



Hell
For the
Holidays

Holiday Novella Box Set



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MARIKA RAY

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DECK THE HALLS WITH BALLS



DESCRIPTION

When the drinks are flowing at the Christmas party, anything could happen. Especially in a little town called Hell.

Prescott

My night started in an expensive tuxedo, offering samples of my knock-you-on-your-ass home brewed kombucha beer to the good citizens of Auburn Hill, aka Hell, at the Jingle Ball. It ended with a naked ride on a mechanical bull with a sexy scientist screaming my name. I'm not sure how things devolved so quickly, but I may have to leave town under the cover of darkness now, which wouldn't be so bad if there wasn't major chemistry between nerd girl and me.

Jazzie

I felt every single molecule come alive when I drove that getaway car with Prescott by my side. Or maybe it was all those bad-boy tattoos that lit me up like a Christmas tree. All I know is I'll do whatever it takes to solve his booch chemistry problem and keep him in town. I have a sudden need for Prescott to deck my halls with his jingle balls all year long.

CHAPTER ONE

*P*rescott

I WAS SWEATING MORE than that one time I got caught replacing the cheerleaders' water bottles with hard cider at the homecoming game senior year. Had you seen the way Dr. Locke glared at students in his office, you would have understood my unhealthy level of perspiration. He'd been a mortician before becoming a high school principal. Genius, really. One meeting with him and you were so scared for your life you didn't step out of line. Different town, different decade, but here I was fucking things up again.

I'd even splurged on a tuxedo. Actually bought one like a card-carrying adult, never mind the fact that it was bright red. I'd only been in Auburn Hill, aka Hell, for four months and I knew how much this event meant to the citizens. The annual Jingle Ball, where the alcohol flowed, pockets opened, and all proceeds went to the Testicular Cancer Research Fund. Hell was small, but they prided themselves on producing the largest donation in all of Northern California.

My problem? I was the supplier of said alcohol at the Jingle Ball this year. The first step to getting attendees to throw caution to the wind and overbid on the auction items. Without the proper alcohol in place, the entire operation fell apart. And if I let down Hazel, the event planner of this whole shindig, I was afraid she'd cut my balls off and use them for science in that factory where she worked.

“Prescott!” Speak of the devil. Hazel materialized at my side and glared up at me, her eyes looking far crazier than my balls cared for.

I gulped and tugged on my shirt collar. Damn thing was trying to choke me. “Hey there, Hazel. Looking gorgeous as ever!” I gave her the smile, the one that softened every female I’d ever come across.

She poked me in the chest and cut off any further distraction attempts. “Why the hell are the cups of kombucha beer so damn small? We agreed on eight ounces. You’re passing around shot glasses like a Costco taste tester. We need people feeling good they got all dressed up for tonight, you understand me? A cheapskate dribble of beer in a red Solo cup ain’t gonna do it!”

Apparently the good female citizens of Hell were impervious to my charms. I’d have to try honesty, which quite frankly, made me shudder. What was the fun in that?

“This batch came out strong, Hazel. I can’t be handing out eight ounces or they’ll be drunker than those weird goats that do the yoga dealio just outside of town. Though I’m not sure if they’re drunk or just stoned,” I mused.

Hazel grabbed her headset and listened to something that made those brown eyes go code red. My balls beat a hasty retreat inside my body.

Her gaze came back to me, and she drilled me in the chest again with that finger. “I don’t care about your excuses, Prescott. Eight ounces or I will personally see to ruining your hooch business before it’s even up and running. We clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The salute was over the top, based on the way her face flushed and she looked ready to explode. But she did finally leave in a twirl of bright red ball gown like the tiny devil she was. I shifted to let the boys dangle freely now that danger had been averted.

Hazel’s anger must have been contagious as I was starting to feel a little hot under the collar myself. Everyone knew you couldn’t lower the alcohol content of a batch of beer by simply

watering it down. This batch had gone a little nuts, topping out over twenty percent alcohol. My normal batches of kombucha beer were hovering right around five percent, which would have been perfect for this event. A little alcohol to make them feel generous, but not enough to have them drooling in their starter salad.

I'd moved to Hell to start my new business, Kombrewcha, where land was a little cheaper and my sister, Penelope, assured me the politicians were letting in a lot of questionable businesses. If the mayor liked questionable, I was his guy. I swiped a hand across my forehead and scrambled for a solution to my little problem. If I ruined the ball, I doubted even the lenient mayor would look the other way.

The fermentation process took about five weeks. This kombucha beer I was serving tonight had been in the works for two months. I couldn't just scrap it and start over. I also couldn't figure out what the hell made it so much stronger than normal. I was an alcohol aficionado with a lazy penchant for entrepreneurialism, not a scientist with a degree in fermentation.

"If that stupid scientist had just called me back, I wouldn't be in this mess," I muttered, thinking back on the three long-winded messages I'd left for the head scientist over at the FART facility. Yeah, that's right. I did a double take too when I first heard the name for the facility in Auburn Hill. Technically, it was the Fragrance & Aroma Reformulation Testing facility, but that was quite a mouthful. Round here, we just called it FART. Naturally.

Large groups of citizens were still pouring inside the huge white tent in Bennett Park. They set all of us vendors up in large booths on the perimeter, leaving the center of the tent for the tables and chairs and china and crystal.

I rushed to top off the cups I had waiting, filled with a paltry half finger of Kombrewcha. I didn't go as much as eight ounces like Hazel demanded. Figured six would be a nice compromise. Maybe I could come up with a slogan about how you have to sip it, not slam it.

“Good afternoon, Mayor Bennett. Mrs. Bennet.” I nodded to the couple as they strolled by my booth, each grabbing a cup and sipping as they went. A trickle of sweat dripped down my spine. I needed to get on that slogan before anyone else took a cup.

Maybe Made for sipping; this isn’t a frat party. No, too offensive to frat partiers. They were my brothers in spirit. How about Sip that Kombrewcha, or the alcohol will getcha! Dammit. No, that was too preachy and questionable in the rhyming department. Sip, don’t slug or you’ll be sick as a bug. Okay, the slogans were getting worse. I was disappointed in myself. I could do better if there wasn’t so much pressure from a crazed Hazel.

“Kombrewcha. Hmm. Sounds familiar,” a quiet voice said from across my booth. I lifted my gaze, surprised to see a youthful woman dressed in a light blue dress that went to mid-calf, a sweater covering her shoulders. Despite the overly conservative garb, she was pretty. You know, if you liked the nerdy kind of girl. Which I didn’t, not because of how they looked, but because the smart girls always rolled their eyes at me, dismissing me as the idiot I was most of the time.

“Yep, we’re new in town. If you like to combine imbibing with your health goals, we’re your best bet. The health benefits of kombucha and the sanity-restoring characteristics of a beer.” A little long for a slogan, but it would do for now.

One eyebrow winged above her dark glasses, like she wasn’t quite convinced. Then her expression cleared, and she snapped her fingers. “Hey, are you that guy who called my office and left weird messages about bacteria taking over his lifelong dreams?”

I winced, knowing immediately who this woman was. I guess I’d gone a little overboard in my voicemail to the FART scientist, but in my defense, I panicked. If I’d known she was that young and inexperienced, I wouldn’t have sought her help. Not that she gave it to me anyway.

I felt my face heat and hated her for it. “No, sorry, that had to have been my ridiculous brother. I would never do

something like that.”

Her smile froze as if she were suspended in time, judging whether or not I was telling the truth. “Will I be taking my life in my hands by sampling the goods?”

Holy hell, bespectacled woman. She offered it up on a silver platter. I had to take the bait, the smirk second nature and uncontrollable. “Oh, you can sample the goods any time, sweetheart. I guarantee an orgasmic result.”

She didn’t blush like I’d hoped, or flirt with me back like I dreamed. Her upper lip trembled and for a brief second in time I thought she might cry, the guilt of being a jackass already building in my chest. But after a second of trembling, that lip climbed into a healthy sneer.

“How original,” she drawled. “I think I prefer your brother’s ramblings. At least he had a dose of respect in his tone.”

She snatched a cup off the table and walked away, tilting her slender neck back to swallow down a healthy gulp. I gulped too, but for different reasons. Be still my heart. The science nerd was hotter than Poppy, the mail deliverer, oversharing about her latest sex toy from The Hardware Store in town. Sounded like I had a fetish, but even old, overweight women were hot when they embraced their sexuality and I wouldn’t apologize for it.

I’d never gone for the conventional hot girls, anyway. I usually went for the women society labeled as clumsy, odd, had a screw loose, one fry short of a Happy Meal. The outcasts. Those unassuming, untapped vessels of hotness were my catnip.

And by swiping back at me, Nerdy Science Girl had just become my newest obsession.

CHAPTER TWO

Jazzie

THESE FUNCTIONS WERE STUPID. I'd rather just dig through my desk at home, find my dusty checkbook, and write out a zero or two to save some balls. I was all for testicular cancer research—those fragile fuckers were important—but I could do without the dressing up, socializing, and then sitting down to figure out which fork to use to shovel in the sorry excuse for serving sizes they offered at these things.

I stumbled, but caught myself, turning around to glare at the flat ground. Huh, I could have sworn there'd been a stumbling hazard. I glanced down at the Kombrewcha in my hand, seeing the white bottom of the cup instead of the faintly red brew I'd been sipping in a furious pace. My encounter with the owner had been even more annoying than this Jingle Ball. Maybe I should slow down on the wicked stuff.

“Jazzie!” a voice called out from behind me.

I spun and stumbled two steps to the left. Holy cannoli, the whole tent was spinning. Maybe this year's event would be fun after all. I saw Amelia Waldo approaching, her dress making me instantly envy her fit body and perfect curves.

“Hey, 'Melia,” I responded, wondering why that sounded funny to my ears.

Her smile turned to a frown as she put her hand on my arm. “You okay, girl? You seem a little...loose.”

I shook my head and immediately regretted it when the twenty-foot Christmas tree in the center of the tent went fuzzy around the edges. “Nah, I’m good. I was just about to get another drink before they call us in to our assigned seats.” I leaned in close, jumping back when my chin clipped her shoulder. “What are the odds Hazel will have seated me next to Grandma Yedda?”

Amelia winced and chuckled at the same time, an amazing feat for just one face. I went to applaud the effort, but found that damn Solo cup still in my hand. “Odds are high, young one. Yedda won’t rest until all legal adults are paired up and living their best love life.”

I groaned. “Definitely need more Komboo—Kaboomka—Ka—you know what, I’m calling it weird beer. Way easier to say, am I right?”

Amelia just laughed and pushed me toward the weird beer booth. I made it over there on rubber legs. A very small, unassuming voice in the back of my head tried to call out a warning. Not sure what she said. Honestly, the thing was too damn quiet for my own good. Ignoring the annoying man behind the table, I reached for another full cup of the red stuff.

“Oh, I’m sorry. We’re not giving out seconds.” His voice—the one that made me want to bare my teeth, not in anger or warning, but to nibble on his ridiculously muscled body—made me stop in my tracks.

“Say what now?” I jammed my hands on my hips, an empty plastic cup bouncing off my side and flying to the ground where it rolled under the table. “Where’d that thing come from?”

“Your hand?” Annoying Man offered dryly.

Huh. Guess I’d asked that question out loud.

“Precisely!” That also came out of my mouth, louder than I intended and making absolutely no sense.

His brow furrowed, and he tugged on the neck of his shirt. “Hey, you might want to keep it down,” he mumbled, gaze darting about the tent.

“Listen, Annoying Man, I want more weird beer, so hand it over. My invitation said open bar.” Ha! I knew I had him there. That one phrase was literally the only thing that had gotten me to put on this dress and come tonight. Well, that and the wrath of Hazel if I hadn’t shown up.

“It’s Prescott,” he said, that dang voice running through my veins, lighting fires everywhere.

“Pres-cott,” I tried the name on for size.

He shook his head once. “No. Prescott. Like biscuit.”

“Pres-COTT,” I said again, purposely mangling the pronunciation just to see that flash in his dark eyes again.

He scrubbed a hand over his eyes and those little fires turned into infernos when I saw the ink that covered the back of his hand, the design disappearing into his fancy shirt cuff. “You know what? Forget it. Doesn’t matter. Just go sit down and drink some water or something.”

“Hey, Prescott. Nice to see you again.” The voice to my left cut off my less-than-pleasant retort to being dismissed.

Lucille and Bain Sutter approached the weird beer booth arm in arm, looking like the perfectly in love couple they always did. Lucille gave me a hug while the men did some primitive back-slapping ritual.

“You look gorgeous, Jazzie,” Lucy said, putting her hands on my shoulders and giving me a once-over.

I genuinely liked Lucy, so I didn’t hold it against her that she made me feel short by doing that. I mean, I was short. Five foot four was considered average in America, yet everyone I knew my age was taller than me. By a lot.

“Thank you. So do you! How’s little Roxy?” There, that sounded normal. Maybe that weird beer had a short-lived aftereffect.

LUCY’S EYES sparkled like a proud mama. “She’s wonderful, but not so little anymore. I miss her being a tiny baby.”

I elbowed her gently. “Might be time to try for another, then, huh?”

Her face turned devious, and I saw how a woman like her could handle a hard-ass prison warden like Bain. “I may or may not have plans for that husband of mine tonight. We have a babysitter and Lenora ordered me some new handcuffs.”

I put out my hand for a high five. “Get that sperm, woman.” Again, probably a little too loud based on the way Bain and Prescott whipped their heads over to stare at us.

Lucy, God bless her, just giggled and high-fived me.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention?” Hazel’s voice flowed through the speakers set up at various intervals throughout the tent. “Welcome to our forty-second annual Auburn Hill Jingle Ball!” Everyone clapped and a few whistles joined in. “Let’s all start to take our seats so we can serve the first course. I’ll be back shortly to get the auction started.”

Lucy and Bain said their goodbyes before moving off to find their table. I took the distraction as a gift from the universe and snuck another cup of weird beer before Prescott noticed me. Hiding the cup in front of me, I wandered off to find my table. I finally found my name card at table twenty-six, not next to Yedda, but across from her. I’d have to heavily engage my seat mates in conversation to keep from getting dragged into her latest matchmaking scheme.

I sat down and sipped my beverage while I waited for the rest of the table to fill in. Having grown up in Auburn Hill, I would know everyone, of course. I didn’t know most people well, given my introverted nature, but I could participate in awkward small talk for an hour to two when forced. I nodded hello and voiced pleasantries about the unusually cold winter to each person who sat down. Unsurprisingly, we were all without a plus-one at this table. When Yedda joined us like a queen taking her throne seat, we all inhaled a collective breath to fortify ourselves.

Finally, only one seat remained empty on my left. Servers moved about the tent, depositing our salads in front of us and

whisking away to fulfill our drink orders. I'd asked for champagne, quite enjoying the fizzy nature of my weird beer and wanting more of it. Plus, fizzy rhymed with Jazzie. Kind of. Close enough.

A whiff of cologne had me turning my head to see a wall of red sitting down in the chair next to me. My insides went on a roller coaster of lust and intense dislike.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Oops. That rolled right through my brain and came out my mouth.

Prescott leaned over and whispered, "You've got quite a mouth on you, Jazzie Michaels."

I shivered, literally shivered at the sound of my name on his lips. "That's Professor Michaels to you and your brother," I snapped.

He winced, and I frowned. Surely my weak attempt at pushing him into a more professional space didn't affect him enough to cause his face to react. My first impression was that he seemed to be slicker than an oil spill, impervious to verbal jabs from an amateur.

He cleared his throat and looked away. "I don't actually have a brother."

It took more time than I'd like to admit due to the weird beer consumption, but I finally put two and two together. The big, handsome devil with the tattoo addiction currently causing a situation in my lower region had lied to me.

"Your pants are on fire." I snickered when he looked down at his lap in confusion. His head popped back up with a sheepish grin.

"Wanna put out the fire, Professor Michaels?" A sexy wink had me squirming in my seat. That was more the response I expected from Mr. Annoying Man and Quite Handsome.

Listen, I was introverted and a bit of a science nerd, but I was not unfamiliar with the ways of the human body when it came to sex. I'd had sex exactly two and a half times. I counted the half because it involved fellatio but no penetration. The way I figured it, oral sex should count in my

tally, but not as a whole sexual experience. My stats proved I wasn't opposed to sex for the purpose of releasing tension. Perhaps if I put my moves on Mr. Flirty over here, he'd take me home tonight and release the valve of bottled-up pressure that had been building for two years. Ever since that half an experience left me with an itch I couldn't scratch.

I stabbed at my salad and took a bite, mulling over the lines I could throw out there to get this flirt ball rolling. My greatest hope lay in letting him take over with things once I got it going. He seemed far superior to me in the one-night-stand department.

“So, what made you move to Hell?” I asked Prescott after I swallowed.

He took a sip of water and answered me, “My sister lives here already and she said Auburn Hill would be a good place to start my new business.”

I shoved another bite in my mouth. The dressing was remarkably tasty, though I didn't care for the pieces of weeds they threw in salads at these fancy things. What's wrong with a dependable heart of romaine salad? Or heaven forbid, a little iceberg in there for eatability? I suddenly knew how bunnies felt, chewing forever and still being hungry.

I dabbed the napkin to my mouth and gave up on the salad, incredible dressing or not. “So, is this when you tell me you don't actually have a sister?”

His mouth hitched up on one side. “No, I do actually have a sister. Penelope Fines.”

It was at that inopportune moment that I took a sip of the weird beer to wash away the weed aftertaste. The fizzy liquid made a quick escape out my nasal passages, leaving a significant burn in their wake. My eyes watered and I tried to cover the choking with a cough and a swallow. Dear God, he was related to Penelope?

“You okay?” Prescott leaned over, his dark eyes assessing whether or not I needed the Heimlich maneuver.

I waved a hand in the air to let him know I was okay, delighting in the cool breeze that hit my red cheeks. “I’m good,” I choked out.

Prescott reached over and whacked me on the back, startling me so badly I lurched forward, my breasts hitting the place setting in front of me and rattling the whole table. All eyes went in my direction as everyone rushed to steady their drinks. I pasted on a smile and eventually they all went back to their weed salad, though Yedda kept glancing between Prescott and me, a dangerous sign.

I glared at Prescott as I got my breathing back on track. “I said I was fine,” I hissed, not daring to look at him. “What the hell is in that weird beer, anyway?”

Prescott stiffened in his chair, the flirty vibe gone in an instant. I did look over then, seeing him shift uncomfortably while he looked out over the crowd. His face swung in my direction and I lurched back at the fear in his eyes.

“That’s why I called you,” he ground out, teeth clenched. And I didn’t think he wanted to nibble on me. “Something went wrong with this batch, and because it takes months to make, I didn’t have time to start over again.”

I leaned in closer, his cologne reminding me of something or someone, and I desperately needed to inhale it some more. “What do you mean something went wrong?”

Our noses were now just a few inches apart. The man had full-on diva lashes. Did he put something on them to make them grow like that? Or was this just another set of fabu-lashes wasted on a man who didn’t care about them?

“I don’t know!” he exploded in a hiss, his hot breath hitting me in the forehead. “That’s why I needed your help. Do I look like some kind of bacteria genius?”

I assessed him, happy to have the chance to give his red tuxedo-clad body a once-over. “Nope. You look like a guy who wants to take me home tonight so I can play with your jingle balls.”

Holy hotcakes! I said it. I got the flirt ball rolling, people. I amazed even myself. Time stood still as I waited for him to give me the green light.

Prescott leaned even closer, and I prepared for the inevitable kiss from those pouty lips of his. My eyelids fluttered shut, and I felt him approaching. This was it. The fairy-tale moment when I came to an event single and left with the hot, tattooed bad boy new in town. Twenty-nine years old and my moment had arrived.

A whack to my forehead had my eyes flying open. Prescott had his palm against my head, his expression all scrunched up, examining my face.

“How much of the Kombrewcha did you drink?” he asked in alarm.

Were we playing twenty questions first? “How much did you drink?” I asked petulantly. I wanted to make out, not quiz each other on our imbibing habits.

“Jesus H. Christ. This is a disaster,” Prescott muttered, his sweaty palm leaving my forehead.

