. Now. Tomorrow. Forever.

No matter what lies I told myself along the way, it was always going to end up like this. I was always destined for heartbreak. I was always going to miss her. I was always going to wish she would stay.

Because I love her.

Mom tilts her head to the side, a slow, sly grin spreading across her face. “Don’t you think you should maybe tell Alexis that?”

“I can’t.”

The grin falls from her face, replaced by a fierce frown. “And why not? What’s that line in that one movie? Something about how if you can’t say it at Christmas, when can you?”

“I can’t tell her, because I love her too much.” My throat grows thick, and I have to clear it before speaking again. “Her dream isn’t here. It’s in L.A.”

“Okay.”

I stare at my mom without blinking. “And I live here.”

“Yes, you do. But maybe she wants to move back.”

“I don’t—”

“And maybe—as much as I hate to say it—you might find yourself happy in sunny California. Or maybe the two of you would be happier somewhere else entirely.” She shrugs. “You don’t have to decide that today.”

What she’s saying makes sense. To a certain degree. “But we’ll have to figure it out sometime.”

“It seems to me like you should figure out how you feel about each other first.” She grips my other shoulder, turning me so I face her. “At the very least, it seems like you should at least start by spending Christmas with each other.”

“But she’s in L.A.”

“I seem to remember that there are airplanes and roads that get there.” She gives my shoulders a little shake, though I barely budge considering I’m almost twice her size and mostly muscle. “You know what’s at stake for her right now. You know what she has riding on this pitch. Don’t you want to be there to support her—no matter what happens?”

I do. More than anything, I want to show Alexis that I love and support her. Especially when she’s giving the most important pitch of her life.

When I don't respond immediately, Mom sighs in disgust and releases my shoulders. "Christmas isn't about where you are, it's who you're with. And you and Alexis should be together."

"You're right." I reach for the oversized belt I just fastened and start to remove it. "If I leave now I wonder how quickly I can get there."

"Now, no one said you have to leave right now. I'm sure you can still help with the party before you hit the road." Her lips twitch again with another grin. "Besides, I happen to know there's a plane ticket with your name on it leaving later today."

"But... how?"

"Consider it a little gift from Santa and Mrs. Claus. Speaking of..." She glances around us. "Your father should be here."

I gape at my mom as she rambles about my dad always being late. I'm too surprised, and somehow completely unsurprised, that she's already booked my ticket to Los Angeles.

Of course she knew how I felt about Alexis. And, of course, she knew there was no one I'd rather be with for Christmas.

I throw my arms around my mom and scoop her up in a giant bear hug. She protests even as she laughs.

"Thank, you Mom." I set her back down on the ground.

Eyes still sparkling, she plants a sloppy kiss on my cheeks. "Now, come on. The sooner we meet these kiddos lined up around the building, the sooner we can get you to your girl. After all, it is Christmas Eve Eve."

# ELEVEN

## ALEXIS

Heart racing, but my voice clear as a frozen pond on a cold winter morning, I give my Christmas movie pitch.

The studio reps crowd around the table and listen closely, which is a good sign. None of them looks particularly festive, which isn't the greatest sign. Not when you consider that we're having a last-minute meeting on Christmas Eve with a creative team famous for making holiday movies. You'd think even one of them would have a candy cane in their coffee or a snowflake pendant on their suits.

Fortunately, my faithful agent Doris is more than making up for their lack of cheer. She's wearing a gorgeous red sweater and a necklace that jingles every time she nods, all while beaming at me like a proud mom. That doesn't necessarily mean anything about the project one way or another, but it's still nice to see.

The only thing that could make this pitch better is...

No, it's best not to think about the one person who I wish could be here. The person who made all of this possible. Rob. Oh, I'm sure I would have pushed myself to come up with a concept and a story. It might not have sucked even.

Still, credit where it's due, Rob was the one who inspired this story. He's the one who helped me rediscover the magic for the season. More, he was the one who gave it heart. With his patience, persistence, and something greater still: love.

My voice cracks for a moment then, as I describe the handsome hero of the story. The man who helps the jaded city girl reconnect with her small-town roots and rediscover the love of Christmas.

But if they notice, none of them seems to mind. If anything, my passion and emotion seem to spark more interest. When I finish my pitch, I take a breath. “That’s the story. Do you have any questions?”

There’s a polite rumble of applause around the table. Doris looks about ready to jump out of her seat and give a standing ovation. The jingling of her necklace rings through the air so emphatically, I half expect to see Santa and his reindeer flying over the palm trees outside the window.

But when the applause peters out, one of the executives shuffles her papers and clears her throat.

