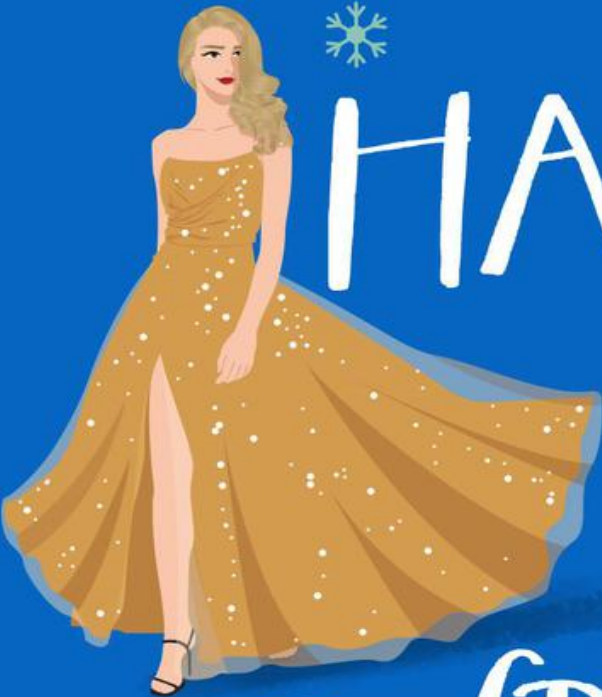


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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

IT
HAPPENED
ONE
CHRISTMAS
EVE



It Happened One Christmas Eve

A Museum of Literature Romance, Volume 3

Jenn McKinlay

Published by JMO Ink, 2022.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

IT HAPPENED ONE CHRISTMAS EVE

First edition. December 6, 2022.

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ISBN: 979-8201792831

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Further Reading: Royal Valentine](#)

[About the Author](#)

About the Publisher

For my three handsome, funny, smart, brilliant guys,
Chris, Beckett, and Wyatt. Our holidays together are
my favorites. Love you forever.



Chapter One



“Finally, you’re getting engaged,” my mother said. She sounded as excited as if the train she’d been waiting for had arrived in the station at last. Hildy Macintosh, New York socialite and reigning queen of the Upper East Side, met my gaze in the mirror and for the first time ever I saw pride in her eyes.

Mom stood behind me, inspecting me for flaws from every angle. Tonight was her big night, after all. She was marrying off her only child, a forty-year-old daughter who had been sitting on the shelf so long I’m sure she feared I’d leave a trail of dust and cobwebs behind me when I walked.

We were in the executive washroom of the Museum of Literature, of which I am the director. Not gonna lie, my family’s money had greased the wheels for me to have this position, but I was also very good at it—*damn it!*—a fact my mother had never, not once, acknowledged. And now here I was, getting engaged because if I didn’t Mom had threatened to withdraw the substantial Macintosh family financial support to the museum, potentially putting my career in jeopardy. It was a cruel thing for a mother to do, I know, but Hildy Macintosh, formerly Hildy Grace, was not one to be thwarted.

My father often said, “Your mother wants what she wants when she wants it, and life is just easier for all involved if we see that she gets it.”

If I kicked up a fuss, my father would not take my side over Hildy’s. I couldn’t blame him. He traveled every week to far-flung parts of the globe as a corporate attorney specializing in the environmental impact of industries on our little blue marble. He didn’t have time for domestic strife.

“That Carolina Herrera makes you look like a golden statuette,” my mother gushed. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Trey

pops the question the moment he sees you.”

I glanced in the mirror. My strapless gold sequined gown was form fitting and weighty. I'd used double stick tape along the bodice to prevent any spillage from my ample front. A mortifying bodice incident had happened to the museum's former registrar, Molly Graham, and I had vowed to never let it happen to me.