A loud clunk, followed by a crash and a high-pitched scream, had our heads turning to table twenty-one.

“Shit. The jingle balls have hit the fan,” Prescott said aloud.

CHAPTER THREE

*P*rescott

THINGS HAD GONE from bad to worse. Science-girl had—dare I even say it?—flirted with me in the most bizarre manner I’d ever encountered, and then the Kombrewcha casualties rolled in.

Some guy at another table had pitched headfirst into his salad, unable to stay upright. I stood so quickly my chair tipped over. While everyone rushed over and called 9-1-1, I knew it wasn’t a heart attack. He had a red Solo cup in front of his place setting. Empty.

I snapped my fingers at a passing server. “Get the coffee flowing at all the tables. Right now!”

The poor waiter hustled off, tossing glances at me over his shoulder like he wondered who the stranger was giving him orders. I just hoped he listened and got coffee to these poor inebriated citizens of Hell. Hazel joined the circle of people around the poor guy, ordering everyone to step back and give him some breathing room. The only response was a hefty snore while he slept peacefully on the makeshift wood floor of the Jingle Ball.

Another scuffle on the other side of the tent, and a lone woman singing happy birthday in a questionable singing voice, caused us all to head in that direction next. A young woman stood on top of the banquet table serenading her husband, including a booty shimmy in a manner that was too

good to be unrehearsed. The husband sat there, red faced, urging his wife to get off the table before she hurt herself.

Hazel charged to the front of the spectators and snapped her fingers for the servers to get the woman down. Then she whipped around and speared me with a gleam in her eye that had me inching backward. She pushed people out of the way like a charging rhinoceros if they had to get through a crowd of people to kill their prey.

I turned and ran, honest to God, fearing for my life. I flew out the entrance flap of the giant tent, the cold of early December hitting me in the face and spurring me on to move faster. I had long legs, and back in the day, I was a good runner. A few too many beer samples had slowed me down a bit, but for the most part, I still had it. I got two steps away from the tent when an enormous baby blue 1970s Cadillac swooped to the curb outside Bennett Park, bouncing as it hit the brakes.

“Get in Pres-COTT!”

I ran straight for it, some part of my brain wondering what the hell Jazzie was doing hanging out the driver’s side window of an old boat of a car yelling for me to get in like we were Bonnie and Clyde in the middle of a bank robbery gone bad. I’d answer that question later, when I knew my balls weren’t on the auctioning block by a pissed-off Hazel Redding.

Sliding my hand over the hood, I yanked the passenger side door handle. The damn thing wouldn’t budge.

“Hey! You get back here and fix this, you alcohol agitator!” Hazel came racing out the tent, surprisingly fast on that high of a heel.

Damn, women were amazing creatures. But now wasn’t the time to marvel at the better sex. I had two balls who wouldn’t be staying at my first Jingle Ball.

I grinned, doing what every boy dreams of doing. I dove headfirst into the open window like a Dukes of Hazard badass, my hands landing on warm, wet flesh, my nose clipping the gear shift, and my junk narrowly missing the doorframe.

Somehow that kind of landing never happened on the television show. Jazzie shifted into drive, hitting my nose a second time, and took off, tires squealing. My legs hung out the window, and I lost a shoe before I could twist in the seat and sit upright.

“Holy shit!” Jazzie yelled as she took a corner way too fast for a car this long.

Looking out the window as I tried to grab the seat belt, I saw the park whizzing by. Twisting, I discovered there was no seat belt in this damn car, so I gave up and turned my attention to Jazzie. She was soaked. Her hair hung down in wet tendrils and her glasses had water spots.

“You can slow down now, Danica.” I couldn’t help the smile that tugged on my face. I should be ashamed of myself. Or even just worried about my longevity in this town after tonight’s stunt. But I couldn’t seem to focus on any of that when Jazzie gripped the steering wheel with one hand and shoved her glasses up her nose with the other. My little crush grew bigger. And so did my cock.

“How’d you know I needed rescuing?” I asked.

Jazzie lifted a shoulder, her little sweater shrugging off. The exposed creamy skin tempted me. Yep, I’d truly lost it. I was getting hot and bothered over a bare shoulder.

“I didn’t. Yedda walked right up to me when you left the table and tossed a glass of ice water in my face. Sobered me right up, I’ll tell you that much. Then she handed me her car keys and said to go pull the Caddy around and that you’d be needing it any moment now.” She shrugged again, and I bit my lip to keep my hand away from her. “Guess she was right.”

I shook my head slowly, absolutely delighted with the craziness of Auburn Hill. I couldn’t get kicked out of town or socially ostracized from ruining the Jingle Ball. These were my kind of people. I belonged here.

“So where to now?” I asked, in a bit of a daze.

Jazzie slowed down finally and the wind whipping through the open windows wasn’t so icy. I glanced at her arms where I

saw goose bumps marring that white creamy skin. She must be freezing in a wet dress, with wet hair to boot. My cock twitched, reminding me the night didn't have to end just yet. She did offer to play with my jingle balls, didn't she?

“Want to head to my place and grab some dry clothes? I'm just down this next street,” I offered, my tone light despite the ache in my gut. I hadn't been with a woman in six months and I hadn't even taken matters into my own hands. I had a backlog that needed unjamming, and Jazzie was the perfect woman for the job. She was a scientist, for Christ's sake. She seemed like a weirdo in the opposite way I was a weirdo. Sex between us could be explosive. Or horrible. Probably no in-between. But I was willing to give it a go, being an adventurer and all that.

“Sure,” she answered, her tone equally light, her eyes trained on the road in front of us.

I gave her directions until she pulled the blue beast into my driveway, the back of the car scraping on the curb. I was renting a little house close to downtown as I intended to set up a shop there once my inventory multiplied. That dream might be dead in the water after tonight, but I'd deal with that tomorrow. Right now, I had a wet woman coming back to my place after rescuing my ass, and the possibility for sex trumped everything else. I'd made that rule years ago, and I was sticking by it.

The car door wouldn't budge again, so I had to climb out the window, not nearly as cool and coordinated exiting as it was getting in. Jazzie smothered a laugh as she watched me, an eyebrow lifting as I walked toward her, down one shoe.

“Did the clock strike midnight, Cinderella?” she asked right before a delicate little snort escaped.

I loved a woman who laughed at her own jokes. “All battles have casualties, madam.” I tipped an imaginary hat to her, and she smiled, biting her lip. I hustled to the front door, getting it open and sweeping my hand for her to enter before me. I wrinkled my nose as she passed, trying to remember if I left any dirty clothes out before I lugged my vat of

Kombrewcha to the Jingle Ball. I wasn't known as the tidiest bachelor in the world, so sue me.

Jazzie glanced around my pad, her glasses continuing to slide down her nose. She should look like a wet rat, but I couldn't seem to take my eyes off her soaked dress. The material was plastered to her, highlighting tight nipples standing at attention atop perfect breasts. As a connoisseur of tits, I'd say they were C-cups, the ideal size to fit in my hands. She shivered, and I blinked those thoughts away. I wouldn't get a chance to squeeze them if she froze to death.

"Here, let's get some dry clothes for you." I stepped toward her and put my hand on her low back, steering her through the living room with the intent on hitting my bedroom for a pair of sweats.

She came to an abrupt halt in the living room, her intake of air sounding more incredulous than appalled. "What the hell are you doing with a mechanical bull in your house?"

I shrugged, like it was as common as a coffee table. "I bought it from a bar that went under a year ago. I plan to use it in my Kombrewcha bar. It's the perfect blend of debauchery and exercise, just like my brew is the perfect blend of alcohol and health."

Jazzie swung her gaze over to me, her lips still parted. She didn't have those fake puffy lips all the women were paying for these days, but they were no less tantalizing.

"That's—well, that's an amazing idea that holds some merit," she finally said.

I bowed. "Why thank you for your vote of confidence. I may have jacked up the Jingle Ball brew, but I do have a brilliant idea here and there." I clapped my hands and got back on track. "Now, how about some dry clothes?"

She smiled, following me as we entered my bedroom. I found a pair of sweats that didn't have holes in them and an old Christmas sweater I'd worn to a party a few years back. Jazzie took one look at the humping reindeer conga line with a keg of beer at their hooves and stepped into my bathroom to

put it on without a word. Damn, each second I spent with her, I liked her even more. Based on her demure dress and sweater—and yeah, the glasses and the science degree—I thought she'd be boring with a capital B. Turn her nose up at everything. Find me lacking in every which way. And yet...tonight had been the best night I'd had in a very long time.

Even though I probably killed my fledgling business before it was up and running.

The door opened and Jazzie came out, dressed head to toe in my clothes, a sight that had my cock twitching again. Total caveman mentality, but damn, I liked her in my shit.

“Why don't we get something to drink and celebrate our incredible escape from Hazel's angry clutches?” I held my hand out to her and she took it, the slide of her palm against mine shifting something in my chest.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jazzie

“WE MIGHT NEED to get some ice for your nose. It looks kind of swollen,” I said, looking at Prescott’s face.

He’d taken off his suit coat and only remaining shoe, and then unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the top of another tattoo that I hoped climbed all over his torso. The man was incredibly handsome, a total goofball, and everything I never thought I could be attracted to. My previous partners had been fellow scientists, the kind that understood how my brain worked and just made sense to me. Prescott made zero sense, and like a train wreck, I couldn’t seem to look away.

He led us back through the living room, where I eyed the bull with both skepticism and intrigue. I’d never ridden one, had never even wanted to ride one, and yet there it sat, tempting me with its fake leather saddle and headless presence.

He let go of my hand when we entered the kitchen, swinging open the fridge and handing me a longneck bottle of beer. “Hope beer’s okay. Pretty much all I have on hand.”

I looked at the label and then back at him, agape. “You’re a weird beer traitor!”

He smiled full out, his face transforming from handsome to downright blinding with a beauty I couldn’t look at without

squinting. He slung an arm over my shoulder and pulled me into the living room.

“My obsession started with beer and then moved into Kombrewcha—not ‘weird beer’ by the way. You can’t really expect me to turn my back on my first love, do you?” He hit a light switch and a pitiful Charlie Brown Christmas tree in the corner of the living room lit up with exactly one string of bulbs.

“Wow, you really went all out with the Christmas decorations,” I said dryly, not seeing any other signs around his house that the holiday was just a week away. “I have questions.”

Prescott gestured to a mishmash of pillows on the floor, sitting down and pulling me down next to him. “I have answers,” he said with a wink.

My cheeks heated, and I groaned inside my head. No reason to blush over a wink. I literally already told him I wanted to fondle his balls. Now that was a reason to blush.

“First, why do you have a mechanical bull secured to your living room floor, but no couch or chairs? Second, how is pinched-nose Penelope Fines your sister and you’re so...you? And thirdly, does the bull work or just for show?”

Prescott took a sip of his beer, his Adam’s apple working in this throat. I held my breath, wanting desperately to trace my finger down his neck and into his shirt, peeking below to see the design of the multicolored tattoo. He answered me, his deep voice jolting me from my daydream.

“I don’t have a lot of people over, so no need for a couch. Besides, I’m usually out on the back deck, tending to my brew, so I don’t sit around that much. Second, there’s a ten-year age gap between my sister and me, and we have different fathers. Thirdly, why not try it out and see? I dare you.” His eyes glittered in the light from the Christmas tree.

Whatever madness pulsed through his veins skipped hosts and made itself comfortable in my chest. “One hasn’t lived unless they’ve ridden a bull, right?” I said without thinking

about it too much. Thinking would only mean I'd come up with a list of twenty reasons not to do it.

Prescott took my beer and set it on the floor next to his. He stood, taking my hands to help me up, pulling me into his body. Dear God, I'd only had a sip of the beer and I was lightheaded, feeling every single muscle pressing against me. Locking his gaze with mine, he reached down and lifted me up. I would have gasped, but I'd lost normal bodily function the second I saw Prescott at the Jingle Ball. My legs wrapped around his waist and I could feel his thick erection pressing against the thin cotton of my pants. Definitely should have kept my wet underwear on, just one extra layer to help me keep my sanity.

Prescott swung around and deposited me on the bull, the rough slap of the leather against my unsuspecting backside jolting me from his erection's spell.

"Swing your leg over," he instructed. "And let go of my arms, sweetheart. Just grab the padded strap with one hand and get yourself seated."

But I didn't want to let go of his arms.

"I know you don't, but you can't ride the bull like this," Prescott said, a smirk on his sexy lips.

I guess I was saying all my thoughts out loud now. That's great. I'd be fired on Monday. One couldn't work at the FART facility testing odors without having a snarky thought or two. Still, I didn't let go of his arms. I was frozen, half on, half off the bull, stuck between wanting to live a little and wanting to live a little in Prescott's arms.

He made an exasperated noise and then climbed on behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and fulfilling both my desires. He leaned forward, and I went with him, wondering if you had to ride a bull like I rode a bike when I wanted to be more aerodynamic. He slapped the bull under his neck, if the poor thing had had a neck, and the beast between my thighs began to move and a Christmas song by Mannheim Steamroller belted out from speakers hidden somewhere in the room.

Deck the Halls was a jaunty tune normally, yet such a weird song to have going when riding a mechanical bull. I burst out laughing, the laugh turning into a whoop as the beast shifted. Prescott shifted behind me, his arms holding me tighter, his cologne mixing with the joy I felt in that moment, to be forever etched in my memory. The bull sped up and Deck the Halls sped up with it, sounding like the band took speed before a concert.

I hung on to that padded strap like I had a solid gold belt buckle to win, never one to give up too easily. The speed increased again, the shift of the bull feeling like it was trying to buck us off now instead of just moving around. For one terrifying second, Prescott and I lurched to the right as a unit, the weight of us almost tearing my hand from the strap. The bull violently shifted left, and we stayed on. My laughter turned to delighted shrieks. But it was only a tease, because the next change in direction had us flying off the bull and landing in a heap on the carpeted floor.

“Ooh,” I moaned, the breath knocked out of me on impact.

I fluttered my eyes open and looked down at Prescott. No wonder I wasn't seriously hurt. I'd landed on top of him.

“Prescott? You okay?” I asked in alarm, trying to climb up his body to his face, when I probably should have just climbed off where I wouldn't do more harm. But hello, muscles.

His eyes blinked open, and I held my breath. The song switched to Jingle Bell Rock, back at a normal speed. Prescott lifted his head, his nose brushing mine, then his head dropped like a rock on the carpet. He burst out laughing and I heaved out my held breath as I rocked on top of him.

I went to push off, relieved he was fine, but he held me close, laughter cutting off as he rolled us over with a speed not even the mechanical bull could replicate. I looked up at him, even happier to have him above me, even if we were now partially underneath the mechanical bull. My legs parted and his hips settled there like they'd found a new home.

His smile was still in place, but his eyes held something else. Something deeper and more serious than I'd seen all

night. He paused there, poised above me, the dangle of the bull's balls right above his head in some twisted form of mistletoe. Then his head dropped, and his lips pressed to mine. My heart stopped and restarted again when I felt his tongue dance across the seam of my mouth. I opened for him, tasting the beer, the weird beer, and something uniquely Prescott.

"I want you, Jazzie," he muttered between kisses, his hands everywhere all at once.

My hips shamelessly ground up against his, seeking the slide of him against me, the ten-inch proof that a man this handsome desired a nerdy scientist like me.

"Me too, me too," I mumbled back, wanting him more than I wanted to find the cure for infertility, or cancer, or anything bigger than just a one-night stand with Penelope Fines' brother with a bull's balls swinging above my head like a metronome.

A quick tug here and a wrench there and before I could properly document all the sensations coursing through my body, we were naked. Skin to skin. Hot flesh with a dusting of coarse hair pressed against my soft white skin, lighting me up to a fevered pitch. His tattoos were massive, extending over every inch of available skin, the designs morphing into one huge canvas of muscled man. I think he impregnated me with just a glance at his ink.

"Protection!" I blurted out, causing Prescott to lurch back, knocking his head against the balls and making them swing maniacally. Like a pro boxer, he dodged them, pulling me away from that sight that couldn't be unseen.

"Sorry about that," he muttered, reaching for his pants on the floor, fumbling with his wallet, and coming back to me with a condom in hand.

He slid the condom on while I adjusted my glasses to get a better look.

What?

It was for scientific purposes only, I assure you. I'd just never seen one that long and girthy at the same time. If I'd had

my phone on me, I would have taken a picture just to examine it all over again later, the proof I needed to believe my ten-inch hypothesis.

Prescott pushed me back down, his knee parting my thighs wider, his gaze almost frantic in the way it raked up and down my body.

“You’re freaking gorgeous,” he said through a clenched jaw.

“You don’t need to butter me up. I’m already willing,” I informed him.

He stilled, that gaze turning into an inferno. “I don’t want you willing, Jazzie. I want you begging for it.”

My breath caught and a thousand things I’d be willing to barter with flew through my head. I’d be the best goddamn beggar in the history of begging beggars if that’s what it took to ride this tattooed bull.

“Yes, please,” I sputtered.

He shook his head, and I wanted to crawl in a hole for disappointing him. Who had I become and where did Jazzie Michaels go? He slid down my body, and I pouted. Literally turned my bottom lip out like a two-year-old and pouted.

“Not good enough,” he said, right before he face-planted between my thighs and licked his way into my heart like a drunk thief. A girl couldn’t survive fellatio that spectacular without growing a slight attachment.

The song from the speakers switched to O Come All Ye Faithful and like a good girl, I came. Over and over and then some more when he didn’t let up. My body convulsed violently, and I could have sworn I saw Santa’s reindeer flying through the room by the time Prescott climbed up my torso.

“Please, Prescott, please” I chanted, the words not even making sense to my own ears. I just knew I wanted. Something. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but my girly parts did as he slid inside, waiting patiently for me to adjust to him.

“That’s. More. Like. It,” he gritted out between clenched teeth. A sheen of sweat dotted his forehead as he held himself back.

O holy night, my insides were on fire, and I was full. Deliciously so. I bucked my hips, and he slid an inch further until I felt what I hoped were Prescott’s jingle balls and not the bull’s slap my sensitive flesh. Which gave me what seemed like a brilliant idea.

“Let’s do it on the bull!” I sang triumphantly, running my hands through Prescott’s thick, dark hair.

He blinked. “On the bull?”

I nodded, suddenly energized after the first orgasm. Maybe there was something to the health benefits of kombucha after all. I’d never felt this good before.

He paused, but then pulled out with a grimace, standing and reaching down to pull me up. My head only hit mid chest and boy, did I like that tattoo of a crown between his pec muscles. He climbed on the bull and then yanked me up to straddle him.

“If I get a staph infection, I’m going to make you clean it and bandage it,” he said as he lifted my hips to line us up.

I grabbed his shoulders and grimaced as the image came to mind. “Eww,” I muttered right as he let my body sink down on his lap, taking all ten inches. “Ooh.”

With his feet in the stirrups, Prescott could thrust up into me as I held on and bounced. A giggle escaped as I watched him try to catch my nipple in his mouth, a split second too late each time. I took mercy on him and pried one hand off his shoulder to hold my breast to his face. He sucked eagerly, a dart of fire heading straight to my lady parts. It wasn’t long before I felt that familiar pull, the one that wanted to suck me under and send me shooting for the stars.

“Oh God,” I yelled. “Keep going.”

Prescott thrust harder, and we lurched to the side, the bull starting to move.

“Oh no,” I cried, chasing that orgasm and not really in the mood for a bull ride on top of the ride I was already taking.

“Shit!” Prescott kept one hand on my hip and the other held on tight to the padded strap. The cords in his neck strained, and I watched the tattoos ripple like they’d come alive with each muscle in his body fully engaged.

The bull leaned left, then right, and then bucked, sending me right over the edge with the exaggerated mechanical thrust. Prescott must have been right there with me as I heard him grunt in my ear, followed by a shudder. My eyes squeezed shut as I clutched on to him and rode out the best orgasm I’d ever had. The third time really was the charm. Or should I say three and a half?

The bull lurched left again, oblivious to our pleasure, and we both slid off with a mangled scream. We made the trip a second time in one night, lying in a heap of limbs on the floor. I panted, not feeling a damn thing but bliss. If I had a broken bone, it would just have to wait. I would ride this high till the cows came home.