“It’s a great story,” she says. “One I have no doubt our viewers would love. Because it’s a popular premise. One that’s been done before.”

There’s a murmur of agreement and nods. For a moment, my heart sinks.

“It’s a story that’s been done before,” she repeats. “Dozens, if not hundreds, of times. But that doesn’t mean it can’t still be special. Tell me, what makes your story so special.”

I consider the question for a moment, my heart still racing. It’s a question every writer gets asked every time they tell someone about their latest project. In a world where every story has been done a thousand times before, “What makes your version special?”

“This story is special because...” I glance around the room as if I expect the answer to magically appear from somewhere. When it doesn’t, I sigh, and give the only response I can. The truth. “Because it’s my story. I don’t just mean that it’s one I’ve written. But it’s one I’ve lived.”

Eyebrows shoot up around the table.



Another executive leans forward, glasses perched on the tip of their nose and elbows resting on the table. “Seriously?”

“I mean, the basic components.” I give a shaky laugh. “I went home for the holidays for the first time this year. And on my first date, I bumped into my high school sweetheart in a bakery.”

“Is he really a firefighter?”

“Does he really have a cabin on a mountain?”

“Did you really split the last piece of fudge?”

“Yes all around.” My face softens into a gentle grin as gentle warmth wraps around my heart. “And before you ask, yes, he did help me rediscover the magic of Christmas and he did save a family from a fire.”

A fresh murmur or approval rumbles around the table, with one executive saying, “Very nice.”

“So,” the first executive says, voice raised above the others. “What you’re telling us is that you’ve lived out a Christmas movie of your own—reconnecting with an ex, rediscovering the spirit of the season, and saving Christmas for your town.”

“Well, technically the town didn’t need saving. But we did get Christmas presents, food, and shelter for a family that lost everything.”

She nods. “So if all of that happened, what are you doing here?”

I dart a nervous look at Doris, and she shrugs. “What do you mean? You requested a meeting.”

“Yes, but if you’ve truly had a transformative Christmas experience, reconnecting with your true love, what are you doing here with us instead of eating sugar plums and ice skating with him?”

“Or maybe they could go to a Christmas tree lighting and sing carols,” one executive suggests.

“Oh, and maybe he could be a single dad,” another adds.  
“Or maybe you’re a single mom.”

“What if she was a single mom and he was a prince?”

“A secret prince.”

“Even better.”

“And maybe he chipped his tooth on some peanut brittle at a holiday festival.”

“And she’s the only dentist in town.”

“So she fixes him up—”

“And while he’s under laughing gas—”

“Do people still use laughing gas?”

“—He could confess his real identity.”

“And then they’ll spend Christmas at his castle. With her daughter.”

“We should make it a son. Sons for single moms and daughters for single dads go better with our demographic.”

I’m barely able to keep up with the conversation around the table. I don’t know how it happened, but my pitch has suddenly turned into a brainstorming session. For a movie that—while cute—is nothing like the one I’ve pitched to them.

“Do you think you could put together a script based on all of that?”

I snap back to attention when I realize the question has been directed at me. “You want me to write a script... about a single mom and a prince?”

“Don’t forget, she’s a dentist.”

“And her dad is a candymaker.”

I frown. “What about the story I pitched?”

An exec frowns. “This is the story you pitched.”

I open my mouth, but words don’t come out. It doesn’t matter. Because while I’m silent, they start talking about

potential actresses to bring in to read for the part of the leading lady. My name isn't among them.

With every word they say, I can feel my excitement and hope fall to the wayside. And through it all, one question comes through more clearly than any other thought. It's the question that was posed to me before.

What am I doing here?

Why am I in this Christmas Eve meeting with a bunch of people who don't actually care about what I have to say or my career? What am I doing in Southern California, when I could be back home watching the snow fall over the mountains? Why am I about one hour away from picking up Chinese takeout and taking it home to my dull, studio apartment?

Why will I be spending Christmas alone when I could be celebrating it with the people I love?

Not just the people I love, but the person I love most of all.

Why am I not spending Christmas with Rob? And why didn't I tell him how I felt before I left?

Closing my laptop, I jump to my feet. "Thank you for the opportunity, but I think I'm going to pass."

Mouths fall open and eyes widen around the table. Except for Doris. Somehow, her face brightens even more.

"You heard the lady," she says. "We're going to pass." As I pass her on the way out the door, she grabs my hand. "Don't worry about this. We'll circle back—and take your script elsewhere—in the New Year. It's brilliant."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. You tell your story the way you want to tell it. I'll take care of the rest." She squeezes my hand. "In the meantime, go live your Christmas story. Be sure to give your muse a smooch from me."