My blonde hair was up in a twist and my makeup on point, thanks to the crew my mother had employed to make me a walking photo op. I'm a large woman, tall and curvy, a throwback to my paternal grandmother's Nordic heritage via Iceland. Usually, I enjoyed being one of the taller persons in the room as it gave me an edge, but tonight, my height made it impossible for me to hide.

I had been dating Trey, a nickname for Benedict Thurmond the Third, since my mother's spring garden party. He was... fine. Tall, broad-shouldered, and handsome in a frat boy sort of way, Trey had an Ivy League education and generational wealth; in other words, he ticked all my mother's boxes. He didn't tick mine, but he also didn't make my skin crawl, so here I was preparing to receive a proposal from a man I considered to be...meh.

My mother's phone chimed, and she took it out of her clutch. “Your father says the doors are open and the Christmas Gala is underway. He's waiting for us at the top of the stairs. Are you ready?”

“Absolutely.” I wasn't, but I also knew there was no other acceptable answer. We exited the washroom and walked down the wood-paneled hall of offices toward the main staircase.

The Museum of Literature was housed in a Georgian Revival mansion on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Formerly the residence of Thomas Stewart, a wealthy industrialist who had amassed a fortune in the steel industry, the home had been left to his beloved wife, Mabel. An avid reader and book lover, Mabel Stewart had bequeathed the mansion to a private foundation with specific instructions to create the Museum of Literature, a place where books were to

be displayed and preserved like rare paintings for years to come.

As we entered the public area on the second floor, I glanced at the life-sized painting of Thomas and Mabel that had been rendered in their personal library at the time. They were posed on a divan, seated, as he read to her. Their beloved cocker spaniel, Augustus, sat at their feet. The portrait had been done early in their marriage and the way they looked at each other made me pause. The closest description I could come up with was affectionate devotion. I wanted that.

The realization sucker punched me. I had walked by this portrait for years and while I'd always admired it, I'd never experienced the yearning pulsing inside me right now. This. This was what a relationship was supposed to be. I had never managed to find that, and I certainly didn't feel it for Trey. I turned to look at my parents, waiting by the stairs. My mother chattered in aggravation and my father reached out to touch her arm in a soothing gesture. She smacked his hand away.

"Stop it, Reed, you'll wrinkle my dress," she snapped.

Dad's expression didn't change but there was a deep sadness in his eyes. Clearly, he hadn't found what Thomas and Mabel Stewart shared either. It made me doubt my agreement to this arranged marriage, because let's not kid ourselves, this betrothal was one hundred percent my mother's doing.

My father turned away from my mom, a petite version of me—short, curvy, and blonde with bright blue eyes and a pert nose. She wore a very festive red satin sheath with a Swarovski-encrusted bolero jacket over it. It had a very mother-of-the-bride vibe.

Dad blinked and a broad grin parted his lips when he saw me. "Clarabell," he said. "You are a vision."

"Do not call her by that ridiculous nickname," my mother sighed.

We ignored her. The only parts of me that I'd inherited from my father were my square jaw, my height, and to be frank, my unruly eyebrows. Thankfully, I could manage those

with professional help. We shared the same intellectual drive and business acumen, attributes my mother thought were unnecessary when, in her opinion, a woman could just marry well.

I slid into the gap between them and gave my dad a half hug. “You look quite dashing yourself.”

Dad was wearing his favorite tuxedo with the black satin lapels that my mother had threatened to burn because he refused to buy a new one. This had been my role in the family for as long as I could remember. Slide between them, smooth the hurt feelings, keep the peace. It’s probably why I was so good at managing the museum board.

“Thank you, my dear.” Dad smiled at me, his eyes twinkling. He held out his arm and I placed my hand in the crook of his elbow. My mother cleared her throat, and he offered her his other arm. The staircase was made of ornately carved wooden balustrades and the walls were paneled oak woodwork of the same rich red-brown, also carved in meticulously intricate designs and polished to a high gloss. A large chandelier in the center illuminated our way down the carpeted steps to the main floor of the museum. The party was in full swing in the conservatory at the end of the building, where the gala was being held.