CHAPTER FIVE

*P*rescott

THE NEXT DAY DAWNED BRIGHT, despite the chill in the air. I had a certain blonde wrapped around my body, a faint snore letting me know she was recovering from our night activities. I guess what they said was true: the nerdy, quiet ones are actually the crazy ones. I'd never had a night like that. We didn't get to sleep in my bed until dawn showed up. The silver lining to all that incredible sex being I was too exhausted to lie there and fret over my future in Auburn Hill.

I was awake now though, the churn in my stomach letting me know I had some unfinished business to take care of. Previously, I would have been bummed to have to leave Auburn Hill to set up shop somewhere else, simply because it would have been a pain to move. But now? Now I had a hot scientist who blew my mind—among other body parts—and I wanted to stay in town for personal reasons.

Who knew where she and I were headed, but I wanted the freedom to explore something with her beyond our Bonnie and Clyde adventure of last night. She shifted, her hair dragging across my chest as she rolled onto her back.

“Did I ride a bull last night?” Her voice came out like a frog was strangling her.

I froze, staring up at my ceiling fan. Did she not remember anything? She'd acted pretty damn sober by the time we got to my house. Oh shit.

“Kidding!” She sat up in bed like a possessed kid in a horror flick, tossing back the covers and straddling me before I figured out how to approach the subject of last night.

She looked damn good first thing in the morning, her blue eyes sparkling without her glasses to block their beauty, her hair a sexy halo mess around her face. My dick took notice too, and though he had some sore muscles this morning, he was valiantly attempting to rise to the occasion.

“Got time for breakfast before I find out if I’ve been blackballed in Auburn Hill?” I asked, my hands exploring all the tantalizing pale flesh in front of me.

“How about you spend another half hour in bed with me, and then I’ll make you my special pancakes?” She bit her lip, and my answer was an instant yes.

“Is ‘special pancakes’ a code word for something else or actual pancakes?” One could never tell with this woman.

She giggled and then kissed her way down my torso, where I soon forgot about breakfast, Kombrewcha, or even my first name. All I knew was Jazzie Michaels and her wicked mouth.



“CALL ME LATER?” Jazzie asked quietly, a stark contrast to the bubbly woman I’d spent the morning with. She was heading home to shower while I dealt with the fallout of my Jingle Ball performance. The mood between us felt like the clock had struck midnight and our magical night was over. I didn’t believe in fairy tales and I didn’t believe for a second that Jazzie and I were over.

I leaned into the window of the baby blue Cadillac to push her glasses back up her nose. “I’ll be counting down the minutes until I hear your voice, sweetheart.” I kissed her,

thinking maybe I could deal with Hazel and the mayor later. Going home with Jazzie was a much better idea.

Pulling back to float that plan out there, her lips lifted into a brilliant smile. “Go get your business stuff done and then come over. I don’t have to be at work until eight tomorrow. So many things we can do...”

She bit her lip, and I had to adjust myself. Right. Work, then play.

“Get out of here before I pull you out and spread you across this enormous hood.” I rapped my knuckles on the top of the car.

She squealed and then blew me a kiss, pulling away from the curb and heading home. The car backfired two houses down and I nearly went down to the ground, thinking there was a drive-by shooting. I rubbed my chest. Not enough sleep last night to deal with everything going on in my life.

Heading back inside, I grabbed my phone, wallet, and car keys. I’d walk to Coffee and grab breakfast for Hazel, then get my truck back from the curb outside the park where I’d left it last night. Then I’d bribe Hazel with everything I had. Depending on how that went, I’d hit up the mayor next. The plan relied on a lot of luck and the magic of pastries and caffeine, but I had little else to offer.

Half an hour later, I knocked on Hazel’s door, a newly constructed home with a grand entrance. Maybe one day I’d have the resources to own something similar. The door whipped open and Hazel stood there, one eye closed and the other squinting at me like she’d had a rough night.

“Oh, it’s you,” she muttered. Then she slammed the door shut in my face.

Shit, this wasn’t going well at all. I hadn’t even given her the donuts fresh from Coffee. I waited a minute, and when she didn’t open the door back up, I turned, deciding I’d need a plan B.

“You better have chocolate glazed.” Hazel’s voice came from behind me.

I spun around and there she was, a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. Both eyes open. I smiled widely and approached cautiously.

“I got two chocolate glazed,” I sang, handing the bag to her and following her into the house.

She shoved one in her mouth, half the donut disappearing in one bite before we even hit the kitchen. I was impressed. And while her mouth was occupied, I got busy apologizing.

“I’m so sorry about last night, Hazel. The batch came out way too strong. I tried to fix it, but there wasn’t time to make a whole new batch. I figured small shot glasses of it would solve the—”

“Shup up,” she said around the donut. She lifted her index finger, swallowed, and continued. “By the time you left, and I came back inside the tent, the servers had the coffee going to each table. By dessert, everyone was at least sober enough to bid on the auctions.”

Her eyes danced, and the first trickle of relief came flooding in. Maybe she wasn’t going to kill me.

“We made more money this year than ever before,” she announced, shoving the rest of the donut in her mouth.

My mouth dropped open, and I went to give her a celebratory hug. She darted out of my embrace, and my arms dropped. Okay, I wasn’t in trouble, but we weren’t exactly friendly yet. I could take that.

“I’m so relieved to hear that. Congratulations, Hazel. You put on a killer event.” I gave her two finger pistols instead of a hug and I could have sworn I saw a smile tugging on her face. “Here’s a coffee too. Now I’m off to the mayor.”

I handed her the coffee and tried to collect the rest of the donuts. She clasped the brown paper bag to her chest with an exaggerated pout. I guessed I’d have to stop by Coffee again. I sighed, but wasn’t annoyed. She forgave me and I hadn’t ruined the Jingle Ball. Things were turning out pretty perfect.

The mayor’s office had a cluster of old guys milling about. The second I entered with a bag of donuts, they were on me

like flies on shit. Mayor Bennett didn't even get one by the time he made it over to me.

“Boy, I got a spring in my step I haven't had for years! That booch really cleaned me out this morning, if you know what I mean.” A guy in denim overalls and ruddy cheeks elbowed me in the side.

The visual was a little much so early on a Sunday morning, but I attempted a smile. “Glad to hear it.”

“Now the wife will let me drink without nagging me about my cholesterol. Did you know that kom-boo-cha stuff can help clean out your arteries?” A guy no younger than eighty whacked me on the back and almost made me spill the no-foam, extra-caramel-drizzle, skinny, almond milk latte I'd gotten the mayor.

“I see you've made some devoted fans already, Prescott.” Mayor Bennett stepped in front of me and pinned me with a steely gaze.

I held out the latte like a peace treaty. He took it, taking the first swig and smacking his lips. “Any man who memorizes my favorite coffee is okay in my book. Consider your shop approved.”

My heart nearly pounded right out of my rib cage to dance around with the old men shooting the shit before the regular Sunday church service started. I'd done it. It hadn't been smooth; it hadn't been easy, but I'd made a home for myself and my business in Auburn Hill.

“Thank you so much, Mayor,” I gushed, sticking my hand out and shaking his a bit too vigorously.

I stayed a while longer to chat with the locals, my fellow citizens, before racing home to grab a mason jar of the batch from last night. With a little sweet-talking of my sexy scientist, I was hoping to have her take a look at it and brainstorm what went wrong. My booch business would be top-notch, the best in the surrounding counties, and for that, I needed to get the alcohol content nailed.

Jazzie's apartment complex was quiet and small with towering pine trees dotting the common areas, making the place feel private. I rang her doorbell and tried to get ahold of myself. I'd never felt this much of a frenzy to see a woman before. And it wasn't just the sex. I mean, hell yeah, I wanted more of it, but I also just wanted to get to know her. Her brain was a fascinating machine.

The door swung open and there she was, an oversized sweatshirt and yoga pants on, her hair piled on top of her head with a pencil shoved in it to hold it in place. Her glasses slid down her nose as she gave me a glance-over and then stepped back to let me in, a secret smile creeping into place.

"I think I like you even better in a Henley and jeans, Pres-COTT," she quipped, shutting the door and leaning back against it.

I put the Kombrewcha down on the nearest table and walked back to her, my heart rate speeding up with each step that brought me closer. I stopped toe to toe with her, not touching any part of her body. She was breathing hard, her eyes already dilating with the same lust I felt.

"I need your brain first, then your body. And not just for today. For as long as you'll let me stick around," I stated calmly, even though I felt anything but, putting my heart on the line.

Her face went slack, and I had a flashback to how she looked as she rode me on the bull. "That might be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me." Then her eyes filled with tears, and I couldn't help myself.

I pulled her into my arms, her head buried in my chest. She was so small. A fireball of wit and feistiness and so much knowledge all jammed into a tiny package. An overwhelming sense of wanting to protect her at all costs made me clench my hands into fists.

"I'm going to science the shit out of your weird beer and then I'm going to jingle your balls again. Like jingle all the way into next year. Got a problem with that?" Her words muffled against my chest.

“No problem whatsoever. As long as I can deck your halls,” I quipped back, my cock already stirring just feeling her pressed against me.

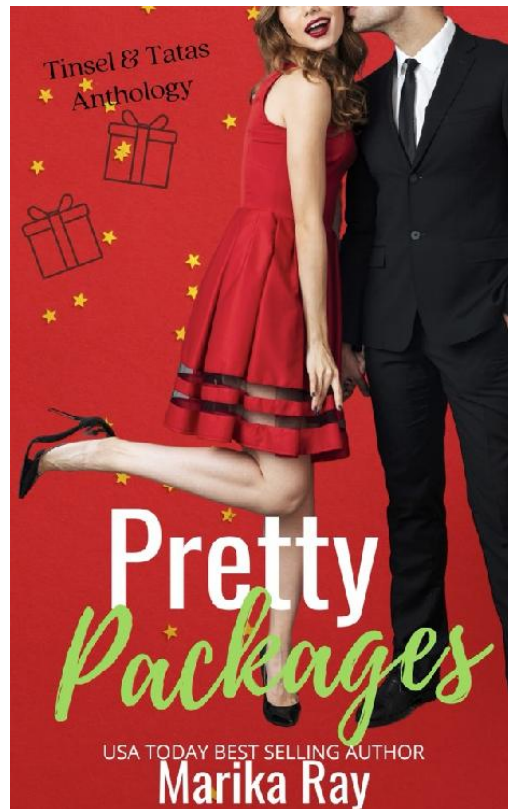
She snorted at my ridiculous attempt at a Christmas joke. I felt giddy, my veins on fire for the successful woman who could do so much better than me.

“All I want for Christmas is you?” I teased. “Frosty the snowman wants a sleigh ride? Want to ride my red-nosed—”

“Stop!” she yelled, pulling her head back and laughing. “Just shut up and kiss me, Mr. Annoying Man.”

So I did.

PRETTY PACKAGES



DESCRIPTION

As a mail carrier in the tiny town of Auburn Hill, I was used to delivering holiday packages every December, but I got a surprise this year when I was tasked with showing the boss's beautiful granddaughter around town. A couple dates and a Tinsel & Tatas Fundraiser later, I think I've found my future Mrs. Claus. Liv may be trying to hide her scars from the world, but I'm convinced her's is the prettiest package of all.

CHAPTER ONE

James

A POPPY-SHAPED SHADOW fell across the table where I was sorting the oversized packages. I pulled the Metallica blaring earbuds out and spun around before she tried to sneak up on me again. That woman was enough to cause a young man to sink to the floor of heart trouble. She only got the drop on me twice before I started being hyperaware of my surroundings.

“Jimmy!” she hollered, even though we were only two feet apart, the only people in the post office this early. The first customer would come in a little after eight, but for now, it was just us and the mail from all over the world come to our tiny town of Auburn Hill.

“Morning, Poppy.” I gestured to her head. “I like the pink.”

Poppy got that coy smile she got whenever she talked to a male, fluffing her short hair currently dyed bright pink. “Well, we got Tinsel & Tatas next week, you know. Time to sport the pink and support the boobies!”

I cleared my throat and tried to keep a straight face. I’d learned early on that while Poppy liked to sneak up on people, she also liked to surprise the hell out of them with her words. If you kept a straight face, she got bored easily and moved her attention elsewhere. I’d seriously considered Botox injections to help my face remain a mask of indifference.

“I’m all about supporting the boobies,” I mumbled, moving another package while keeping one eye trained on Poppy at all times.

“Glad to hear it! In fact, I need your help, Jimmy.”

“It’s James,” I reminded her for maybe the five hundredth time since I started working here almost a year ago.

“Sure thing,” she said like always. “My granddaughter is coming to town for the holidays and I need you to introduce her around.”

I lost the battle with my face and my eyebrows flew up to my hairline. “Excuse me?”

As far as I knew, or anyone else for that matter, Poppy had been single her whole life and had no children. How the hell did she have a granddaughter? And why would she want me escorting her around town?

Poppy stood up tall, her massive bosom rising to the occasion just like her nose, now high in the air with superiority. “I know it comes as no surprise that I’ve had many lovers over the years. One of the early ones left me with a baby when I wasn’t old enough to do her upbringing justice. I gave her up for adoption and she eventually had a daughter too.”

Poppy leaned closer, her gaze drilling into mine. “Make sure you get that part in there about the many lovers when you spread this piece of gossip, you hear?” She frowned. “And close your mouth. You look like a fish.”

My jaw snapped shut, and I scrambled to make sense of it all. “So, your granddaughter is coming here? Why?”

Poppy sighed like my questions were tedious. Like she wouldn’t have asked a thousand more if the shoe were on the other foot, so to speak. “I think it’s high time I met my own granddaughter, don’t you think? But it’s bad timing with Tinsel & Tatas coming up. I’m on the board organizing the whole thing. Besides, she needs someone her own age introducing her around town. After the event, I’ll have all sorts of time to spend with her.”

“I’d be honored.” In an odd way, I was flattered. Poppy trusted me with her own granddaughter. I was also super reluctant. Me and new people didn’t exactly mix. I preferred my alone time where I could sit with my own thoughts and not have to engage in idle chit chat that served no purpose other than for people to hear their own voice.

“I’ve trained you well this past year and you can handle mail like nobody’s business, Jimmy.” Poppy put her hands on her hips. “But if you think for one tiny second, you’re going to get your hands on my granddaughter’s package, I will cut you down like an unprepared customer in my express line. You got me?”

Straight face, straight face. “You bet, Poppy. You can count on me.” I gave her a salute that I thought looked like something a boy scout would do. I didn’t know for certain. My childhood pursuits required less hiking and camping and tying knots and more reading by myself.

She smacked me on the shoulder, all smiles. “Outstanding. Swing on by right after your shift to pick her up.”

“Wait. Today?” Today was leg day.

Poppy’s left eye began to twitch. “Yes. Today.”

Leg day would have to wait. I could condense biceps and shoulders together later this week, and that would leave me with tomorrow for legs. Yep, that would do just fine.

“You betcha, P.”

She wrinkled her nose and walked out to the front of the office, muttering something about impertinent boys with man muscles. It wasn’t my fault I’d been born scrawny. I had to work hard to keep these muscles I’d built after too many years of bullying. I wouldn’t lose them over the sudden appearance of Poppy’s granddaughter. I could only imagine she’d be a piece of work just like her grandmother. I put Metallica back in my ears and got busy sorting Christmas gifts. Anything to distract me from having to be social this evening.



I KNOCKED on the only non-Christmas decorated square inch of Poppy's door, a little later than she would have wanted, but someone had decided shipping eggnog to their uncle in a poorly packaged box was a bright idea. The damn thing had popped open the second I picked it up, and I'd been sprayed from head to toe with spoiled dairy. One of Yedda's stray cats had come through the post office door a customer had left open and licked my leg. That is, until I picked her up and put her outside where she yowled so loudly, Yedda had to come by and entice her back to the shelter with a cat nip trail. I ended up going home after work to take a shower so I didn't make Poppy's granddaughter nauseous with my scent.

The door swung open and the prettiest face I'd seen in my entire life stood there blinking back at me. The silence stretched out, and I knew this would be the time someone should say hello, but I couldn't get my mouth to function.

She finally smiled, looking down as if the eye contact had been too much for her too. "You must be James?"

I shifted on my feet, my gaze taking all of her in now that her big blue eyes weren't making my brain short out. She was wearing grey sweats that swamped her tiny frame. "Yeah. And you must be...?" I trailed off, realizing Poppy hadn't told me her granddaughter's name.

Her gaze swung up to mine again. "Liv. Short for Olivia." Her smile faded, and I suddenly wished I had a good joke at the ready to bring it back. "Look, I know this is super awkward with my grandmother making you show me around. We can just tell her we did and skip it, if you prefer."

I shook my head immediately. "First of all, Poppy would know before my tires left your driveway that I didn't take you around. Secondly, I agreed because I wanted to."

That was a lie at the time, but it was true now. I very much wanted to look at Liv. I mean, introduce her to the sites and people of Auburn Hill. Looking at her would just be a bonus.

She nodded her head. “Okay. Then I guess we’re doing this.” She stepped out and closed the door. I backed up to give her room on the tiny stoop and scratched the back of my neck.

“Do you want to get a jacket first? You might be cold in just sweats. It’s not set to snow yet, but any day now it will.” Why hadn’t I asked Poppy where Liv was from or if she was used to cold weather?

Liv’s cheeks flushed, but she walked over to my truck. “Nope. I’m good.”

Well, okay then. I opened the door for her and she climbed up with a wince that made a thousand questions ping through my brain. We didn’t say a word as I went around to the other side and got in, buckled up and backed out of the driveway. I strained my brain, searching for a topic to discuss that would be relevant, but not lame. Interesting, but not highlighting how weird this town was. A question maybe, that wouldn’t sound like I was interrogating her.

“That’s a cool statue,” Liv said conversationally as we went through the roundabout to get into the downtown area. The statue was currently decorated badly with a green and red wreath thrown around its neck.

I blew out a breath. Thank God, one of us had a grasp on basic conversation. “Yeah, that was put up by our former mayor. It gets tarred and feathered once a year or so. Long story, but people don’t much like the old mayor.”

Liv giggled, and I fist-bumped myself mentally. “I’ll be on my best behavior to avoid the same fate.”

“Oh, no one would do that to you. Unless you plan to swindle the whole town.” I glanced over at her as she kept smiling. Damn. She had a huge dimple on either side of her mouth when she smiled.

“It had crossed my mind, but I think I’ll save that for my second visit,” Liv joked.

Everything got better after that. She asked questions about the town. I supplied the answers and any interesting stories behind it. I finally parked the truck in front of Forty-Diner and turned off the engine. Every light pole along Main Street had green garland winding its way to a large gold star. The decorations made the town come to life, making it the perfect time to introduce a stranger to the place we affectionately called Hell.

“Hungry? We can grab a bite here before I take you home.” My hands got sweaty all of a sudden.

Liv shrugged. “I could eat.”

That was close enough to a yes for me. I climbed out and came around to open her door. She even took my hand when I offered it, her cool, silky skin a contrast to mine. Shit. I hope she didn’t feel how sweaty my hands were just being around her. This wasn’t a date. I knew that. And yet my body was acting like it was.

I got the door to the diner and inhaled when she walked by me. I’d been trying to place her scent the whole time she was in the truck with me. She smelled like sunshine and tanning oil. If summer had a scent, this girl was it. I found it delightful that she wasn’t predictable in boots and a pumpkin spice latte. How on Earth could this delicate, dynamic creature share genetics with the formidable Poppy Strauss?

“Booth for two?” Dot barked. The hostess, who’d been working for Forty-Diner since I was a kid, looked at us through thick glasses, her eyes blinking rapidly.

Liv jumped, and I put my hand on her back to steady her while I nodded at Dot. I was used to the pack-a-day smoker voice of the Forty-Diner’s hostess, but I could see how it might make a newcomer jumpy. Liv gave me a grateful smile and followed Dot to our booth. She slid in first, and then I sat across from her.

Dot handed us laminated menus that had seen better days. They didn’t replace them very often, because quite frankly, we all had the menu memorized.