## TWELVE

### ALEXIS

Heart pounding with excitement for what's to come in the new year, but more for what and who awaits me back home, I take the elevator down to the lobby.

On its descent, I pull out my phone and start looking up flights home. Last-minute flights usually cost an arm and a leg—not to mention the promise of your firstborn child and every penny left available on your credit card. But maybe I'll stumble across a deal. It'll be my very own Christmas miracle.

The door slides open and I step out, contemplating the first flight I can grab. I'm so distracted, I nearly run into a person getting on as I do.

“Oops.” I nearly drop my phone and bag as I fly forward. The man grabs my elbows to keep me from completely losing my balance. “Sorry, I—”

“Alexis.”

I suck in a breath and slowly raise my gaze. Once I do, I stare into a pair of dark brown eyes that immediately makes my heart pitter-patter and my soul sing.

“Rob.” I immediately wrap my arms around him, burying my face against his chest. His flannel shirt tickles my nose, and I breathe in deeply. He smells like pine and cinnamon and spice and clear mountain air. He smells like Christmas.

He smells like home.

He releases my elbows and folds me into his embrace. I can feel his lips pressing kisses all over the top of my head. His voice is low and husky as he whispers my name over and over.

He feels like Christmas. He feels like home.

Without releasing my hold on him, I lean back a little so I can see his handsome face.

“You’re here,” I whisper.

“I’m here.”

“I can’t believe you’re here.” I shake my head. “What are you doing here?”

A slow smile spreads across his lips. “I had an idea for how your movie should end.”

“Oh?”

He nods slowly, adjusting me in his arms so he can stroke my cheek with the backs of his knuckles. “I think your heroine should be called back to the city for a meeting on the day before Christmas.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You do?”

“Yep. And as soon as she does, the hero will realize he’s been an idiot. Because he never told her how he felt about her. He never told her how much he loves her. He never told her there was no one he’d rather spend Christmas with more.”

My throat aches and tears burn the back of my eyes. “Is that so?”

“It is.” He grips my chin lightly, and his calloused thumb slides over it making goosebumps prick up on the back of my neck.

“What happens next?”

“He does the only thing he can. He takes the next plane to the city, finds the girl, and tells her all of that. He also says he doesn’t know what the future holds, but he knows a future without her isn’t one he wants. He doesn’t want to settle for anything less than a future with her.”

A tear slips down my cheek then. “That’s a pretty good ending.”

“Wait till I tell you the part about how he kisses her under a bundle of mistletoe that his mom snuck into his pocket and that nearly got him stalled in airport security.”

I snort out with laughter, a sound that’s hardly sexy or cute. But it still seems to make Rob smile. And, really, that’s all that matters. I don’t care if anyone else thinks I’m sexy or cute. I just care that he loves me. I care that he’s here.

Still smiling, Rob lowers his lips until they nearly reach mine. Just before they touch, I press my hands against his chest, giving him pause. His brow furrows in a most adorable way I’d like to kiss. Maybe later.

“I had an idea of my own for the ending.”

His brow relaxes, catching on to my game. “And what’s that?”

“In my ending, the heroine comes back to the city on Christmas Eve to give her big pitch. But while she’s doing it, she realizes this isn’t what she wants.”

“But your scripts...” He shakes his head. “You’re too good to stop writing them.”

“It isn’t that I, or rather she doesn’t want to keep doing what she does.” I grin slyly. “It’s that she wants to do them on her own terms and in her own way. And she wants to write them in her favorite place in the world.”

“Where is that?”

“Back in a little cabin on a mountain near her hometown. With the only man she’s ever loved—the only one she could ever truly love—reading her work over her shoulder.”

“I don’t stand over your shoulder to read.”

“You might as well have.” I pat his chest. “But, anyway, she decides she wants to go back to spend Christmas with him in their hometown. Where they can build a life together because she doesn’t want a future without him either.”

His eyes crinkle around the edges and he rests his forehead against mine. “That’s a pretty good ending too.”

“Rob?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you. And I want to go home to start a life with you.”

“Alexis,” his voice shakes. “I love you. And I want to take you home so we can start our life together.”

I lean up on my toes so I can kiss him. He pulls back this time.

In answer to my silent question of “What?” he says, “How about we have Christmas here first?”

“Are you sure? What about your family and the town and the traditions and—”

“They’ll be there waiting for us next year. Besides...” He gives me a gentle squeeze. “This way, selfishly, I get you all to myself.”

“Okay, let’s have an L.A. Christmas. But just this once.” I wince. “I don’t have a tree.”