My steps slowed as we walked along the parquet floor. I knew what was coming. Trey had warned me, since the proposal he had planned was going to be very public, he’d wanted to be assured that I wasn’t going to embarrass him by saying no. He didn’t give me many details except to say a very special messenger was helping him with his proposal. I had no idea what this meant. Was Harry Styles going to make a guest appearance? Trey certainly had the connections to make that sort of thing happen.

“Claire!” a woman called from across the lobby. I blinked. It was our former registrar Molly Graham and her boss/beau Lord Insley of Bath, or as we called him, Jamie.

“That’s one of my former staff,” I said. “Excuse me a sec?”

“Can’t it wait?” Mom pouted. “It’s time for your grand entrance.”

Music poured out of the massive glassed-in room ahead of us. Gowns glittered in every hue against the backdrop of black tuxedos. I felt my nerves jangle. I wasn’t ready.

“Molly’s come all the way from England and he’s in the nobility. It would be rude not to say hello.”

My mother heaved a put-upon sigh, but the mention of aristocracy made her hesitate as I knew it would. Dad patted my hand and said, “Go ahead. We’ll go in and scout the party for you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll just be a minute.”

I stepped back and my parents continued forward. I turned and ran for the safety of my friend. “Molly!” I hugged her with more exuberance than was warranted but she’d been gone since the spring, and I missed her. I held out my hand to Jamie. “Wonderful to see you again, Lord Insley.”

He rolled his eyes. “Jamie, please. We’re friends.”

“I don’t know that we are,” I said. “I’m still sore at you for stealing our registrar.”

“But you have a new one, handpicked by Sarah.” Molly pointed across the great room and sure enough there was the museum’s curator, Sarah Novak, with her handsome Irish boyfriend, Liam Maguire, who had come to work for the museum after they had shared a near catastrophic adventure on an island in the Aegean Sea.

“That does make it difficult to hold a grudge.” I grinned at Jamie. “You’re forgiven.”

Jamie bowed slightly in acknowledgement. Charming. I liked having a friend who was nobility. “How are you? How is Bath? And more importantly, please tell me you two aren’t sneaking out already.”

They exchanged a guilty look.

“No, absolutely not.” I shook my head. “I forbid it.”

“Fine.” Molly rolled her eyes. “But only until your big moment and then we have to get on the road to Vermont. Jamie is meeting the family.”

“The entire Graham family?” I asked.

“Yes,” Molly said.

A waiter passed by with glasses of champagne. I grabbed one and handed it to Jamie. “Here. You’re going to need this.”

Molly had grown up in a large family on a dairy farm in Vermont. She sent me a reproving look before she snagged another glass and handed it to him. “Have two.”

He laughed and, on that note, I said, “We’ll talk more later.”

Molly hugged me, gently, as if she was afraid that too much of a squeeze would knock the sequins off my gown.

I crossed the room to enter the conservatory. Back in the gilded age, it had served as an orangery. The massive greenhouse was now the main party room for the museum and frequently rented out for weddings and other notable events. It overlooked the museum’s winter-barren gardens, the immense lawn a novelty in the heart of the city and a real draw in the spring and summer.

Tonight, the room was decked out in twinkling fairy lights and evergreen boughs tied with scarlet ribbons. A swing band played toe-tapper tunes in the corner, and I should have been excited, maybe nervous, or at the very least joyful. I was none of these. In fact, if I examined my emotions closely, I felt dead inside. As if I were a blindfolded captive about to walk the plank. I paused in the doorway, unable to force my feet to enter the party.

Out of the shadows, wearing a stunning black velvet gown with the collar turned up, stepped Olive Prendergast. Her long dark hair framed her face in glossy waves, but that didn’t soften her appearance. Her features were more striking than beautiful, high cheekbones, a long nose, and full lips, accented by arching brows, one of which had a fine vertical scar that ran

through it. Her mouth had been painted a deep crimson and her lashes were long and curled on the ends.