“Water?” Dot croaked, her signature red polka-dot mouse ears sliding off her head.

I smiled. “Yes, please. We’ll just need a few minutes.”

Dot’s gaze danced between Liv and I for a second. She grinned and patted my shoulder before bustling away to another table. Putting my menu down, I observed Liv while she read her menu.

“I can tell you now, the roast is dry, and the meatloaf is spicy, but the fried chicken is incredible and so is the lasagna.”

Liv slapped her menu down and folded her arms on the table with a smile. “Done. Lasagna it is.”

“Well, if it isn’t Slim Jim,” came a loud voice to my left.

I turned away from Liv to see the one guy who could ruin my day. Blake “Asshat” Aston. The guy had quit tripping me and making me drop my books once we reached adulthood, but he’d kept up the constant teasing. There stood the smug face of my tormentor, the one who’d spurred me on to start lifting weights my junior year of high school. I should thank him, actually. Without his bullying, I might have stayed a buck-fifty lightweight, living out my life in fear. Instead, I had at least twenty pounds of muscle over the semi-adult version of Blake.

“Hey, Blake,” I said with an obvious lack of enthusiasm. Liv frowned, studying my face instead of looking at Blake.

Blake had a seat next to Liv, scooting in so quick she jumped again. Liv slid as far over as she could.

“Who’s your pretty friend, Jim?” Blake gave her a typical wink and greasy smile. Thankfully, Liv wasn’t falling for it. She looked at him like one would the Grinch showing up at Christmas dinner.

“I’m Liv. And you’re in my seat.”

I grinned, wanting to stand up and applaud. This girl was fantastic. “You heard the lady, Blakey. Time to move on to wherever you’re wanted.”

Blake swung his gaze over. “And are you gonna make me, Slim Jim?”

I huffed out a long suffering breath and stood up, towering over him. I nodded, noticing a few tables around us were now watching. “I’m hoping you’ll save yourself the embarrassment of getting publicly rejected by a lady. Just move along before you cause a scene.”

Blake stood up, slapping me on the back, harder than was called for. “Wow. Take a joke, buddy. We’re all friends here.” He winked at Liv again. “When you’re yawning into your dinner, you can find me coaching at the high school, sweetheart.”

He walked off, saving me from having to actually remove him, which I’d never done before. I had the muscle mass, I just had to have the confidence to use it. Liv rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue at Blake’s retreating back, making me laugh.

CHAPTER TWO

L^{iv}

“I HAVE A QUICK TINSEL & Tatas meeting right after work, but I should be home in time for dinner. We can spend some time shootin’ the shit.” My grandmother hustled about her small house, grabbing all kinds of things she should have had in her tote bag ready to go for work, but no, she had to spread them all over the house every night. Yarn, her knitting needles, her glasses, her backup glasses, a little pill box that contained God knows what. “I think we should decide on what you call me. I’m partial to Grand-Pop. Isn’t that cute?”

I frowned. “It sounds like you’re my grandfather.”

Poppy skidded to a halt right by the front door. “Huh. Guess you’re right. Well, we’ll brainstorm tonight over cocktails. That always gets my creative side humming. Ta-ta for now! Get it? The Tinsel & Tatas thing coming up?”

Her cackle followed her out the door, cut off by her shouting good morning to her neighbors. I was coming to find out my grandmother was a handful. A character. A force to be reckoned with. I wasn’t sure coming here to recuperate and lick my wounds was a wise choice. But I’d wanted to bridge the gap. Maybe right some wrongs and get my mom and her mom talking. My mom had a chip on her shoulder about being put up for adoption, and it had seemed like a good idea to get these two women together. Either for a relationship or for closure, I didn’t care which. Then again, maybe I was just

taking my own quest for personal insight and projecting it on to my mom.

Of course, thinking about relationships made me think of James. Good Lord, the man was built like a construction worker who lifted weights twice a day in front of an old Schwarzenegger poster. Normally, that wouldn't be my type, but add in the warm brown eyes, the dark hair, and the shy smile, and I was a goner. The man was hot with a side of puppy dog.

I pulled off my sweatshirt and pants, heading for the shower. The best way to feel better was to get up, get some hygiene, and fake it 'til you make it. And since I had lunch scheduled with James today, I wanted to make sure I put some effort into my appearance. Damn, Poppy should have told me he was gorgeous. I wouldn't have answered the door in raggedy sweats, that's for sure. Although he'd been incredibly nice once we got past the awkward stage. I liked how he put his hand on my back, opened my doors, and defended me at the diner. He hadn't been put off by the scrubby girl in sweats. If only I'd met him at eighteen, things would have been very different.

Once I was clean, perfumed, and had even taken a dive into my cosmetics bag, I had to choose clothes. Which was hard because I didn't feel like anything fit my new shape. Eventually, I settled for dark jeans, boots, and a puffy pink sweater that hid my shape. Good enough. I wasn't here to catch a guy. I was here to heal, physically and emotionally.

James was helping a customer when I walked into the post office. I had to pull the sweater away from my sweaty body while I waited for him. Poppy's neighbor, Yedda, had loaned me the use of her enormous baby blue Lincoln while I was in town. Maneuvering that boat into town was enough to have me pumping out heat like a furnace in winter.

"I don't think you understand. I have to have one hundred bras delivered for the Tinsel & Tatas Games & Gala this weekend. If I don't get those bras, I'll have to have the participants bedazzle their own bras. Can you imagine the outrage if women have to undress for the bedazzling?" The old

lady leaned over the counter, and James's eyes widened. "Pastor Murphy is supposed to be helping me at the station!"

His face flushed, and I tried to bite back a smile. "I understand, Mrs. Trudowsky, but there's no way to get them here any faster. The boxes are held up in customs right now. There's still plenty of time though, so don't panic."

Mrs. Trudowsky shot a skinny arm up in the air. "Too late!"

James put his hands out, obviously trying to placate the hysterical woman. "Now there's no need to yell. I can track the boxes every single day and give you an update on their whereabouts. How about that?"

A cloud of essential oils hit my nose right before a soft voice spoke in my ear. "They might be here awhile. If you're waiting on that sweet boy, James, he won't let her leave unless she's calmed down."

I turned to see a woman who might have been just a few years older than my mom. She had laugh lines bracketing her mouth and brown eyes that sparkled. I liked her immediately. She put her hand out.

"Sorry for crowding you, but I've seen this happen too many times not to warn you. He might be awhile. I'm Faye Bennett, by the way."

I shook her hand and smiled back. "I'm Liv. Poppy's granddaughter."

Those brown eyes widened for a second before the polite mask slipped back into place. "Well, it's lovely to meet you, Liv. I have to say, I'm surprised I didn't know about you. Then again, Poppy's not about to spread gossip about herself, right?"

"Poppy's a gossip, huh? I kind of got that sense when the first night here she told me everything about everyone. You're divorced from that bastard the swindling mayor and your son is the current mayor. Did I get that right?"

Faye tossed her head back and laughed. "That's about right. That's the thing about Poppy's gossip. It's mostly all

true. You seem sweet, so I have to apologize. I put Mrs. Trudowsky on the bra bedazzling station to keep her out of trouble, but so far, she's caused quite a bit of trouble for James."

I glanced over at him to see him showing the old woman his computer screen. Probably tracking her boxes across the continent like Santa's slay on Christmas Eve. He glanced up at me and smiled so quickly I almost missed it.

Faye elbowed me gently. "That boy has it bad for you, I can tell. Don't break him. He's a gentle soul in the Hulk's body."

My face flushed, and I looked down at the toe of my boots. "I'm only here for a short time. I have no plans of breaking anyone." I looked up at Faye, an idea hitting me. "Hey, maybe I can help with the Tinsel & Tatas thing."

Faye's eyes lit up again. "Oh, I'd love more help! When I went to Rip—that's my son—with the idea for a fundraiser, I had no clue it would mushroom into this huge town-wide event. I just wanted to help the young girls I saw at my chemo treatments."

My heart squeezed in my chest. "You had cancer?"

Faye smiled, but it was the kind that hid a painful past. "I did." She patted her short brown hair. "Just recently got my hair back, so I'm feeling quite good about myself for the first time in a long while. Fresh off my divorce, I was diagnosed with stage two breast cancer. A double mastectomy and many chemo treatments later, here I am. Husband free and cancer free, working on raising money for young girls like you who face the same diagnosis. Cancer and surgery is hard for any woman, but the young ones who have their whole lives ahead of them got to me in a way I can't describe."

My heart was hammering, the secret inside of me bubbling up so strongly I thought I might burst. I didn't believe in coincidences. I knew life put people and circumstances in your life at just the right time if you're brave enough to face them.

“Faye, do you have a few minutes?” I asked, sucking in a full breath and making my decision.

She looped her hand through my arm and tugged me out the door. “I sure do, sweetheart. What’s on your mind?”

CHAPTER THREE

James

“THERE YOU ARE,” I said, coming through the front door of the post office and seeing Liv on the park bench outside.

Faye had just given her a hug and walked down the sidewalk with Mrs. Trudowsky. Thankfully, the older woman left pacified for today. She’d be back tomorrow. If those damn boxes of bras didn’t get delivered soon, I’d drive down to the harbor in San Pedro and collect them myself.

Liv looked up with tears pooling in her eyes and her nose the color of Rudolph’s. My feet were moving to her before my brain caught up to what I was walking into. Emotional females were akin to magical elves. Mysterious and something to avoid at all costs. Liv hopped up from the bench and tried to wipe the tears away before they fell.

“Hey, are you okay?” When I reached her, I pulled her into a hug, the need to comfort someone upset stronger than my awkwardness around girls.

She looped her arms around my waist and nuzzled her face between my pecs. Her entire body pressed into mine from chest to knees, and I might have swallowed my tongue. She sniffled, and I felt like an ass for noticing exactly the way she felt in my arms. She was so small, so soft. And damn, she smelled good. Exactly like yesterday.

Liv's hands tucked under my jacket and trailed up my back. The feel of her touching me made me shiver. She pulled back and I let her go, embarrassed that I'd reacted so strongly to her touching me. Two spots of pink stained her cheeks. She bowed her head and swiped at her eyes again.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to feel you up. I just don't think I've hugged someone with that many muscles before."

Her comment made the middle school boy inside of me preen and flex. But I didn't like how she wouldn't look at me. I didn't want her afraid of me or feeling awkward around me.

"Hey." I reached out and tilted her chin up, my gut clenching at the sight of her red eyes. "Did Faye say something...?" I trailed off, hoping she'd tell me what was wrong so I could go fix it.

She grinned, but it didn't meet her eyes. "No, nothing like that. She's really sweet, actually. She has quite the story."

I searched my brain for any tidbits I knew about Faye, but other than her cancer journey and her asshole of an ex-husband, I didn't know much. That's what happened when you kept to yourself, even in a small town. I pretty much only knew anything about anyone because of Poppy's incessant gossiping while I sorted boxes every morning.

"There you two are!" Poppy flew out the door. I snatched my hand back from Liv's face. "You better take your lunch break, Jimmy, so I can get off the counter and back to mail delivery. Oh! Also, it looks like we're going to ask everyone to take part in the Tinsel & Tatas Games & Gala as partners to help speed things up. There's just too many stations for everyone to go one at a time. So..." Poppy trailed off, waggling her eyebrows in that way that made me nervous. "You two need to pair up."

With that, she stepped back inside and swung the door shut, leaving Liv and I in uncomfortable silence. She looked down the street as if she wanted to look anywhere but at me. I liked the idea of partnering with Liv, but I was getting the feeling there was more to her than the average carefree

twenty-five-year-old. Things she might not want to share with me.

“How about we swing by Coffee, grab sandwiches, and eat in the park if you’re not too cold?” I offered.

Liv lifted her head and smiled. This time her eyes joined in. “Sure, that sounds nice.”

We walked side by side to Coffee, me saying hello to various townsfolk as we passed. If it was someone I knew well enough, I introduced them to Liv. She smiled and said all the normal things I found so hard in a casual conversation, but the sparkle I’d seen in her back at the diner last night was missing.

When we got to the park with our food, I handed the bag of sandwiches to Liv. I began to unzip my jacket and lay it on the ground.

“What are you doing?” Liv’s eyes widened, watching me.

“I don’t want you to sit on the grass. The sun is shining, but it’s too cold to sit directly on the ground.” I sat down on the grass next to my spread out jacket and nodded for her to sit on it. She sat completely silent and staring at me.

I ate a few bites as she picked at her sandwich. Swallowing the bite, I couldn’t take it any longer. “What?”

She sat her food down. “Why are you so nice? You know nothing about me, and yet you’re being nicer than most of my friends back home.”

I frowned. What the hell? Her friends weren’t nice to her? I wanted to find them, leave some bruises, and tell them not to mess with sunshine in human form. “Why do you have such shit friends?”

Liv just laughed. “Seriously? My friends are fine. It’s you who’s crazy. You’re way too nice!”

I frowned some more, the few bites I’d eaten turning to acid in my stomach. “Too nice? Is there such a thing as too nice? I let you sit on my jacket. I didn’t buy you a pony or anything.”

Liv put her hand on my arm. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. I think your niceness is amazing, actually. Between the nice and the muscles, I’m wondering how you don’t have every female in town falling at your feet.”

I snorted before I could pull it back. Snorting was not socially acceptable. I knew that at least. “I don’t think you know me very well either. I’m not the guy people invite to their bonfire parties down at the beach, Liv. I’m awkward and shy and spend most of my time at the gym when I’m not at work.”

“Hey, James!” a female voice called from across the park.

Liv and I both turned to look. It was Vee Waldo. The scariest girl in all of Auburn Hill. She was gorgeous and made me tongue-tied instantly. She said things that shocked the hell out of me and then expected me to answer. She came striding over in leggings and a cropped sweatshirt that should have been illegal, her blonde hair flowing in the breeze.

“Jeez, it’s like a shampoo commercial come to life,” Liv muttered under her breath.

Vee smiled, and I tried to smile back. “Hey, James. Hi person I don’t know. I’m Vee.”

“I’m Liv. Poppy’s granddaughter.” At least Liv was able to look directly at Vee and still command speech.

“Shut up!” Vee barked, plopping down on the tail of my jacket, nearly bowling over Liv. “Poppy has progeny? That’s wild! So good to meet you!”

Liv chuckled nervously, and I didn’t blame her. Vee was a lot. Vee swiveled her head and looked over at me.

“Do you have a partner for the boob cancer thing this weekend, James?”

I swallowed hard. “Um, yeah, I do. Liv, actually.”

Vee studied my face, then looked at Liv. “Ahh, I see. That’s way cool. Although if you’re knockin’ boots, your boss might not like that so much, James.”

“Oh my God!” Liv said, before clapping her hand over her mouth. Welcome to conversations with Vee.

“We’re not, um,” I cleared my throat, feeling my face heating up. “That’s not...”

Vee stood up and brushed off her leggings. “Hey, I don’t have a problem with it. I’m just saying you better make sure Poppy is good with it. Maybe don’t tell her about the banging part. Just get her blessing on dating her granddaughter first. Oh and Liv, let’s chat after the boob thing, yeah? I’d love to get to know any granddaughter of Poppy’s.”

Liv removed her hand from her mouth. “Yeah, okay. Interesting to meet you, Vee.”

Vee walked off, finding someone new to terrorize while Liv picked up her sandwich. “At least she didn’t sit on my lunch.”

I picked up mine too. “Yeah, sorry about that. Vee is...”

Liv nodded. “Understood.”

“Sorry about saying we were partners, but it just slipped out. You don’t have to partner with me if you don’t want to.”

Liv put her hand on my arm again, and I realized I quite liked it when she reached for me. “I don’t mind at all. It’s just I’m not sure if I’ll be able to do all the events. I had surgery recently.” She looked down at her sandwich, like the pastrami was suddenly interesting. And if I wasn’t mistaken, she was blinking back tears again.

I had a thousand questions to ask her, but I could tell she wasn’t ready for any of them. I had this overwhelming need to protect her from the very moment I met her, and it was blaring at me now. I’d protect her...even from myself.

“Okay. Well, that’s why you’ve got me as your partner. I haven’t been lifting weights for ten years just to let a pretty girl do all the heavy lifting. I’ll take care of you. I promise, Liv.”

Her head lifted, and I felt like I’d slayed a dragon to get the tiny smile back on her face. “Pretty girl, huh?”

“The prettiest,” I confirmed, hoping she knew that wasn’t some line just to get in her pants.

She smiled brighter. “How can I say no to all that niceness and all those muscles?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Liv

“YOU’RE GOING to wear a hole in my carpet with all your pacing, girl,” Poppy declared bright and early the next morning.

I’d been up for an hour already, dressed and ready to go to the Tinsel & Tatas Games & Gala with James. I should have used the time to get some sleep to make up for being awake half the night before deciding what to do about James. He clearly liked me, and if the pounding of my pulse any time I thought of him was any indication, I liked him, too. The problem was if I wanted to do something about it.

“Sorry, Poppy.” We’d decided last night that calling her anything resembling grandmother made her feel too old and felt too awkward for me as an adult. Calling her Poppy would do just fine for both of us.

I flopped down on the couch and tried to sip my coffee calmly, despite the racing thoughts in my brain. If I wanted things to go further with James, I’d need to be upfront with him about why I was really here. He deserved to know I was damaged goods before the evidence got flashed in his face.

“Do I need to have a talk with Jimmy?”

I wrinkled my nose. “You mean James?”

Poppy just chuckled. “I call him Jimmy to keep him on his toes.”

I had no idea how giving him a nickname kept him on his toes, but the mysteries of Poppy would have to wait. “No, you don’t need to talk to him. I’m an adult, for God’s sake. I can handle things with a man.”

“Hmm.” Poppy didn’t look convinced. Then again, I didn’t know that I’d displayed a deep list of good decisions up to this point from which to earn her confidence.

The sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway had me leaping up. “That’s James. See you there!”

I bounded out the door and instantly felt better seeing James’s smiling face through the window of his truck. He climbed out and opened my door for me with a deep hello that started my heart racing again. Not going to lie, I leaned in a bit while getting in the truck, just to smell him. He always smelled like soap and some kind of hair product. Manly and clean.

“Thought we could start the day with a huge breakfast at Forty-Diner. Sound good?” James started the truck and when I gave a nod at his suggestion, pulled out of the driveway.

The town was starting to look familiar as we drove through the neighborhood streets and then came to the roundabout. the slower pace of things was usually calming, but I found myself twisting my fingers together in my lap, feeling like I’d burst if I didn’t tell him what I was hiding before the day’s festivities began.

He groaned in the silence and I followed his line of vision to see what had him chuckling. “Oh my God, is that what I think it is?” I squealed, clapping my hands over my mouth.

There, right on the bronze statue in the middle of the one and only roundabout in town, was a lacy red bra and feather boa. The Benjamin Bennett lookalike statue wasn’t tarred and feathered today or even ready for Christmas. It was dressed up like a lady of the night.

Cars were backed up in the roundabout, everyone leaning out of their windows to take a picture of the sight. I grabbed my own phone and did the same, leaning over James to get a

clear picture. He put his hand on my back to steady me, my entire upper body draped across his lap. Jeez, the boy didn't miss leg day, that was for sure.

"Got it!" I exclaimed, turning the phone screen so he could see the picture.

I froze, seeing the look on his face. James wasn't looking at the statue or the picture. He was looking at me like I was a protein shake after a tough workout.

"Good," he said, his voice gone deep and throaty in a way that made me squirm. Which made me realize I was still face down on his lap while we drove through town. A town where I was trying to make a good first impression.

"Oh crap!" I pushed off of him and scrambled to my side of the bench seat.

James grunted and squeezed his eyes shut for a second, and I realized where I'd placed my hand.

"Oh crap!" I said again, face heating to the color of Santa's coat. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," he wheezed. It was anything but fine. If one could die of mortification, I was halfway there.

He parked a block away from the diner, traffic pretty heavy for a weekend simply because everyone was out and about getting ready for the Tinsel & Tatas event. He turned to me and grabbed my hands, which had gone back to twisting with a vengeance.

"Liv. Seriously, it's fine. I'm fine. No harm done."