“That’s okay. We’ll find something.”

“And I don’t have anything to eat in my place.”

“We’ll make a mad dash to the store and find what we can.” He presses his lips to my temple. “And I have it on good authority that my mother may or may not have slid some fudge into my bag.”

“Well, it sounds like we will have ourselves a nice, if simple, Christmas.”

He cradles my cheek. “We’ll always have Christmas as long as we’re together.”

Our lips find each other at last. It’s a kiss that seals the love we’ve always had but has only grown stronger over the years. It’s a kiss of promises for a future together.

Bells jingle in the background. No doubt Doris has made her way downstairs if the excited gasp and cheer that accompanied them are any indication. They're the perfect soundtrack for the first of many kisses that we'll undoubtedly share during this first Christmas of being us.



## EPILOGUE

### ROB

An error message pops up on the TV.

Scowling, I slap the remote against the palm of my hand before directing it back to the screen. As if beating the hell out of a remote is suddenly going to help our connection to the Internet up here on the mountain.

“What idiot decided living in the middle of nowhere was a good idea?” I mutter.

“I wouldn’t call you an idiot.” Alexis appears at the entry from the kitchen, her hand resting on the swell of her belly.

My irritation is momentarily forgotten as I take in the sight of her. In the spirit of the season, she’s wearing a knee-length green dress, trimmed with faux fur. The velvet clings to her curves, which are even more ample these days now that she’s carrying our child.

Our child. Our family. All part of the beautiful life we’ve already built together in the past year.

A lump lodges in my throat and I have to clear it before speaking. “I can’t get the Internet to work.”

“Have you tried unplugging and replugging it?”

I frown. “No.”

“Because that’s probably a good place to start.”

I give a heavy sigh and stride across the room to do just that. “If this works, I’m going to be mad.”

“Why?” Her brows knit together. “We’re expecting twenty of our closest friends—including our parents, your sisters, and my agent who has flown in all the way from Los Angeles to attend our little party.”

“Little party.” I scoff as I sprawl out on the floor and lean behind the entertainment center to reach for the plug-in. “Tonight happens to be the world premiere of your movie.”

“Yeah, well.” She shrugs, but there’s no denying the brilliant smile that spreads across her lips. “It’s not like my name is on the marquee outside of a movie theater.”

“But it’ll appear first on the title screen.”

I return her smile as I give the Internet router the customary thirty seconds it apparently needs to remain unplugged. When Alexis’s pitch didn’t go the way she hoped last Christmas, she’d wisely walked away from the deal. As promised, her agent had taken the script—and the stipulation that Alexis would get to star in the movie if it was made—and shopped it around.

By mid-January, a major streaming network had ordered the movie giving Alexis top billing at the star. In addition to the writing credit, she’s also one of the producers. I couldn’t be more proud of her. Or the fact that they’ve already given her a three-movie deal with the option to direct.

And tonight, at exactly midnight, the results of her hard work will be live for everyone to see. We’re marking the occasion by having the people we love most come over for a super late-night party.

When thirty seconds have passed, I plug the router back in and push myself up. Sliding an arm around Alexis, I pick up the remote.

“Let’s give this another try.”

She leans up to kiss my cheek. “For luck.”

I pull her even closer and she rests her cheek against my chest. I scroll through the menu and click on the streaming service’s icon. We hold our breath while it loads.

Seconds pass, and it opens. Her new movie—*Christmas Once Again*—appears big on the screen along with the words, “Coming Soon.”

Alexis whoops in excitement and I grumble even as I grin. “I hate when it’s as simple of a fix.” I press a kiss on the top of her head. “There you are, babe. All of your dreams are about to come true.”

She turns in my arms and gazes up at me. “This is pretty amazing, but it isn’t my dream.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“There was a time I would have said it was.” She shakes her head and takes one of my hands in hers and places them both on her belly. “Now, I know better. Living your dream doesn’t mean anything unless you have someone to share it with.”

The lump returns in my throat, and all I can say is her name as I lean down to brush my lips over hers.

And, as if on cue, our baby gives our linked hands a nudge.

“Merry Christmas, little one.” Alexis kisses me again. “And Merry Christmas, my love.”

The holiday season is only beginning, but I have a feeling this will be the best one ever. And they’ll only get better.



Thanks for reading *Fudge It All!* Check out the rest of the [Merry Fudgin’ Christmas](#) series of standalone romance short reads.

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Want some more holiday reads from yours truly? Check out [Peanut Brittle and the Prince](#). It may or may not be very much like the plot of the story the studio execs were discussing during Alexis’s pitch. ;)

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