“You seem tense, boss,” Olive murmured low enough that only I could hear her.

“Nah, just contemplating the death of my life as I know it,” I said. “Marriage. Remind me what a woman gets out of it?”

“You’re asking the wrong gal,” Olive said. “Personally, I’ve never seen the need for it.”

I nodded. I felt very much the same way. Sadly, my opinion didn’t count.

“You know, you don’t have to go through with it,” Olive said. “Miles will fight for you, and the board is afraid of him, rightly so. You won’t lose your job if your mother tightens the purse strings.”

I laughed. Miles Lowenstein was the head of Special Collections, one of which was Olive’s Books of Dubious Origin, or BODO for short. To say that her department, which was housed several layers down in the basement, was top secret and need-to-know only was a vast understatement.

“I appreciate that, Olive, I do. If I balk tonight, Mom will still have her way in the end. She always does. Besides, even if I keep my job, the lack of funding would be keenly felt, especially in your department.”

“It’s your life.” Olive shrugged. She was not one to waste time on pesky things like feelings. “But if you need some liquid courage, there’s a decanter of fine whiskey in the kitchen pantry. I find it makes these events almost tolerable.”

She tapped her toe on the floor indicating the kitchen right below us. Huh.

“I like the way you think, Olive.”

Olive inclined her head to the door leading to the staff staircase behind me. I took less than a second to consider.

“Cover for me?” I asked.

“Of course.”

With a smile of gratitude, I slipped down the narrow steps to the chaos of the massive kitchen below. Because we hosted so many private events, it had all the latest gadgets and gizmos a chef could want.

There was a stone floor, beamed ceiling, and windows that ran along the top half of the room, overlooking the lawn. The kitchen was ablaze with light as three chefs prepped the trays while the wait staff hustled to carry the food upstairs. I noted we were serving caviar, pâté, and an array of exotic cheeses. I can usually pack away a good amount of hors d'oeuvres but tonight the sight made me queasy.

I slipped past them unnoticed, which was shocking since I sparkled like a firecracker under the fluorescent lights and stepped into the walk-in pantry. To the right was the bottle of whiskey and a clean glass. Olive had somehow known I was going to need this. I took a moment to appreciate our special collections expert and how very efficient she was.

I meant to drink just one glass, but my mother appeared in the kitchen, demanding to know if anyone had seen me. Thankfully, I had closed the pantry door most of the way. When she ordered everyone to search the premises, I poured myself a second drink. I had just tipped it to my lips when I heard a commotion outside.

The kitchen was now empty, and I hurried to the high windows and peered out. The wrought iron gate that enclosed the museum swung open and in trotted a large white horse and carriage, outfitted to look like an enormous reindeer and a sleigh, with Santa Claus at the reins. Oh, lord, this was how Trey planned to propose. He was having Santa deliver the ring. I downed the second glass of whiskey. It burned. I coughed.

The next thing I knew I was striding toward the kitchen door that led outside. I climbed up the short stone steps to the yard above, which had a blanket of snow from a recent snowstorm. The bitter winter wind slapped against me, but I was so focused on my mission that I barely felt it.

Santa brought his horse to a stop and rose from his seat. Standing, he shouted, "Ho ho ho!"

The doors to the veranda from the conservatory remained closed. Obviously, Trey hadn't seen Santa and his meager "Ho ho ho" was no match for the swing band that was in full Glen Miller mode.

"Damn it," Santa muttered. He appeared to be debating leaving the "sleigh" to tap on the French doors. He shook his head and sighed, resigned to jumping down and approaching the house.

I had one chance. While Santa climbed the steps and crossed the veranda, I hurried forward and around the front of the horse, grateful that my sparkling dress didn't spook him. I hopped into the carriage, which was no small feat in my designer gown, and grabbed the reins where Santa had dropped them. Unfortunately, my movements set the carriage to jingling as it was covered in bells.

Santa whipped around and stared at me, his eyes going wide at the sight. "Hey!"