I peeked one eye open and looked at him. He had a little grin on his face that made me feel a thousand times better, but not quite enough to have me stress-free either.

One of his eyebrows lifted. "Should I squeeze your boob or something so we're even?"

My mouth dropped open. "James!" He was teasing me. I knew that meant he felt comfortable around me, as I hadn't seen him tease anyone else. And that made me deliriously

happy. But the reminder of my breasts made me shift in my seat.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I blurted out.

He took his hands away and I could feel him building a wall between us. I reached out and grabbed his hands. “No. Not about you. About me. Just something I think you should know about me before we start this event today. Or start anything else.”

He studied my face for a bit before nodding and climbing out of the truck. He came around to my side and helped me down, keeping a tight hold on my hand as we walked down the sidewalk in the opposite direction of the diner. Little puffs of condensation marking our path in the cold morning air. When we got to something called the T-Spot, the last building before the park began, he stopped around the corner and turned to me.

“There’s not much you can say that would change my mind about you, Liv, but go ahead and try.”

Fuck. That hit me right in the chest. That trust. That sincerity I saw in his eyes. James was the kind of man who once he said something, you knew it had to be true. I’d made the right decision to tell him everything. He deserved honesty in return.

I looked around but didn’t see anyone remotely close enough to overhear our conversation. I took a deep breath and tried to lock out my knees. Only three people knew what I was about to tell James. It was deeply personal, and I hadn’t quite come to terms with it myself yet.

“Okay, I’m just going to rip this off like a Band-Aid,” I blurted, the words flowing faster and faster as they left my mouth. “When I was eighteen, I got a boob job. Breast implants. I loved them. They made me feel so feminine when I’d been teased growing up about being so flat. Well, a year ago, I got a notice in the mail from the company who made my implants and it said that they were being recalled due to medical issues. They said they’d pay for surgery to replace them, and that sounded like a decent offer. Until I started

doing more digging on my own. Turns out they were a textured implant that doctors found could lead to a special type of cancer called BIA-ALCL.”

I stopped there, seeing James stiffen. “I don’t have cancer.” His shoulders dropped, and he blew out a long breath.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I squeezed his hands. “That’s crazy good news, I know, but the problem was, I wanted to have the implants removed. I didn’t want new ones. I just wanted them gone, so I never had to worry about anything like that again. The C word scared me so badly I just wanted them out. I mean, I was only twenty-four and having to deal with a cancer scare. It was ridiculous. But the company wouldn’t pay for removal only, so I went into debt to have them removed. I have two really large scars on my nearly flat chest now. It’s not pretty, James. I’m not pretty.”

Tears hit my eyes, but I willed them back. I would not cry about this. Looks weren’t something to cry over. If I’d developed cancer, that was something to cry about. I was one of the lucky ones.

James frowned, pulling me in and letting go of my hands to cup my jaw. “Listen to me right now. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. Inside and out. Who gives a shit if you have a few scars?”

My eyes were burning hotter. “Says the perfect guy with the stacked muscles.”

His eyes went wide and then he was stepping back. I wanted to slap myself for being so flippant. But then James was unzipping his jacket and letting it drop to the ground. He whipped his T-shirt over his head and my mouth went dry. Dear God, the man had perfect six-pack abs. Bulging pecs and biceps I could sleep on. Those brackets of muscles over his hips leading down into his jeans.

“Look at my shoulder right here.” James pointed, and I gladly looked. I’d stare at his body for hours and not get bored. “See those marks? Those are stretch marks. Permanent

scars that happened because even as I build this ‘perfect body of stacked muscles’ it left forever marks.”

He was right. He had faintly red lines all in a row on both shoulders and even some on his chest.

He cupped my jaw again, and all those muscles were now touching me. “Do you think I’m ugly because of them?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “God, no.” He was magnificent. He belonged in a cowboy calendar for old ladies who like to hoot and holler over hot young men. He’d be the guy I’d try to sneak pictures of at the beach with my girlfriends so we could drool over him later.

He nearly touched his nose to mine, looking deep into my eyes. “Then believe me when I say I don’t give a shit about your scars. We all have marks on our bodies and they tell our story. I bet your story is more beautiful than any model out there.”

My dented heart burst, cracking right in two and leaving behind something new. A different beat took up the rhythm, flooding me with new life. It took a quiet postal man in a small town before a boob festival to remind me that my story was wholly mine and it was beautiful.

I went up on tiptoes and kissed the hell out of him. He was right there with me, his tongue flicking my bottom lip and surging in to taste me the second I let him. I pushed and his back hit the wall of the T-spot. His hands roamed my body, starting little fires of sensation that made me feel like a cat, leaning into him for more. Then he flipped us and I was against the wall, his hard body shielding me from anyone who might happen to walk by. He was careful to avoid my chest, for which I was grateful. I was still healing, and telling someone about my scars was a far cry from showing them off or letting him feel my almost non-existent breasts.

A wolf whistle somewhere in the park had James pulling back, his eyes hooded like he had plans for me that didn’t include participating in the Tinsel & Tatas Games & Gala.

“Thank you for trusting me with your story,” he whispered, not even caring he stood shirtless in the middle of town in December.

Oh, my heart.

CHAPTER FIVE

James

“HOW THE HELL do you do it?” I asked, already squirming with the heavy sacks hanging from around my neck. They were supposed to be the same weight and size of breasts, but in my estimation they were swinging way too much to be like natural boobs. But I was willing to deal with it for the fundraiser. If any man took the boobs off for any reason during the event, we had to pay double.

Liv laughed, swiping at tears. “I don’t. Flat, remember?”

I gave her a look that said I might spank her if she talked poorly about herself again. I quite liked the way her cheeks heated in response. I had to stop thinking of her boobs, or spanking her, or that kiss if I hoped to get through the day without an embarrassing erection.

“Thank God you had them taken out. They must have been a pain in the ass.”

She smirked. “More like a pain in the neck, but yeah. I’m glad too.”

“I swear on our children’s lives, if you add another sandbag to my bra, I will use my cuffs on you in a way you won’t like.” I looked over to see Bain glaring at his wife, Lucy. He was the prison warden here in town and usually sporting a frown. However, he had a huge soft spot for his

wife. Lucy slid one more sandbag into the ugly beige bra Bain wore over his sweatshirt and patted him on the ass.

“I look forward to it,” she whispered, giving him a look I didn’t need to see.

Liv and I looked at each other with wide eyes before racing off to the next event, laughing the whole way. I held her hand in mine and realized I’d never had so much fun.

“Want to paint flamingoes next?” I asked her, pulling her over to the station manned by Titus and Amelia Jackson, the couple who owned the Flamingo B & B. Titus lifted at the gym, often times spotting me on the bench press, so we knew each other. His wife, also big sister to Vee, was a bit scary, but Titus was pretty chill.

“Hey man, glad you could make it!” Titus came over to shake my hand and I introduced him to Liv.

“Oh! You must be the new girl Vee told me about.” Amelia came over with their baby strapped to her chest in some sort of sling, her gaze focused on Liv. “She told me you were gorgeous and now I see what she means.”

Liv smiled and accepted the hug from Amelia, careful to keep from squishing the baby. “Thank you. That’s sweet of you both.”

Amelia shrugged. “If you were ugly, I’d tell you that too. I don’t have much of a filter.”

“Seems to be a Waldo sister thing, huh?”

Fuck, I loved it when my sweet Liv went in swinging.

Amelia tossed her head back and laughed, waking the baby. She began to bounce and sway side to side to settle her again. “That would be true. There are five of us and I can admit we’re a handful.” She glanced over at Titus and me. “Takes a special man to put up with us. Looks like you found one too.”

Liv smiled, but looked down at her boots. She didn’t know it yet, but I was all hers. Had been since she opened the door in those horrible sweats and smiled at me.

“We’d love to paint a flamingo,” I said, saving Liv from further relationship prying from Amelia.

They got us each a yard flamingo and set us up with paints. Mine was covered in solid blue paint since it was my favorite color. When I finished, I looked over at Liv’s and nearly dropped mine in the grass.

“What the hell?” I mumbled.

Liv looked up as if startled from a daydream. “What? I love painting.”

Her flamingo was bright pink with a red and white polka dot bikini top, sunglasses, and jewelry. I looked back at my flamingo. It looked like a second grader could have painted it. With his eyes closed.

“Okay, Miss Artist. How about we go tag a wall and see what you come up with?”

Liv put her paintbrush down, stuffed twenty bucks in the bucket for donations, and picked up her model-perfect flamingo.

Amelia waved and hollered after us. “Have fun tagging! Save some wall space for me!” Then Titus grabbed her and put his hand over her mouth. She swatted at him. We didn’t wait around to see her full retaliation. I felt sorry for Titus, but figured after quite a few years together, he could handle it.

I whispered the story to Liv while we walked to the tagging station. “The Welcome to Auburn Hill sign kept getting spray painted with the word Hell. Happened for years. Turns out it was Amelia doing it.”

Liv gaped. “Damn! Gotta watch out for that one.”

I laughed, thinking about when the truth came out. “Yeah, and her dad’s the Chief of Police.”

“No!” Liv looked horrified, right before she began to laugh. “I think I might love this town.”

Something twisted in between my ribs, making me address that Liv had a home elsewhere. And here I was, falling for her

when she would be leaving soon. That thought certainly put a damper on the day.

“You two want to try some muffins?” I looked over to see a booth stacked with baked goods. Esme Waldo waved us over. “Here, try these samples first.”

Liv walked over and took a sample, letting out a lusty groan at the first bite. Great. Add another thing to the list to try not to think about. “Oh, my goodness. These are so good! Who made these?”

“I did.” Izzy Waldo smiled shyly, standing up from the chair she’d been sitting in behind the table.

“Buy one for three dollars, or two for five,” Esme chirped. Her cowboy husband came over and snatched another muffin off the table. She spun and tried to slap his hand, but he danced out of the way. Remington was another guy I saw at the gym a lot, but hadn’t spoken to him yet as he was older than me. “Stop eating the inventory, Remy!”

“I’m starving, honeypoo!” he pouted, sticking out his bottom lip, and the rest of us laughed. I knew the feeling, though. It took a lot of calories to keep on muscle mass.

“We’ll take two, please.” I grabbed a blueberry for me, handed a five-dollar bill to Izzy, and looked to Liv to choose which one she wanted. She bit her lip, and I studied her face, taking in the slope of her nose, the sweep of her long lashes, and the tiny wisps of hair that fell from the bun on top of her head.

Remington nudged me, leaning in to mumble, “I know that look. Better make her yours before someone sweeps in first.”

I didn’t know him, and yet I felt like I could tell him anything. “She doesn’t even live here.”

Remington lifted his shoulders. “Neither did I, and here I am, married to the hottest woman in Auburn Hill. People move all the time, James, for reasons sillier than being in love.” We could see Liv coming our way with a muffin in hand. “Wouldn’t mind a workout partner next time we see each other at the gym.”

I nodded once, appreciating him offering friendship. “Sure thing. And thanks, man.”

He patted me on the back and then went behind the booth to steal a kiss from Esme.

“What was that all about?” Liv asked, biting into her muffin and groaning around the huge bite.

I groaned too. “You gotta stop doing that,” I muttered.

Liv frowned. “What? Eating?”

I shook my head and looked off into the distance, where people were tagging walls in the park and running between booths, laughing and talking in the winter sunshine. Could I leave Auburn Hill? I’d grown up here. Always figured I’d grow old here too, surrounded by people I knew, even if I wasn’t exactly social. Just knowing they were there if I needed something was enough to keep me feeling grounded.

Liv grabbed my hand and pulled me out of my musings. “I know what will put a smile on your face!”

I was already smiling, just looking at her. “You?” She grinned and bit her bottom lip. “No, silly. Let’s go bedazzle some bras!” She leaned in and snuck a kiss on my cheek. “I’ll even model mine for you later when there are fewer people around.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Shit. It’s official.”

Liv frowned. “What’s official?”

I narrowed my eyes at her and pulled her into me. “I’m going to have to do this whole Games & Gala thing with an erection.”

Her eyes went wide right before I swooped down and kissed her. I didn’t care who saw us or who whistled at us this time. I just needed to be as close to Liv as she’d let me while she was here. Everything else could wait.

CHAPTER SIX

Liv

“I GOTTA TELL YOU. These boobs of yours are really freaking me out right now,” I whispered against James’s lips as we made out.

The sun had just started to set, and I was half on top of his lap on a bench in the park, tucked behind a huge tree. It was getting colder out, but I didn’t feel a damn thing cozied up with James. The scavenger hunt was supposed to be going on around us, but I didn’t see another sole. Oops. Looks like we missed the scavenger hunt.

James smoothed a lock of hair back from my face. His fake breasts had slid to the side, jamming me in the ribs as we kissed. James adjusted the harness that held his sand bags. “Listen, I’m not losing.”

I snickered. “It’s only another ten bucks if you take them off.”

“But I’m so close,” he whined.

“Fine,” I giggled, pulling back and trying to right my sweater. My bun felt like it was falling off my head. I pulled out the hair tie and tried to finger comb myself into looking like I hadn’t been making out with James for the last half hour.

“Shit,” James muttered, scrubbing a hand across his face.

“What?”

He studiously looked at the tree trunk next to the park bench. "I can't look at you."

I stood and laughed, loving that this man found me desirable. He was exactly what I needed in a season that had me doubting myself. "Let's just make an appearance at the Gala and then we can leave."

James stood up too, but had to adjust his jeans. "Yeah, but what if Poppy sees us? There's no way I can pretend we're just friends."

I grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the huge white tent set up at the opposite end of the park. "It'll be fine. We're adults. Poppy, of all people, should understand. She let it slip about the sea caves urban legend the other night. She's had her own fair share of sexual encounters."

James made a strangled noise. "I don't even want to think about that."

My laughter followed us into the bright tent where everyone was either in line for the potluck, or already seated and chatting with their neighbors. Several people called out to say hello to me, which made me feel more welcome than anywhere I'd ever lived. People where I lived just kept their nose stuck to their phones, lost in their own little worlds. They didn't look around a room and smile in greeting, hoping to chat. I could feel this little town growing on me. For more reasons that the hot guy with his hand on my back as we maneuvered our way into the food line.

We'd just gotten our plates loaded with every side dish you could imagine and found seats at a table in the back when Faye tapped the mic up on the makeshift stage. The stage held multiple Christmas trees, all decked out in festive colors. The items up for auction lined the tables on stage, all bundled in ribbons and bows. Pretty packages, ready for the highest bidder.

"Good evening, Auburn Hill!" Faye called out. The town answered with whoops and hollers to rival any professional sports game I'd been to. "Starting last year with our Jingle Ball, you have turned out in record numbers to support various

worthy causes. As you know, the charities that support cancer patients are near and dear to my heart. Partially because of programs created with community funding, I am now one hundred percent cancer free!”

The crowd went wild again, and Mayor Rip stood up in the front to whistle for his mom. Tears hit my eyes, and James instantly took my hand in his. Faye took a bow and waited for the cheering to subside before continuing.

“We have several guest speakers for you tonight before we start our last and final fundraiser for the day; the silent auction. Enjoy your dinner, learn from our speakers, then bid with open wallets, and we’ll reconvene for dessert.”

A tall black woman took the microphone from Faye and began to tell the story of the first Young Survival Coalition (YSC) group meeting in New York City. Her story was beautiful, poignant, and the perfect way for everyone to understand the unique issues young women face when receiving a cancer diagnosis. Not a dry eye was left in the tent by the time she finished.

Another woman took the stage and told her story, highlighting how YSC helped her and her family two years prior when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer. When she was done, Faye took the microphone and looked in my direction.

I thought I might pass out, but I gave her a head nod. James looked over at me in confusion. I probably should have warned him about this.

“What’s going on?” he asked, but Faye beat him to it.

“Next up is a personal story from someone you’ve all been hearing about, Liv Seymour.” Faye extended the microphone and I hopped up to take it. I could feel all eyes on me as I wound through all the tables and climbed the stairs to the stage. Faye gave me an encouraging smile, and then it was just me. Facing a few hundred faces. Poppy stood up from her table, and the look on her face was everything I needed. Pride. Love. Belief that I could do this. I focused on her to get started and then found James’s face in the crowd.

“Hello, everyone. I’m Poppy Strauss’s granddaughter. I’m not here with a cancer story, but a cautionary tale that I hope might save even just one young girl’s life.”

I proceeded to tell everyone about my implants, the recall, and the removal. Most people didn’t realize some breast implants could cause cancer. Telling my story was no longer about me, but about helping other women make informed choices. Getting implants was a deeply personal decision with no right or wrong answer, but every woman should be given all the information ahead of time. No one had told me, when I went to have them implanted, that there was a risk factor for cancer. Maybe it was in the ten pages of fine print, but women’s lives deserved more than a fine print warning buried in legal language.

When I was done, Poppy wolf-whistled and James stood up, clapping like he wasn’t the shyest guy in the room. Everyone else began to clap, and I handed the microphone to Faye. My limbs were shaking like a leaf, but I felt lighter. Happier. Free.

I got to our table and James pulled me into a hug so tight I could barely breathe.

“I’m so damn proud of you,” he whispered in my ear.

A bulldozer hit us from the side, and when James somehow kept us all on our feet, I realized it was Poppy. She held on tight, joining the hug in a fierce awkwardness that was how she went about life in general.

“I’m so dang proud of you, kiddo!” Tears slipped down her chubby cheeks, in direct opposition to the huge smile on her face.

James extracted himself, clearing his throat and stepping back now that Poppy was here. I hugged Poppy back and then pulled her off me.

“Thank you. I’m so happy I came here. And especially happy I met James.” I looked over at him and slid my hand into his, giving him a squeeze that said touching me in front of my grandmother was more than okay.

Poppy looked down at our hands, her gaze pinging back to my pink cheeks and James's shy smile. She bobbed on her feet and clapped her hands. "I'm so happy to see you two together! I was hoping that would happen when I asked James to pick you up. Yedda thinks she's the town matchmaker. Pshh."

"You see this, Yedda? Who's the matchmaker now, bitch?" she shouted off to the side, pointing at us while everyone's heads swiveled in our direction.

"Good Lord," James muttered under his breath. He pulled us down to our chairs, trying to avoid being the center of attention.

Glancing around, I noticed Poppy had moved off to argue with Yedda and everyone else had gone back to eating and drinking. They were used to Poppy being Poppy. Oddly, I was coming to enjoy her antics myself. But right now I had other things on my mind. I grabbed a roll off my plate and leaned into James. "Think we can get out of here now?"

His eyes heated, and he clenched his jaw. "Hell, yes." He grabbed the hand that didn't hold the to-go roll and we ran out of the tent into the dark night.

At his truck, he crowded me against the door, his breath puffing into white clouds around our heads. "I can't believe you did that. I'm so in awe of you, Liv."

My chest puffed with pride, and it no longer mattered if I had beautiful breasts. Having this man look at me like that with his heart in his eyes was a thousand percent better. He pressed his forehead to mine, pulling back only to whisper the words I'd been waiting my whole life to hear.

"Is it too soon to tell you I love you?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

James

I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID it, but the raw truth was pressing against my skin, trying to get out. Telling her I loved her felt more essential to life than breathing. No sooner were the words out there than Blake strolled by to ruin the moment.

“Hey, Slim Jim. Looking to get lucky even though she has no boobs, huh?”

I swear to Saint Nick I saw a blanket of red across my vision and nothing else. I stepped away from Liv and punched the asshole right in the face. He went down to the sidewalk, clutching his eye. I didn't even feel it in my hand.

“What the hell, James?” he whined, finally using my proper name for the first time.

I was breathing hard, just trying to keep from smashing the rest of his face in. “That was for Liv. Keep talking and we'll right all the wrongs from high school.”

“It's okay, babe,” Liv said, coming up behind me and tugging me away.

Liv looked over her shoulder. “By the way, asshole. High school was a long time ago. You should try growing up. It's time.” And then she threw her roll at him, the bread bouncing off his forehead.

I opened the truck door for her, the anger draining from seeing her peg him with a bread roll. That shit was funny. “That felt really fucking good.”

She smiled up at me. “I bet it did. You know what else feels good?”

The lower half of my body knew an answer to that question, but I kept my mouth shut so I didn’t sound like an asshole. Liv pressed her body into me, and even through the layers of winter clothes, she had to feel the steel rod in my pants I’d been fighting against all day.

Her smile turned dangerous. “Take me back to your place and I’ll show you.”

I may have left tire tread backing out of the parking space and leaving Blake still sitting on the sidewalk in my exhaust. I’d never made it home from downtown Hell that quickly, but a desperate man will move mountains when the woman he loves offers herself to him. In my driveway, I pulled her out of the truck and swept her into my arms, running into the tiny house I saved up for and bought last year. I kicked the door shut while she giggled and pointed down the hallway.

In my bedroom, I laid her on my bed gently and stood back to take in the sight of her. Here. In my bed. Looking at me like I was Christmas and Easter and Valentine’s Day all rolled into one.

I threw my jacket off and whipped the T-shirt over my head, approaching her slowly, wanting to savor every second with her tonight. Her hands ran over my arms and to my chest, coming around to my neck and sifting through my hair when I kissed her. When we were both panting, I pulled back and reached down to pull off her boots, dropping them onto the hardwood floors with a clunk.

“Are you ready for this?” I asked her. I wanted to make sure she was emotionally ready to show me all of her. Scars and all.

Her eyes were wide, but she nodded. The bravest girl I’d ever met. I started with her jeans, pulling them down her legs

and growling at the sight of her bare legs. The bright red panties looked like ribbons on a package under the tree just for me. My hands went for her sweater, but she stopped me. Liv sat up and held the bottom of the sweater in her hands.

“I want to do it.”

I knew what she meant, and I loved her even more for it. She sucked in a deep breath and then pulled the sweater over her head, revealing a plain white cotton camisole. She took that off next and squared her shoulders, letting me look at her. She had the most perfect pink nipples and just enough round breast tissue to make me grind my teeth. I could barely make out a straight scar under each breast, as if those perfect breasts were underlined and highlighted because of how perfect they were. They were all Liv.

I stepped out of my jeans and laid her back, climbing over her. I made sure to support myself on my elbows in case she was still sore from the surgery.

“You’re so beautiful, it hurts, Liv. The prettiest package.”

She smiled and tugged me closer, kissing me and moving far too fast for what I had in mind for our first time. Her legs tipped open, and I settled there, the heat of her driving me wild. She crushed me to her, and I broke away.

“Wait! I don’t want to hurt you,” I gasped, lungs feeling like they were on fire from holding back. I’d be gentle, even if it killed me.

“I’ll tell you if anything hurts, but don’t you see, James? I’m not fragile. I’m not broken. Don’t treat me like I am.”

I shook my head. “Never. I just don’t ever want to cause you pain.” She smiled and ran her fingers through my hair. “Trust me to tell you. Otherwise, don’t hold back, okay?”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I kissed a line down her chest and found her nipples, tugging each into my mouth until she gasped above me. Her panties ripped apart with one quick tug. Liv gaped, her laugh one of shock.

“Did you just rip my panties off me?” she asked.

I grinned up at her. “You said not to hold back and I’m the type to rip the wrapping paper off.” I dove between her legs and found out exactly what gave my girl pleasure. She came on my face and I tucked away the sounds she made into my memory.

She was still breathing hard when I came back from the bathroom where I kept a box of condoms I rarely used. “Do it again, James.”

Fuck, yes. I laid down next to her and kissed her nose. “Climb on top so I can watch you.”

Her cheeks went pink, and she looked away for a second before coming back to me. “Yeah, okay.”

She rolled, lifting her leg and straddling me before lifting up and slowing lowering down my length. I dug my head into the pillow and tried to keep myself from blowing apart at the feel of her squeezing me.

“Oh, God, babe, so good,” she murmured, beginning to move. She tossed her head back, her long blonde hair trailing down, lit up from behind by the full moon streaming through the curtains I’d forgotten to fully close.

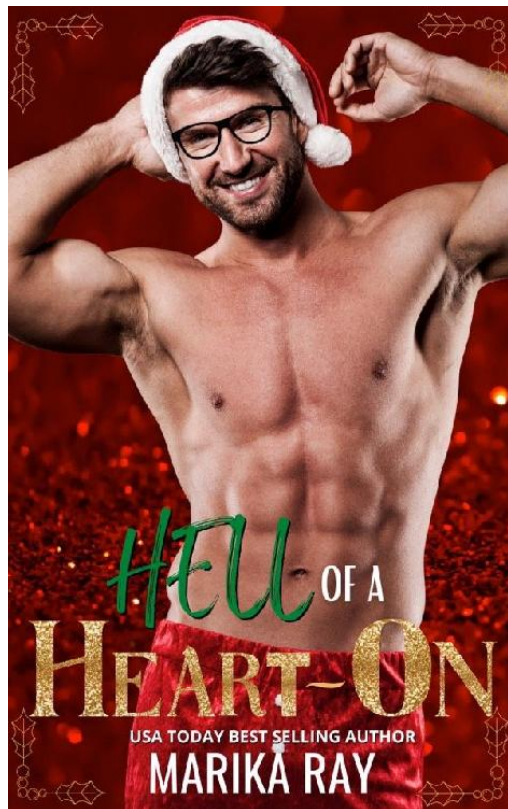
She took pleasure from me, like some sort of Christmas nymph. A mystical creature of the night with her creamy white skin. The sounds she made nearly undid me, the curtain of her pale hair surrounding us. When she squeezed tightly around me and fell into my chest with a soft cry, I grabbed her hips and finally let loose, poisoning into her until I exploded with a deep growl ripped from my soul.

We lay there entwined and out of breath until I eventually drifted into that space of half asleep, but aware of the sounds around me. I’d never been happier. Never been more content than when Liv was draped across my body. I’d move anywhere to be with her. Considering I already told her I loved her today, maybe I should save that confession for tomorrow.

Liv stirred, kissing my shoulder, right where I showed her my stretch marks. “Is it too soon to tell you I want to move to Hell?”

Relief flooded in, and I crushed my lips to hers.

HELL OF A HEART-ON



DESCRIPTION

This is one secret Santa I shouldn't have kissed.

Mostly because my daughter saw me and now thinks I'm dating Santa. Also because once he takes off the beard and puts on his glasses I realize who he is. And I want nothing to do with this nerdy hero who makes my heart pitter patter.

CHAPTER ONE

B en

“YOU THINK Brownie will attack if I tickle you?”

My sister, Annie, was cuddled up on my couch with her boyfriend, Blaze. Who also happened to be my best friend. I was okay with it. Mostly. Except for times like now when the two of them were flirting incessantly and couldn't keep their hands to themselves. The dog Blaze was currently training started growling as Annie leaned over Blaze. I let out my own growl of annoyance. I had work to do and couldn't focus if I was monitoring those two lovebirds.

“I'm heading out to the library,” I announced, putting my laptop in my backpack.

Annie's head popped up from the back of the couch, that loopy smile on her face that had been there since I gave my blessing for her and Blaze to officially date. Don't get all excited over that gentlemanly gesture. Blaze put his hands on my sister well before asking me if it was okay. But that was a story for another time.

“Got a hot date with a librarian?” she asked coyly.

The Auburn Hill—otherwise known as Hell—librarian was at least eighty years old.

“I do like older women,” I snapped back, throwing the backpack over my shoulder.

“Do you want to practice some lines first?” Blaze piped up. He and Annie shared a glance.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Annie shrugged. “Well, it’s just that your flirt game isn’t very strong. Like you’ve been riding the bench instead of the star player.”

I rolled my eyes and shot her the middle finger over my shoulder as I left. I loved my little sister, but she’d become obsessed with love and romance, so much so that she was trying to set me up with every single woman in town. I didn’t need a matchmaker, and I didn’t need a girlfriend. I needed to work the bugs out of this damn app so I could release it before Christmas. Wasn’t much of a market for Christmas games once the new year hit. Maybe then I could focus on having some sort of love life.

The town library was an old structure set at the very end of Main Street, built entirely of weathered red brick. Someone had already put a green wreath on the front door and wrapped the light poles on the street with festive garland. The holiday decor should have made me excited. I’d always loved Christmas, but now it only caused me anxiety realizing I had a couple of days to send in the final version of my app.

At least the library was quiet, thanks to the stern glare the librarian shot at anyone who so much as breathed a little too aggressively. I took a seat at an empty table and got to work. Feedback from my development team agreed that my velociraptor snake was gruesome. Maybe a bit too much for a Christmas version. I went back into my old game and viewed some of the comments about that character. Just like I thought. Gamers either loved the snake hybrid or were terrified of it. Was there a way to make the thing warm and cuddly in the Christmas version?

“Oh my gosh, you have Battleshift?” The screech to my left made me jump. It also made the librarian give me the evil eye from across the room. Certainly she didn’t think that high of an octave came from me, did she?

I glanced down to find a dark haired little girl of not more than six or seven bouncing on her toes by my side, her gaze firmly affixed to my computer screen. A green beanie with brown felt reindeer horns sat atop her head.

“Can I see? Can I see?”

“Uh...” I swiveled my head, but didn’t see a parent anywhere around. Before I could offer to take her to the front desk to find her mom or dad, she climbed on my lap. I lurched back, not sure what to do with this small of a person. I was highly aware that having a little girl on a strange man’s lap was probably not going to be looked upon kindly by, well, anyone.

She jammed her hands on the keys and my velociraptor snake died a violent death before reincarnating into a unicorn-puma.

“My favorite,” she squealed.

“Do you have a mommy here?” I asked, continuing to look around nervously.

“She’s at work.” The little girl somehow got her puma through the meteor shower and closer to the rings of Saturn. “I can’t get past Saturn level. Do you know how?”

I gave up looking for a guardian and focused on the game, the one topic that could make me forget anything else existed. “You play Battleshift?” That was my first game app. The one I started coding in high school and eventually got to market. I’d become a millionaire off that game. It was my baby.

The little girl shrugged, her tiny fingers flying over the keyboard. “Only when Mommy lets me use her phone.”

I smiled. Her pout was Oscar-worthy. “Here. Let’s show you how to defeat Saturn.” I showed her how to punch in the right sequence of moves, getting her unicorn-puma dancing on the rings before lifting her tail to fire off poop darts against her enemies. It was ridiculous, really. But the sales proved elementary aged kids loved this game.

“Cheyenne!” A whispered shout had us both looking away from the screen. A frazzled teen glared at the little girl. “You

can't walk off like that!"

I didn't like how Cheyenne looked so sad. "Is this your babysitter?" She nodded at me and slowly climbed off my lap.

"Maybe you should spend less time looking at your phone and more time playing with Cheyenne," I chastised the teenager. She quickly hid her phone behind her body.

Honestly. What if I'd been a kidnapper? Or a pedophile? Or any manner of low life who could have hurt Cheyenne? We'd been playing Battleship for ten minutes before the babysitter even noticed she was gone.

"Th-thanks for watching her," the teenager responded, looking contrite. I nodded at her and waved to Cheyenne as the two left the library.

The door opened again and part of me hoped it was the little girl coming back to give me a reason to ignore the work I needed to do. Instead, it was a pack of kids. Middle school age, if I guessed correctly. Although now that I was pushing thirty, everyone under twenty looked like a baby. The librarian was having a field day trying to keep the group quiet. When a paper airplane sailed over my head, I gave up. The Tavern would be quieter at this time of day, though it wasn't my normal Thursday visit.

Nugget, the owner ever since I could remember, gave me a head nod when I walked in. I took a tiny booth in the back of the tavern, pulling out my laptop and trying to get some actual work done. I had my usual tables all over town and most of the workers knew my preferred food and drink orders. I tried to rotate where I worked so I didn't occupy a table all the time at one establishment. A lite beer in a frosty mug appeared on the table when I lifted my head from my screen a little while later. I took a long swig of it, happy with the modifications I gave the velociraptor-snake in the Christmas version. Reindeer horns and a big belly made the guy positively cheerful. Or ridiculous. I had a feeling a little girl named Cheyenne would like him, and that was good enough for me.

"Want some onion rings with that or just keep the beers coming?" a sultry female voice asked, nearly making me

choke on my beer. I spun to take in the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. That was definitely not Nugget, like I'd been expecting.

This woman was tall, maybe six feet of lanky limbs and curves in the middle. Raven black hair, dark brown eyes, red lipstick highlighting luscious lips, ripped black jeans, and a pair of beat up Doc Martens.

"Hello?" The red lips moved again.

I blinked and suddenly wished I'd gone over some lines with Annie. I could have used one right then. My glasses felt like they were fogging up.

"Uh. Yes."

She tilted her head, those lips tugged up into a smile that felt like she was laughing at me. "Yes to onion rings? Or yes to only beer?"

"Yes."

She did laugh then, rapping her knuckles on the tabletop and turning to go. "Okay then."

She left, and I watched her walk away, only dropping my forehead to my hand when she went through the door to the kitchen in the back. "I'm such an idiot."

That wasn't a surprise. I wasn't much of a talker anyway, but put me in front of a beautiful woman and I was a tongue-tied idiot. I tried to focus on removing the glitch on the final level of the Christmas game, but hadn't quite figured it out when a text message on my phone distracted me.

Annie: Delivery came for you. Something you need to tell me?

I groaned out loud. I'd forgotten about that promise I'd made to Nugget.

Me: Don't remind me.

Annie: I won't since I don't know what's going on. But I do plan to be there to get pictures. Blackmail for life. Blaze says not to fret...women love a man in a red suit.

A flash of black hair in my field of vision had me staring at the woman who left me tongue-tied. She had a small white kitchen towel slung over her shoulder as she served up a few plates of fries to some patrons at the bar. She gave them a wide smile and I couldn't help but stare. She must be the new bartender I heard Nugget hired recently.

When she turned to me with a basket full of onion rings, I cleared my throat and wracked my brain for something intelligent to say. You'd think I could come up with something based on my IQ, but you'd be dead wrong.

"Figured a guy working so hard needs some nourishment. Not that onion rings have much nourishment, but hey, it's a bar." She put down the basket and shrugged.

I, being a man of infinite wisdom, picked up one of the rings and held it out to her. "Will you marry me?"

I meant it as a joke, of course. Like, a woman who knows a man needs food is a valuable woman indeed, but based on the eye roll, she didn't take it well.

"As if I haven't heard that line before. Try harder, glasses." She spun on her clunky heel and stalked off.

I threw the onion ring in my mouth and chewed, ignoring how it burned my tongue. The glasses insult burned worse. I'd do better to just stay silent. Especially around the prickly woman with boots that could kick my ass.

Nugget clapped me on the shoulder. "How's the gaming business, Ben?"

I swallowed the onion ring as best I could, washing it down with some beer. "Better than my flirt game, apparently." I waved a hand in the gorgeous woman's direction as she washed some cups behind the bar. "You sure she's good for business?"

Nugget snorted. "You need new glasses, son? Come by on a Friday night and see for yourself. She's fucking gorgeous and smart as a whip. The bar has been hopping ever since I hired her."

I grunted.

“She’s a little rough around the edges, is all,” Nugget assured me. “By the way, you got the Santa suit I sent over? I can’t thank you enough for volunteering at the fundraiser.”

I nodded weakly. “Looking forward to it, Nugget.”

Let the record note: I was not looking forward to it.

CHAPTER TWO

Aspen

I GOT AS FAR as the “We are sorry to inform you” part of the letter before I folded it and slid it back into my apron pocket. Another rejection from a publisher, another night hustling tables so I could put presents under the Christmas tree for my daughter. I let out a single sigh and then rolled my shoulders back. I would not let myself wallow in self pity. What my girl needed more than an expensive gaming console was a mom who showed her how to be tough as nails in a world designed for the haves instead of the have-nots.

“Aspen?” Nugget hollered from the bar out front. “Did we order champagne?”

The poor guy was freaking out about the event we’d been planning for months. Or rather, I’d been planning. Every time I’d ask Nugget a question about a detail, he’d just grunt and I’d make the decision myself. The only thing he’d been clear on is that the fundraiser would be for his late wife. Jan had died of a heart attack over a decade ago, but he still thought of her every single minute of every day. Kind of made my jaded heart go a little soft. Speaking of hearts, all the proceeds from tonight’s chili bake-off would go to Go Red For Women, the American Heart Association’s initiative to raise awareness of women’s heart health. And for the guy who gave a strange new woman in town a job when she needed it, I’d blow this party into the best damn fundraiser Hell had ever seen.

I pushed through the saloon doors and hustled over to Nugget, pulling his hands from his white hair and pushing him toward the table where the sprigs of mistletoe needed to be hung. “I got this, Nugget. I promise you I’ve thought of every detail. And if for some reason I missed something, I’ll run to the store and make it right. Just get ready to schmooze once the doors open.”

“I hate schmoozing. You know that, Aspen,” Nugget grouched, his hair now sticking up all over his head.

“Don’t be all bah humbug. This is going to be fun.”

The front door banged open and both our heads popped up. Instead of the first of our invited guests, my daughter and the babysitter I’d hired two weeks ago stood there in the doorway looking awkward.

“I’m so sorry, Aspen,” the babysitter gushed. “My mom just called, and she thinks my dad might have broken his leg at work. I need to meet them at urgent care.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” I came forward to gather up Cheyenne, pushing down the flare of irritation. Of course she needed to be with her family. That put me in a bind, but I couldn’t blame the teenager. Especially when she was the third one I’d gone through the last month trying to find someone reliable to watch Cheyenne when I was working. “Go ahead, honey. Good luck to your dad.”

“Thank you, Aspen. Again, I’m so sorry for bailing on you!” She was out the door before I could reply, which was just as well.

I looked down at Cheyenne to see her looking around at the inside of the bar. “Sorry, mommy. I could help you.” She looked up at me with renewed excitement in her eyes.

God, I loved this kid. She was sweetness with just the right punch of sass. Not much had gone right in my life the last seven years, but it was all worth it to be this girl’s mom.

“How about you fire up my computer in the back, kiddo?” Nugget reached out to tweak Cheyenne’s cheek. She allowed it, even though I knew it irritated her. Nugget was good people

and sometimes you put up with their quirks just to keep the peace. “You can play that game you love so much.”

I rolled my eyes, hating everything about computer games. Kids should be reading books and playing outside, using their imaginations, not glued to a screen like a zombie. Then again, letting her play Battleshift would get her out of the bar during the fundraiser. I couldn't exactly have her in the bar or risk Nugget getting shut down.

“Can I, Mommy?” Cheyenne squealed, bouncing up and down on her toes.

When I gave her a head nod of permission, she squealed even louder and hugged my legs. Then she hugged Nugget's legs before dashing away to the office in the back. I probably wouldn't see her for a few hours once she got going on Battleshift.

That was my last chance to even think about my daughter as the door swung open and the first of our guests arrived, hauling their crockpots of chili with them. Before long, the place was packed with both familiar and strange faces. You tend to meet a lot of people working in a bar, but I still hadn't met everyone in Hell. I could barely keep up slinging mixed drinks and taking orders for more beer from Nugget. At one point, he looked over and widened his eyes comically. I knew what he was thinking. This was more business than The Tavern had done all of last month combined. A hit of warmth filled my chest. I was happy the fundraiser was a success. Maybe if more women knew about the signs of an impending heart attack, women like Jan would seek professional help before it was too late. And no husband would have to visit their wife's grave every Friday morning like Nugget.

One by one, the crockpots were getting unplugged when they ran out of chili. We'd crowned the winner and even a runner-up. Where the hell was the Santa who was supposed to close out the night's festivities by announcing how much money we raised? I'd already totaled it up twenty minutes ago. I'd tried to hire a Santa from Blueball, the closest town to the south, but Nugget had said he pulled in a favor and not to worry about it. I should have handled that detail myself. If you

want something done right, do it yourself. That would be the slogan on my gravestone.

I headed for the front door to see if Santa was waiting out in the parking lot for some reason. With my hand on the antler shaped door handle, the door swung out, pulling me with it. A draft of cold air hit my overheated cheeks and my boots tangled with another pair of boots. My chest hit what felt like a cloud of pillows, warm hands grabbing hold of my arms.