"Sorry! No time to explain," I said. "H'yah!"

I snapped the reins, and the horse stomped its feet and began to move. The band finished playing and the bells on the carriage filled the sudden silence as we lurched forward.

"Wait! You can't just take my sleigh!" Santa yelled. He ran down the steps toward me. "You have no idea what you're doing!"

"I assure you, I do," I said. Years of equestrian summer camps had outfitted me in all manner of horsemanship, including carriages.

The ridiculous amount of jingle bells tied to the sleigh made a helluva racket as I cracked the reins again and the horse, wearing silly fake antlers, picked up his pace.

The doors to the conservatory flew open and Trey strode out onto the veranda with my mother right behind him.

"Claire, what are you doing?" Trey cried. "This was supposed to be your surprise."

“Claire?” Santa repeated. He squinted at me as he ran alongside the carriage, looking absurd in the ill-fitting Santa suit.

I ignored him. Instead, I snapped the reins. The horse moved into a trot, and I steered him toward the massive gate. Not to be left behind, Santa picked up speed and before I could stop him, he jumped into the carriage. For one second, I thought he’d fall back out, but he regained his balance and collapsed onto the floor at my feet, which were freezing—unsurprising given I’d just run through four inches of snow in strappy, gold high-heeled sandals. Why hadn’t I thought to grab my boots from my office?

“Claire Macintosh, you come back here right this instant!” my mother screeched.

That was enough to scare the horse into a full gallop. The security guards at the gate saw us and scrambled to open the ornate iron barrier before we crashed into it. We slipped through on an inhale, and I opened her up, encouraging the big, beautiful horse to dash across Fifth Avenue, which was blocked off from cars for the evening, and into Central Park.

I was free!



Chapter Two



“Lady, what the hell is wrong with you?” Santa cried. He pushed himself up to his feet. His hat fell over his eyes, and he shoved it back on his head.

“Nice. You talk to the kids that way, Mr. Claus?” I asked.

Not gonna lie, I felt like a badass whipping down the path that ran alongside the reservoir and even Santa Claus himself couldn’t shame it out of me. I *did* glance over my shoulder, convinced my mother would appear right behind us at any moment to drag me back by my hair if need be.

“I don’t see any kids here now.” Santa planted his hands on his hips. “Just a deranged half-naked woman who commandeered my horse and carriage. You could’ve gotten us killed crossing the street like that. You didn’t even slow down!”

“The road is closed for all of the parties,” I said. “They do it every year. All the museums on Museum Mile are having their annual holiday galas tonight.”

“So, by all means, just help yourself to a man’s property, his livelihood, and run off with it.”

When he said it like that, I could see how my badass self might appear to be an arrogant ass instead.

“You’re right, and I’m sorry, truly, it was out of line,” I said. “But I panicked.”

Santa glared at me, resembling an annoyed very tall, very broad-shouldered garden gnome.

“I was supposed to get engaged tonight.” I glanced behind me one more time. There was no sign of my mother in hot pursuit. Thankful for small mercies, I pulled on the reins and slowed the horse to a quick trot.

“Believe it or not, I’m aware.” Santa removed his red fake-fur trimmed hat, his wig of white ringlets, and his matching fluffy beard. Short, cropped dark-brown hair, pale-green or gray eyes, I couldn’t tell in the dark, and a square jaw were revealed. I frowned. I knew this man. But from where? Then it hit me.

I gasped. “You’re Sam Carpenter, the reporter!”

He gave me a chagrined look and then raised his white-gloved hands. “Surprise.”

“What are you doing here dressed like that?” I demanded.

“I paid off the guy who was supposed to bring your engagement ring.” Sam reached into his pocket and lifted out a little red velvet box. The sight made me queasy. “Speaking of which, I need to get his horse and carriage back to him.” He held out his hand and after a brief hesitation, I dropped the reins into them.