“Ho, ho, ho!” Santa Claus shouted as if on cue, setting me on my feet.

My heart lurched in my ribcage. I tried to move backward, but not before Nugget hollered above the crowd noise, “They’re under the mistletoe!”

If I didn’t know better, Nugget planned that shit. He knew I wouldn’t be caught dead kissing anyone, let alone a mysterious Santa in front of half the town.

I finally raised my gaze from the shiny gold buttons on Santa’s suit to the white beard, the full lips, and then the firm navy blue eyes that were trained on me. He had lashes most women would kill for. Typical. The universe granted a male with the lashes a woman would want. My lungs stuttered like that first breath when you step out into the below freezing temperatures. Santa must have felt it too, because his hands tightened on my arms.

Those lips that were far too pouty to be on a grizzly old Santa Claus opened, as if he was going to say something. But the crowd behind me had had too much alcohol to keep quiet. A chant of “Kiss, kiss, kiss” started up, building steam with each repetition. Those blue eyes flicked behind me for just a moment before returning to my stunned ones.

“Uh—”

I didn’t know if it was the Christmas spirit filling me with sugar plum fairy ideas, but I didn’t want to hear one more word out of Santa’s mouth. The night had been long and my frustration hovered at peak levels. All I wanted was to platonically dust my lips against his and get this night over

with so I could go home and snuggle with my daughter, who did not deserve to spend the evening sequestered in a bar's back office. I tilted my head back, thanking my genetics for my freakishly tall height that didn't require straining to meet a man's face, and did just that, cutting off Santa's ramblings. My lips touched his and my spine lit up like Rudolph's nose, a hot poker of desire stunning me into staying right there with my lips locked with a stranger. Santa froze too, but recovered quicker, pulling me into his chest with a grunt vibrating from somewhere beneath those pillows jammed under his jacket.

“Mommy's kissing Santa Claus!”

My daughter's shriek cut through my travel through the seven levels of the candy cane forest, bursting that bubble of Christmas magic. I lurched back, my fingers immediately going to my lips as if I could wipe away the feeling of that kiss. Santa's eyes stared at me like I'd grown an antler from my forehead. I could even hear the hushed breathing of everyone behind me.

Baby, it was definitely cold outside. My heart was not light. There was no peace, joy, or love. I was such a ho, ho, ho for kissing Santa Claus in front of my daughter.

“Kill me now,” I muttered before chaos erupted behind me.

CHAPTER THREE

B en

I COULDN'T SEE shit without my thick glasses, but I didn't need the world to come into focus to realize with a sudden flash of inspiration that I'd been going about finding a date all wrong. All I had to do was dress up as Santa and women practically threw themselves at me. The hot bartender who had crushed me under her boot the other day was now staring up at me like that kiss was exactly what she'd been wanting for Christmas. Her dress matched her lips, and I was officially obsessed.

"Santa's here!" Nugget proclaimed in the awkward silence, the crowd letting out a drunken cheer and moving on from that unexpected, life altering kiss.

I wasn't a man to go around kissing women. Hell, I pretty much gave up on dating when it seemed to always turn into a stilted dinner where I had to try to engage in mundane conversation that only highlighted how socially inept I was. Even having Blaze as my wingman didn't help me. I could count on two hands the number of women I'd kissed in my lifetime. And my grandma was one of them. So to say I was severely off balance was an understatement akin to saying this town was a little weird.

"Well, come on in and tell us how much money we raised." Nugget was tugging on my arm, his jovial smile for the crowd going hard around the edges.

All I could do was stare at the hot bartender and the cute kid from the library. I was ashamed to say it took me longer than it should to put two and two together and come up with the mother-daughter answer as to who they were.

“Pull your shit together,” Nugget whispered out of the side of his mouth.

That brought me up short. I was here to be Santa for the crowd, doing Nugget a favor so he didn't hold a grudge against Blaze and his brothers for getting into a bit of a scuffle a few months ago with some guys from Blueball. Why was I the one being Santa when Daxon had started the fight? I wasn't sure how that came about, but I was one hundred percent willing to be the fall guy to protect Blaze and his brothers. That family had been like my own growing up and I'd do anything for them. Including dress up like Santa Claus in front of the whole town.

Nugget shoved a scrap of paper in my hand with loopy, feminine handwriting on it. Thankfully, it was big enough script I could just make it out. “Just read it.”

I tried to think of the announcement I'd rehearsed in my head all day, but that kiss with the bartender had short-circuited my brain. I lifted my gloved hand in the air and waited for the crowd to die down. All eyes were on me and all I wanted to do was find a hole somewhere and crawl in it until all the people went away.

“Ho, ho, ho!” My voice cracked on the last ho. I cleared my throat, grasping at the threads of the rehearsed speech. “Thank you for supporting a good cause. And our favorite beer slinger in Hell, Nugget.” The crowd cheered. “As you all know, Jan was a wonderful woman. Probably the only woman who could have put up with Nugget.” The crowd tittered, but Nugget's eyebrows looked like they wanted to murder me. “Your efforts today have raised...” I lifted the scrap of paper, “just shy of twenty thousand dollars.”

The bartender behind me gasped louder than anyone else. Nugget rushed forward to grab the paper from my hand.

“It’s ten thousand,” he whispered to me furiously while the crowd cheered.

I ignored him, addressing everyone else. “Please take your belongings and head outside to the waiting town trolley that will drop you all off safely at your homes.”

Everyone listened, grabbing their things and turning their attention away from me. It immediately felt a little easier to suck in a full breath.

“Dammit. You got the number wrong,” Nugget grouched.

I turned to the grumpy old man, feeling the stare of the hot bartender the whole time. “It’s not wrong. You just hadn’t added my contribution.”

Nugget’s watery eyes went wide. “You matched it?”

I shrugged, as if donating ten grand wasn’t a big deal. Because it wasn’t. I made a ridiculous amount of money making computer games. It was stupid the amount of money I made. If I could help Nugget and prevent other women from dying of a heart attack, that seemed like a pretty good use of my cash. Lord knew I couldn’t spend it all on me in multiple lifetimes.

“Okay, time to head to the office while I clean up, honey.”

I turned further, seeing the hot bartender—I really should find out her real name instead of using what might be construed as a demeaning moniker for her in my head—trying to herd her daughter behind the bar.

“But wait, mommy!” the little girl cried. “I haven’t asked Santa for what I want yet this year!”

Several heads lifted at that statement. The bartender looked up with a grimace that held a tinge of embarrassment. Cheyenne was looking up at me with those eyes that no human on earth could resist.

“You haven’t taken her to see Santa yet, Aspen?” Chief Waldo asked, coming over to frown at the bartender. He technically wasn’t Chief anymore, since he retired almost ten years ago, but he’d always be Chief in my mind.

Aspen. That name suited her. She was tall and willowy. Beautiful and a bit untouchable. She pulled herself up straight, her hands on Cheyenne's shoulders.

"Been a bit busy, but I planned to go tomorrow."

"But Christmas is only a few days away and what if Santa can't get his elves to make my gift that quickly?" Cheyenne blurted out, using sound logic.

Nugget elbowed me and waggled his eyebrows. I had no idea what was wrong with him. I frowned back. He jerked his head in Cheyenne's direction.

I jolted, realizing what he was trying to tell me. I could solve this little dilemma. "Santa's right here!" I bellowed, coming down to one knee. "How about you come tell me what you want this year, unicorn-puma!"

Cheyenne let out a shriek that had half the bar grabbing for their ears. Aspen gave me a grateful smile I didn't deserve. If she knew who I was, she wouldn't let her daughter anywhere near me. Her eyes had held a lot of disdain when I met her the first time.

"See, mommy! Santa knows!"

Cheyenne scrambled up onto my one knee and grabbed the lapels of my Santa suit, turning her enthusiasm on me. "Come closer, Santa."

I leaned down, putting my ear close to her mouth and hoping I wouldn't regret it. The girl could go cow tipping with that squeal. "Tell Santa what you want, Cheyenne."

Her voice dropped so low I barely caught it. "I want a daddy for Christmas."

My head reared back and my jaw dropped. The emotion churning in her little eyes was like a dart straight to my heart. "You...what?"

"A daddy," Cheyenne confirmed, this time louder. "For mommy, not for me. So she won't be lonely anymore."

Aspen gasped. All eyes were back on me and this adorable little girl with a heart of gold. And a voice like a bullhorn,

apparently.

Not even Santa could make that wish come true. I had no idea what to say, so I looked away. Right into the direct gaze of the hot bartender.

Fucking reindeer balls. She had tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

*A*spen

“GIVE me just ten more minutes to help Nugget clean up, and then we’re out of here. Okay, Chey?”

The light of my life, the one person in the world who got my ass out of bed to hustle another day, looked up at me and smiled. “Okay, mommy. I’ll try to get my unicorn-puma to level ten.”

I swallowed my sigh and left her with a kiss on the forehead. I hated video games. In a world where our youth had lost the art of social interaction or even just the simple pleasure of turning the weathered pages of a book, I wanted to raise my daughter differently. But being a single mom meant long hours working and all too often relying on video games to babysit my daughter.

Only the sheer strength of my resolve, tested by six years of raising a kid on my own, had me opening the office door and venturing back into the bar. I’d never been so embarrassed in my life. A daddy for my mommy? Argh!

Only a few of The Tavern’s hardcore regulars were still seated at the bar, shooting the shit with Nugget and nursing their last beer of the night. A flash of red by the door had me turning in that direction. Santa Claus with the magical lips. He waved to Nugget and opened the door, clearly on his way home. I should have let him go. Should have tried to just

forget tonight had ever happened. But one thing poked at my brain, not letting me leave him alone.

Before my teenage modeling career went down the drain due to my unplanned pregnancy, I'd kissed a lot of boys. Even a few men. Some of those kisses had left my heart racing. Some had left me grimacing and moving on. But not one of them had wiped my brain and transported me to where sugar plum fairies danced. Not until this mystery Santa.

"Hey, Santa!" I hollered, running out the door to follow him. I shivered as the icy wind hit my skin. Probably should have stopped to put on a jacket over my red dress, but Santa was already stepping into a silver SUV. At my shout, he froze, one foot in, one foot still on the ground. The gravel crunched under my boots as I approached him. When I was still a full car length away, he turned, those dark blue eyes looking almost black in the dimly lit parking lot.

"I, uh, wanted to apologize for my daughter." I folded my arms across my chest to ward off the cold. And maybe to protect myself from his penetrating gaze. "And for kissing you like that. I shouldn't have just...well, gone for it. Not my finest moment." This apology was so lame I almost turned around and ran back inside the bar.

The guy blinked, his Santa hat sitting askew on his head. "Don't apologize."

"Well, I am apologizing." I hadn't kissed a man since I was seventeen. Coming right out of the gate kissing Santa with an audience was not what I had in mind for venturing back into the dating pool again.

"I don't want you to apologize."

My mouth dropped open. This guy was starting to piss me off. "Well, too bad. I'm officially lodging my apology and there's nothing you can do about it."

His eyes narrowed. Right before a gloved hand came up to pull off the white beard. The hat came off next, revealing dark hair that might have been a touch auburn had there been more moonlight to illuminate it. Santa looked vaguely familiar, but I

couldn't place him. A gloved hand shoved thick black glasses on his face and all the puzzle pieces came together.

"You!" I pointed at him, brain scrambling to believe that the latest asshole who offered to marry me was the Santa who'd just blown my mind.

He shrugged. "Yep, just me. I'm Ben, by the way. Ben McLachlin."

I dropped my accusing finger and narrowed my eyes. When he'd been in the bar the other day, he'd been just like the long line of drunk men in my past who'd asked me to marry them. Can you even imagine how many times I'd been proposed to over a pint of beer? It was nauseating, and quite frankly, unimaginative. If ever I was to be swept off my feet—and chances of that were looking slimmer and slimmer—it would be by a man who dug deep for a way to connect with me.

"Your kisses are better than your flirt game, that's for sure."

Ben didn't slink away like I thought he would. He simply tossed his head back and laughed, creating a cloud of fog around him. And boy could the big guy laugh. It made me think of when I'd been a kid, long before my modeling days. Back when I laughed with my childhood best friend. Uninhibited. Almost an uncontrolled giggle with no end in sight.

Before I could school my features into a frown, I found myself smiling and waiting him out. When he finally sobered, he opened his mouth to respond. I found myself straining toward him, eager to hear what he had to say.

"My lines are horrendous, I know. My sister's been trying to help me, but it's no use. I'm hopeless."

Another shiver wracked my body. "No one is hopeless."

Ben dropped his chin to his chest with a groan that made my girly parts sit up and listen. Interesting. That hadn't happened in a very long time.

“Pretty sure I am. That’s okay, though. I’ve made peace with it.” His head came back up, eyes piercing into mine. “Unlike your daughter.”

I grimaced, feeling that mom guilt twist my insides. “Yeah, sorry about that. She sees other families and thinks...”

Ben nodded like he was listening, but he was taking his Santa coat off, revealing a tight T-shirt underneath that highlighted every muscle the suit had hidden.

“What are you doing?”

He threw the coat around my shoulders, his hand brushing against the bare skin of my shoulder. “You looked cold.”

He pulled the lapels together under my chin and I shivered for a different reason. The coat smelled subtly like cologne and maybe hair gel. “You should have led with this, not the line.”

Ben smiled down at me and fuck if I didn’t feel like the maiden in distress with her white knight coming to save her with his thick coat and gorgeous smiles. “I am much better at executing than talking about it beforehand.”

“Is that so?” I asked coyly, tilting my head to size him up again. Where I’d only seen a tired line from a guy who couldn’t handle me, now I saw a man who had substance beyond the pathetic lines he tried to use.

Ben’s smile faded. “Maybe you could help me with my lines.”

I bit my bottom lip, enjoying the way his gaze immediately dropped to my mouth. “And what do I get, Santa?”

I watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed hard. “I can pretend to be your boyfriend.”

My mouth dropped open, the flirting dropped in an instant. “Excuse me?”

Ben pulled his hand out of the pocket of the Santa pants. He held a folded piece of paper, which he handed to me.

I snatched it from his hands and unfolded it, immediately recognizing the artwork of my own daughter. It was a stick figure drawing of me, her, and a tall man I couldn't identify all standing inside a red heart. I glanced back up at Ben, words no longer forming.

“How—why—”

“She handed it to me, but I thought you might want it instead. She's worried about you.”

I snapped my mouth shut and tried not to wince as the mom-guilt turned into a full blown panic attack that would require more alcohol than The Tavern had left over after the fundraiser.

Ben stepped closer, lightly putting his hand on my arm. “Teach me to flirt. I'll treat you like a queen so your daughter doesn't think you're lonely.”

Now it was my turn to swallow hard. I considered myself a tough broad, but when it came to Cheyenne, I was mush. I'd do anything for that little girl. Including put up with this wanna-be Santa so my daughter could just focus on being a carefree kid.

“You got yourself a deal.”

CHAPTER FIVE

B en

WHY? Why was I even allowed out of the house? Offering to be Aspen's fake boyfriend so she could tutor me in flirting? This was Annie's fault. She'd had on so many stupid romantic comedy movies over the years, I'd somehow fallen into one in real life.

Aspen looked at me, her shivers finally abating with my coat over her shoulders. "So, what do we do from here?"

I looked down at my Santa suit, desperately wishing I could just disappear. This night had taken a strange turn. "I'm going to go home since it's late. Maybe we should get together tomorrow and plan this thing out?"

Aspens's dark eyes rolled back in her head. "Oh great. You're a planner. I should have guessed."

I frowned, hating that her judgement affected me. I'd been hiding behind a computer screen for so long I'd forgotten what face-to-face rejection felt like. "Fail to plan, plan to fail." I muttered my favorite motto, one that had served me well so far in life.

Aspen took a giant step closer, her tips of her boots touching mine, her nose just an inch away from my chin. I liked that she was almost my height. Nothing worse than trying to talk to a girl when you had to look down so far your neck screamed at you.

“I have a better idea. How about we just wing it and see what happens?” Aspen’s hands shot out from between the jacket lapels and ran up my chest.

I sucked in a breath, watching her short black nails touch my body. Her perfume wafted up to my nose, something spicy and rich. Those nails didn’t stop like I thought they would. They trailed up the sides of my neck and into the back of my hair. Aspen was now so close I could count her eyelashes, which I had the sudden urge to do. Anything to stop my body from responding to the lush curves plastered against mine.

I opened my mouth to speak and found I had no control over my tongue. My body had gone rogue with one touch from Aspen. I couldn’t swallow, could barely breathe. My body was on high alert, chemicals coursing through my veins and pooling below my Santa belt. I’d never been a mall Santa, but I was pretty sure getting an erection while suited up was strictly against the rules.

Aspen’s tongue darted out to lick her lips, and I was mesmerized. “This is the part where you put your hands on me and sweep me off my feet with a kiss to end all kisses, Mr. Claus,” she said so low and sultry I realized the error of my ways like a lightning strike.

I’d asked the queen of flirting to help me, the idiot with zero experience. My one and only time with a naked woman had ended so badly I couldn’t even talk about it with my best friend for fear of never living down the shame. I should have asked a more moderately flirty woman to tutor me. Baby step me into the big pool of flirtation and dating. This woman would dump me in the deep end and sit on my head while I tried desperately to stay afloat.

“Uhh...that’s a tall order,” I answered lamely. Because of course I did. Lamé was my main game.

Her fingers tightened in my hair before she let me loose and stepped back. Her face fell, and I steeled myself for the rejection that was sure to come next. The part where she’d laugh at the idea of pretending to date me. It wouldn’t hurt so badly if it wasn’t for the fact that I rather enjoyed her body

pressed against me. Her kiss had made all the nasty voices in my head stop. All the voices that said I sucked when it came to women, or that she was only kissing me because she was forced. Those voices were finally silenced with the press of her lips. A fucking Christmas miracle, if you asked me.

“Look, if you don’t have self confidence, this isn’t going to work. We have to actually look like we’re dating or no one will believe us, especially Cheyenne. And I can’t teach you anything about flirting if you don’t have confidence.” Aspen folded her arms across her chest, tapping her steel-toed boot against the pavement. She should have looked ridiculous in a tight red dress, black boots, and a Santa jacket, but she didn’t. She looked like a modern day Mrs. Claus, complete with ass kickers and sex appeal for days.

I stared at this firecracker of a woman, wondering how the hell I was going to pull off the acting job of the century when one quiet, timid voice popped up in my head.

Grab her and kiss her or you’ll regret this for the rest of your life.

I didn’t make a pros and cons list. I didn’t explore each possibility three steps down the road. I didn’t even ask a colleague for a recommendation on my course of action. There was no time for a beta run. This was the real deal, live and in front of me. I reached down deep where I must have been hiding my courage all this time and decided to fucking go for it.

I snatched Aspen to me, heart pounding at the surprise that flitted across her face. And then I was tipping her over my arm, the edge of the Santa jacket dragging across the pavement. Her long, inky black hair tickled my arm. The bow of her neck made my teeth ache to nip at her. The very warmth of her seeped into me, turning on some ancient DNA that required I mate with this woman or die trying.

My head dipped and her lips were under mine. I didn’t wait for further invitation, knowing innately she wouldn’t extend it. If I wanted it, I had to fucking take it. So take it I did. My tongue plowed between her lips and I tasted the

essence of her. She was spicy and sweet and a little hoppy, as if she'd been nipping at the beer she'd been serving all night. My hand swept up the front of her, tilting her head to the side and devouring her as if this would be my only chance. And it probably would be. Women like Aspen didn't kiss men like me.

But tonight I was Santa and my wish was coming true.

After a single moment of hesitation, Aspen was kissing me back.

CHAPTER SIX

*A*spen

MY FAVORITE SCARF, the one with the skulls all over it, was chafing my neck. I gave it a yank and let out a sigh. I was being ridiculous. All worked up over a kiss from a guy I was pretty sure I didn't even like. I mean, who kisses the hell out of a woman in a dark parking lot and then walks away? I barely got my feet under me before he revved the engine of his car and took off. By the time my lungs started working again, his taillights had already disappeared. All worked up and nothing to take the edge off. Story of my life, apparently.