Sam Carpenter and I had a history. Not a personal one. I only knew him from a distance. He was an investigative reporter for a high-end New York magazine that detailed the lives of the non-celebrity wealthy, mostly their salacious crimes and misdemeanors of which there were many. I’m not talking rich people who carry as much debt as income, I’m talking the obscenely wealthy who don’t have to work because their money works for them, also known as the “what’s a weekend” set.

Carpenter had written more than a few stories that mentioned my father because Dad managed to aggravate those same wealthy muckety-mucks who did not agree with his passion for saving the planet. The few mentions I’d garnered in Sam’s articles portrayed me in the unflattering light of privileged daughter to socialite Hildy Grace Macintosh and Reed Macintosh, and granddaughter of Sterling Grace, one of the wealthiest men in America. Yes, my grandfather was up there in the rarified air of Bezos, Buffett, and Gates. I felt a protective growl form in the back of my throat. My family might drive me crazy, but they were still family.

“Well, I guess I should wish you a Merry Christmas,” I said. “I just dumped the best story of the year right into your lap.”

“You did indeed.” Sam chuckled.

I shivered, although I wasn't sure if it was from the cold or the realization that I had just publicly blown up my life and with it my family's reputation. Sam noticed and in one smooth motion, shrugged off his thick red jacket with the faux white fur trim and dropped it around my shoulders.

It was warm from his body heat and even while I protested, “Oh, no, I can't,” I snuggled deeper into its warmth.

“What kind of jerk would I be if I let a half-naked woman freeze to death?” Sam asked. “Besides, I have another shirt on under this flannel so I'm good.”

Good was a vast understatement. Sam Carpenter was effortlessly handsome and comfortable with himself. Confidence. Arrogance. It was a fine line, but Sam fell somewhere between the two. I noticed as we passed under an old-fashioned lamplight that the deep-green-and-blue plaid of his wool shirt darkened the color of his eyes, which were definitely green.

I glanced away. I could not trust this man and had to stay focused.

“So, what's your plan?” Sam asked.

“Plan?” I repeated. My voice went up an entire octave and I cleared my throat. “My only goal at the moment is to escape to my cottage in Maine, where I'll watch it snow from the hot tub wearing nothing but my maiden name.”

Sam barked out a laugh. “That's a bold move.”

“Yeah.” I bit my lip. I had no idea how I was going to get to Maine. I had no phone, no wallet, nothing but a sparkly dress and my smile. Oh sure, I could dash back to my apartment on Park Avenue, but my mother would be waiting, and she would be incensed that I'd thwarted her plan and so publicly, too. How mortifying.

“I can help you,” Sam said.

I stared at him and arched one eyebrow to let him know I was skeptical with a side of dubious. “What will it cost me?” I asked.

“An exclusive,” Sam said. “For the magazine.”

I laughed. A plume of hot breath filled the air. “Not on your life. A hit piece about what a spoiled heiress I am, and my career will implode, if it hasn’t already.”

“No, you’ve got me all wrong, Macintosh,” Sam protested.

Sam steered the horse and carriage down a side road. It occurred to me that he could murder me and leave my body in Central Park, and no one would know it was him. The original guy he’d paid for the horse and carriage potentially didn’t know who he was and neither did anyone at the party. I shook my head and made a mental note to stop watching so many true crime shows.

“Exactly how do I have you wrong and where are we going?” I asked as he headed for the west side of the park.

“The stable is on 52nd Street near the Hudson River,” Sam said. “I told my friend I’d meet him on the west side of the park. He’s waiting for Paddy over there.”

“Paddy?” I asked.

“The horse...er...reindeer,” Sam said. “He’s a Percheron draft. Beautiful, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is,” I agreed. I wondered how Sam knew so much about the horse. I couldn’t imagine he’d gone to years of horsey camp as I had, but I supposed it was likely the reporter in him, always getting the who, what, when, where, and why, of which I wanted no part.