"Mommy!" Chey called from her room in the tiny apartment Nugget rented to us over his garage. "Can I wear whatever I want to Coffee?"

I winced. "Sure! Just make sure you dress warm." Giving Cheyenne the green light to dress however she wanted could lead to some interesting Whoville-worthy outfits. They say to raise a headstrong daughter, but they don't tell you what a headstrong daughter does to her mother. This was karma, paying me back for being a handful—putting it mildly—when I was a little girl.

Christmas Eve was tomorrow, but I was more concerned with today. Cheyenne and I were to meet with Ben at Coffee this morning. Our first official date. Fake date, that is.

"Ready!" Chey announced.

I turned to see her standing in the doorway with the biggest smile on her face, her dark curls constrained by the Santa hat on her head, the one that had a string of flickering lights that wound around the hat. A bright pink puffy ski jacket covered her top half, purple leggings and a tutu covering the bottom half. Boxing gloves were on her hands instead of mittens. I'd bought those soon after having Cheyenne. They'd helped me get back in shape, plus punching the shit out a bag really helped work out some of the aggression that had to do with her absentee sperm donor.

“Honey, you can't wear boxing gloves to Coffee.”

She instantly pouted. I struggled, but managed to keep the stern look on my face. Her pout was adorable.

“Why not?”

“Because you can't hold your hot chocolate cup with those on.”

She looked at them, flexed her hands, and realized I spoke the truth. Her shoulders slumped. “Fine.”

I bent down to help her take them off. Once that was accomplished, she shoved her feet in her boots, the ones that were probably too small for her this year, but I didn't have the money to replace, and ran out the door.

“Wait!” I ran after her, locking the door and zipping up my own jacket. Black as my soul, not pink like Cheyenne's. “I need to tell you that we're going to meet my friend, Ben, at Coffee.”

Cheyenne skidded to a halt on the sidewalk out front. “Your friend?”

My cheeks began to heat thinking of that epic kiss. “Well, maybe more than a friend, but we'll see.”

“Really?!” Cheyenne squealed, running back to fling her arms around my waist before skipping ahead of me again.

She was so excited about that prospect that I couldn't help but think maybe this arrangement was a good thing after all. Even short term, it would show Chey I wasn't lonely and she

didn't need to be worried about me. And hey, maybe I could scratch the itch so to speak with Ben. After all, seven years was a long dry spell.

Both our cheeks were pink by the time we made it to Coffee. I always told Cheyenne that walking everywhere was for our good health, but it mostly had to do with not having a car. But all dark thoughts about finances drifted away in the winter breeze when a tall, dark haired man rose from the only table and chair out of the cold sidewalk. He turned and my breath caught in my throat. How did he get more good looking every time I saw him?

“Good morning,” Ben said, his voice deep and rumbly and all kinds of delicious.

Cheyenne halted right in front of him, gazing up with wide eyes. “Is this your more than friend, Mommy?”

Ben's lips, the ones I was intimately familiar with, wobbled on the edges. More heat hit my cheeks. “Yes, this is Ben.”

Cheyenne let out a squeal that scared all the pigeons meandering around on the sidewalk. “He's the unicorn-puma maker!” Before I could decipher what that meant, Chey wrapped her arms around his legs and held on like he might run away if she didn't stop him.

Ben patted her back and looked back up at me with a sheepish smile. My brain was having a hard time computing today. I blamed it on the dark jeans that hugged his thighs. Or maybe it was the way his thick dark glasses gave him that Clark Kent vibe.

“The video game?”

Ben lifted one shoulder and let it drop, still patting Cheyenne's back while she practically cooed at him. “Yeah, Battleshift is my app.”

My jaw dropped. “I hate that game.”

It was out of my mouth before I could swallow it back. It was exactly how I felt, but insulting my fake boyfriend wasn't a good way to start things off.

Ben seemed to weather my insult just fine, sweeping past it to open the door to Coffee and gesture for Chey and me to enter. I tried to give him an apologetic smile, but he was looking at the ground. Dammit. I told him last night that he had to work on his confidence and here I was bashing him and his company. My mom had always been harping at me to try a “lighter touch” as she put it. Perhaps there was wisdom there.

“Hey, Dante. Merry Christmas.” Ben spoke over my shoulder, directing pleasantries to the barista, far nicer than I’d been just moments before. “Can you fix up three unicorn hot chocolates for us?”

“What’s that?” Cheyenne spun around, pushed up the Santa hat that had fallen over her eyes and gazed up at Ben, much like I think I’d looked after he’d kissed me last night.

Ben put his hand on my low back and even with a jacket and a sweater in between us, I could feel the heat of him as if he was a furnace. “Wait and see.”

Ben had his credit card out so fast I didn’t get a chance to argue over who should pay. When I pulled my wallet out, Ben shut me down. “You can get it next time.”

We moved to a table in the corner of the shop. Several people I knew waved hello, and I waved back. Ben held my chair for me, a move I was not anticipating. When was the last time a guy held my chair for me? I sat, then got Cheyenne out of her jacket and settled in her chair. Ben waited for our hot chocolates and then presented the first one to Cheyenne.

“It’s so pretty!” Cheyenne said in a loud, deep voice that had several tables next to us laughing.

She was right. The hot chocolate was topped with a pile of whipped cream that was pink, purple, and blue and dusted with glittery sprinkles.

Ben handed me mine and sat down across from me. “I called ahead and spoke to Dante. He’s a genius with these kinds of creations.”

I put my hand on top of his where it lay on the table. “Thank you, Ben.”

I felt like an asshole. I just insulted him and he'd gone to such trouble to treat my daughter. His hand flipped over just as I went to pull away. He snatched my hand in his and held it firmly, his gaze locking with mine. Heat from more than the hot chocolate was flooding through my body.

"You're welcome."

"So I got to level ten last night. But then the queen bee sent her minions after me and I died." Cheyenne was talking wildly with her hands. I moved her hot chocolate away from the edge of the table, smiling at the multi-colored mustache she wore. "I even used my light sword, and they still killed me."

Ben finally dragged his gaze away from mine and I could breathe again. "That's because the light sword doesn't kill bees. You have to fumigate them."

Cheyenne's nose wrinkled. "Funny-gate? What's that?"

Ben chuckled and something about the light hearted sound made me want to curl up against his chest and beg him to laugh some more. "You have to go on an adventure through the spinner forest to find the skunk capital."

The two of them kept talking, every word out of their mouths making absolutely no sense whatsoever. I sipped my hot chocolate, my hand in Ben's and my heart beating faster as I watched them interact. I tried to wrap my brain around the wisdom of faking a relationship with a man who turned me inside out and upside down, while also producing the video game that represented everything wrong with raising a kid in today's world.

But as I watched Cheyenne's eyes light up and the way Ben gave her his undivided attention, I began to think that maybe there was something here I just hadn't seen until now. Until a Santa with cheesy lines and a genius brain came barreling into my life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

B en

I REMINDED myself a thousand times this morning not to stare at Aspen like an idiot. Of course, the second she and Cheyenne walked up the sidewalk, that went out the window. I'd had a hard time ripping my gaze from her skin-tight jeans, or the red sweater that clung to her curves, or the dark straight hair that looked softer than silk. Even the skulls on her scarf made me want to crush her to me and kiss the darkness from her. Every single time I'd seen her, Aspen had red lipstick on, highlighting the bow at the top of her full lip. It was mesmerizing. Distracting. Indecent.

Thankfully, she went on to insult my app and that snapped me out of me whatever spell I'd been under. Now I was wholly focused on Cheyenne and her assessment of my game. For being so young, her take on the levels and various characters was fascinating. I was beginning to think that my development team should be fired and replaced by Cheyenne and several of her friends. I was getting more usable feedback than I'd had in years.

"Can I play right now, Mommy?" Cheyenne asked with her hands clasped below her chin.

I risked a glance up, seeing a soft look on Aspen's face I hadn't previously thought her capable of. She blinked in rapid succession and then gave a quick shake of her head.

“No, honey. We’re here to socialize.” As Cheyenne’s shoulders dropped, Aspen kept going. “That’s what’s wrong with kids today. They have their noses in their phones, completely cut off from other people. Rates of childhood depression are skyrocketing and somehow no one’s correlating that with technology use.”

She cut off mid rant, maybe realizing that the developer of the very app she was ranting about had just bought her hot chocolate.

Honestly, I kind of thought the rant only made her hotter. Aspen wasn’t afraid to tell it like it was, which was a refreshing take. The last few dates I’d gone on had been a soul sucking mission of finding out that most people will just agree with whatever you say in order to keep the peace. I rather preferred intelligent discourse and challenging new ideas.

“I get it. You’re one of those moms who thinks video games are ruining our children.”

Aspen’s eyes went heated and every body part of mine below the table went tight. I forgot all about the six-year-old between us, caught once again in the Aspen vortex.

“And what would you know about the development of children?” Aspen asked with a decided frost in her voice. The one dark eyebrow slowly lifting on her forehead was fascinating.

“I get emails from angry moms pretty much every day.”

“Oh good. I’m glad there are others out there expressing their concern. I’ve sent you a few over the last year or two myself.”

“You look beautiful today.”

Now both eyebrows were nearly in her hairline. “You’re just going to change the subject?”

I leaned forward over the table, afraid that I had officially fucked it all up with this woman. Dammit, Annie was right. I was not good at this. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Is that another line of yours?”

“What? No! I have no lines. No witty comments or flirtatious repartee. I’m just a man sitting across from a woman, about to tell her something he’s never told anyone else.”

Aspen licked her lips and my knee jumped under the table, hitting the underside and rattling our mugs.

“Whoopsies! I do that all the time. Mommy says I should wear an apron at all times.” The intrusion of Cheyenne’s enthusiastic voice pulled my attention away from Aspen. For a second there, it felt like we were the only two people in Auburn Hill.

“Uh oh.” Thank goodness Cheyenne had interrupted. The town’s biggest gossip had entered Coffee and her gaze was darting around the faces at this table.

“What is it?” Aspen’s head swiveled left and right, trying to suss out what had me bothered.

I tilted my head in Lucy’s direction, trying to be subtle. “See that lady there with her tall husband and two daughters?”

Aspen nodded while Cheyenne swiveled all the way around in her seat, making it obvious who we were talking about.

“Her name’s Lucy Sutter and she’s one of the primary gossipers in this town. And she’s looking over here.” She also fancied herself a matchmaker, but I didn’t want to scare Aspen off with that information.

Aspen focused on me again and I couldn’t help but stare at her lips, even knowing Lucy was watching and probably taking notes. Hell, I wouldn’t put it past her to take our picture, but I couldn’t look away from Aspen. “I don’t care. Let them gossip. Tell me your secret, Ben.”

I sighed, scrubbing my hand across my face and realizing that I’d already messed things up with Aspen. Hell, this wasn’t even a real date. I might as well be honest with her. “Sometimes I wish I’d never made that app either.”

She studied my face, maybe looking to see if I was being honest. Thing was, this was the very thing that was keeping

me up at night for the last few months. I wasn't sure when things had shifted, but it didn't seem like they'd just naturally shift back. I was unhappy and wasn't sure what to do about it.

A full thirty seconds later, just when I was starting to wonder if Aspen had even heard me, her face broke out into a smile so bright I thought surely she was looking at someone else over my shoulder.

“Let's give Lucy of the gossip grapevine something to talk about, hmm?” Aspen reached across the small table and grabbed the collar of my jacket. Before I could ask her what the hell she was doing, she'd given me a yank and her lips were pressed to mine. Holy shit. Her tongue darted out to swipe at my bottom lip. The world disappeared again and my hand was somehow on the back of her neck, tangled in all that beautiful hair while I kissed her back with everything I had.

“Mommy? Let Ben go...everybody's looking!” Cheyenne giggled.

“Mommy, can Ben come over for Christmas Eve tomorrow?”

Aspen ended the kiss abruptly and sat back in her chair, her eyes hazy and her cheeks flushed. Well, call me Santa, the giver of Christmas miracles. I'd done that. I'd put that look on her face.

She finally answered her daughter while staring straight into my soul. “I think that's a very good idea.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

*A*spen

DID Chey's clothes mate and multiply? Every time I turned around, there were more of them needing to be washed, folded, or hung up. I threw yet another load of laundry into the washer that was currently located in the screened-in porch. I was thankful for a washer and dryer on sight, but damn, it was cold out here in the winter.

"Mommy!" I heard Chey call from somewhere in the house. "How do you spell Ben?"

I came inside and shut the door, rubbing my arms to get feeling back in them. "B. E. N." Chey was a smart kid. She already knew the whole alphabet and could spell basic words. Another reason why I didn't want her on devices too much. She had too much potential to dumb her down with games that didn't feed her brain.

I glanced around the room and went over to fluff up the throw pillows on our one and only couch even though I'd fluffed them just ten minutes ago.

"Get ahold of yourself, Aspen. He's just a man. Probably a disappointment," I muttered to myself.

Then I went into the kitchen and cleaned the formica counters one more time. I didn't know why I was getting so worked up about a fake boyfriend. Sure, he was hot in a super nerdy way, but I'd seen hotter at The Tavern. He wasn't slick

or sophisticated, which I kind of liked. I'd seen more men full of themselves on photoshoots than I cared to remember. There was just something about Ben McLachlin and his innocent, horrifically corny charm that spoke to my rebel heart. There was more to him than met the eye, and Santa help me, I wanted to dig to find out what.

A firm knock sounded on the door and I threw the dirty paper towel and Windex in the cupboard under the sink. Cheyenne came screaming out of her room to the front door. I barely got a hold on her by the time she unlocked all three locks and threw the door open. My heart was pounding in time with hers.

"Ben!" She jumped and, thankfully, Ben caught her, giving her a hug in return. "Merry Christmas Eve!"

"Merry Christmas Eve to you too, Cheyenne." He stepped through the doorway and wrapped his other arm around me, pulling me in for a kiss. He smelled like pine trees and some fragrance I couldn't put my finger on but really, really wanted to.

"Not this again," Cheyenne said comically when the kiss went on a little longer than she cared for.

Ben and I chuckled as he put her down. "I got something for you."

"You did?" Cheyenne looked ready to burst.

"Oh, you didn't need to do that. We keep Christmas simple." And shit. I hadn't gotten something for him.

Ben winked at me from behind those thick glasses, and I had to bite my lip to keep from fawning all over him like Chey. He pulled something small from under his jacket, the wrapping job one of the worst I'd ever seen and that was saying something because I normally wrapped Chey's presents by myself on Christmas Eve after indulging in a bottle of wine.

Chey ripped the paper off and opened her mouth wide. No sound came out, which was a new level of excitement for her. Then the squeal began, and I had to plug my ears.

“A unicorn-puma?!” Chey looked up at Ben and then back down at the ugliest and brightest stuffed animal ever made by Santa’s elves.

“It’s an exclusive. Only one of its kind.”

Chey wrapped it in her little arms and looked up at Ben solemnly. “I will love it forever. And I love you, Ben.” Then she threw herself at his legs and hung on tight. Ben cleared his throat while patting her back.

Something was happening to my chest, and I wasn’t entirely sure if it wasn’t a sign of a heart attack. Instead of the numbness I always felt around men, I had an odd sense of pressure in my rib cage. Add in the shortness of breath and the cold sweat that broke out across my back and I was two seconds away from calling 9-1-1. Then Ben turned his head to look at me and I saw a distinct shine on the surface of his eyes.

The tall strapping man with the nerd brain and magic lips was hugging my daughter and getting teary-eyed over her declaration. Well, fuck. How was my heart to survive that?

Chey, oblivious to the emotions the adults were dealing with, let go of Ben and ran toward her room, calling over her shoulder that she had a game to play. Little minx knew she was supposed to ask before taking my phone and playing games, but was also smart enough to know I wouldn’t say no on Christmas Eve.

In her wake, the silence stretched out. I finally cleared my throat. “Thank you for that. That meant so much to Cheyenne.” What I didn’t say was how much it meant to me.

“She means a lot to me, too.” Ben took off his jacket and laid it over the chair at the small breakfast table. A stack of paperwork that I kept there in barely controlled chaos got pushed to the ground. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

We both squatted down to pick it up, and I was frantic to make sure he wouldn’t see how many bills I was behind on, but Ben was too quick. He got an eyeful of the publisher’s rejection letter I got the day of the fundraiser.

“You write books?” he asked, looking up.

I couldn't meet his gaze. I grabbed the papers from his hand and put them back on the table. He stood up too, his hand coming to my elbow to turn me back toward him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to pry. It's just way cool."

I smirked. "Way cool?"

Ben frowned. "Oh sorry. Do the cool kids not say that anymore?"

I bit back a laugh. His awkwardness was adorable. "I write children's books, but none have been published yet."

Ben's gaze took a trip around my face. "I like how you phrased that." I tilted my head in confusion and he explained. "How it's just a matter of time before you're published."

I sucked in a deep breath. Nothing like telling a successful millionaire that your work had never even been published. Then again, I was well acquainted with humility.

"I have faith—most days—that I'll be published. Until then, I sling beers and I'm damn grateful for the job."

"Can I read one of the books?" Ben asked suddenly.

There was that pounding again in my chest. "Oh, I don't know."

He took a step closer to me, that woodsy scent back in my nose. "You ever thought about using your writing skills for an app?"

Maybe it was how close he was to me, but my brain couldn't grasp what he was saying. "Huh?"

He smiled, and in a lightning bolt of insight, I realized what was happening here. I was falling for my fake boyfriend. The shivers, the cold sweat, the heart palpitations. This was desire. The thing I'd run from as I focused on being the best damn single mother I could be.

"Remember the secret I told you yesterday?" Ben's hand came out to rest on my hip, tugging me even closer. I nodded, unable to form words. "I've been unhappy and unfulfilled with my job for a while now. And this may sound crazy, but it just

came to me. What if you and I paired up to make an app that was both fun and educational?”

“No unicorn-pumas?”

Ben’s smile turned lopsided, and I wanted to lick it. “Well, we can have whatever characters we want. That’s the beauty of it. We’d make it up together. Your words, my coding. We could both find our passions.” His other hand came up to hold my waist, pulling me fully into his chest.

What was actually happening here and why did I want to find my passion with Ben so badly?

Ben’s voice dropped lower, the vibration of it taking that tiny flame of desire in my body and pouring gasoline on it.

“Let’s partner up for real.”

I licked my lips. “Partners? As in, making the app together?”

Ben’s eyes got shifty, and I realized he was nervous. “Um, well, as in...partners with benefits?” His gaze came back to mine, filled with hope and jitters that mirrored what was happening in my chest.

“Confidence,” I whispered, reminding myself that if I wanted something, I had to have the confidence to make the leap.

Ben’s eyes lit up. Then he was pushing me back to the wall, not hard enough to bash my head, but more aggressive than I’d have thought possible from this gentle giant. His palm cupped my jaw, traveling back to tangle his fingers in my hair. He either had a giant candy cane in his jeans or his brain was definitely joining mine in the gutter. Ben wanted me as much as I wanted him. That knowledge filled me up, pushing away doubts about getting involved with a man for the first time since Cheyenne’s father.

I didn’t have time to hold on to that feeling because Ben tugged on my hair. Hard. My head tilted back, my lips just a breath away from his.

“Say yes,” he whispered, the plea as desperate as a man down on both knees.

Fuck caution. “Yes.”

His lips crushed mine and my head spun. Here was the take charge man that turned me on and inside out.

“Merry fucking Christmas to me,” I whispered against his lips, right before I jumped and wrapped my legs around his waist.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marika Ray is a national bestselling author, writing steamy and sweet RomCom to make your heart explode. All her books come with a money-back guarantee that you'll smile at least once with every book.

Marika spends her time behind a computer crafting stories, walking any beach she can find, and making healthy food for her kids and husband whether they like it or not. Prior to writing novels, Marika held various jobs in the finance industry, with private start-up companies, and then in health & fitness. Cats may have nine lives, but Marika believes everyone should have nine careers to keep things spicy.

If you'd like to know more about Marika or the other novels she's currently writing, please join her newsletter list here (and you'll get a free RomCom...double bonus!): <http://bit.ly/MarikaRayNews>