I had to make an escape. To where? I had no idea but spending any more time with a reporter who specialized in demonizing the well-to-do was a very bad idea. “You can just drop me off here.”

I shrugged out of his coat and the winter wind whipped around me, taking my breath away. Sam reached over and

yanked it back up around my shoulders.

“Are you trying to catch pneumonia?” he asked. “It’s thirty-seven degrees outside with the wind chill and you’re practically topless.”

Why did knowing the exact temperature make it worse? I don’t know, but it did. I kept the coat on.

“I have to go.” I peered over my shoulder again, surprised that my mother hadn’t swooped in like a Valkyrie and snatched me back to the gala. Ugh, the museum. What was everyone thinking? I didn’t know how I’d face those people ever again. I needed to buy myself some time. “For the sake of argument, how do you think you can help me?”

Sam glanced at me. “I can get you to Maine.”

“Isn’t that a long trek for Paddy?” I gestured to the horse.

“I was thinking more along the lines of financing your trip since you don’t seem to have a place to keep any cash or cards in that dress.” Sam’s appreciative gaze moved over me and despite being buried in his Santa coat, my face grew warm. Was I blushing? I hadn’t done that in decades.

“And you get an exclusive about the runaway fiancé,” I said. “How badly will I be misrepresented?”

He put a hand over his heart. “I’m wounded. I take my journalistic ethics very seriously.”

“Like with that innuendo-laden article you wrote about Clarice Winspear?” I asked.

“She was having an affair with her father-in-law,” Sam protested.

“Gossip,” I countered.

“That’s why she eloped with him to Italy last week?”

“She didn’t!”

“She did.”

“Huh, you think you know somebody,” I said. Actually, I wasn’t surprised at all that Clarice had done that, but

appearances needed to be maintained. “I don’t want to be your next spoiled little rich girl story.”

“I would never,” Sam assured me. “I was picturing a think-piece on a woman exercising her own self-determination and not doing just what’s expected of her.”

“Hmm.” I considered his offer. The smart thing to do would be to take the jewelry box and catch a cab back to the museum and figure out how to salvage Trey’s proposal. Or I could follow my instincts, flee to Maine, and spend Christmas by myself, pretending I hadn’t just done the unthinkable. “All right.”

Sam’s eyebrows went up. I’d surprised him. Good. We were nearing the park exit and I wanted our terms nailed down before I lost my only certain means of transportation, namely Paddy.

“You’re giving me an exclusive then?” Sam asked.

“If you get me to Maine,” I countered.

We stared at each other as the carriage jostled us forward. Sam extended his hand. I hesitated for the briefest moment and then clasped his gloved hand with my icy fingers. His warmth even through the gloves surrounded me immediately. How was he so warm in this cold? I was surprised steam didn’t rise from our handshake so different were our temperatures.

“Hey, Carpenter!” a man in a puffy coat, holding a steaming cup of coffee, called as we approached. “Are you giving rides now?”

“Nah, I picked up a stray.” Sam turned to me. “That’s Nick Deluca, an old friend of mine. He owns Paddy. He was supposed to be the one in the suit delivering your ring.”

I nodded. I’d figured as much.

Sam halted the carriage. Nick stepped forward and helped me down. He was wearing a black beanie over his curly gray hair and had matching scruff that covered his chin. Most of the Central Park carriage drivers upped their game by wearing suits or top hats to look the part. Nick was clearly off duty.

Sam hopped down beside me, and Nick climbed into the driver's seat. He picked up the reins with his free hand and observed us. "Did you get your scoop, Carp?"

"Of course," Sam said. "You know me, I never quit."

"Even when you should. By the way, I want that Santa suit washed before you return it to me. I have a reputation to maintain." Nick winked at me. "Keep an eye on him, Miss, he's a magnet for trouble."

"Hey, I resemble that remark," Sam retorted with feigned outrage.

Waving goodbye, Nick and Paddy left us on the west side of Central Park to fend for ourselves. I was in a sparkly gown, sandals, and the top half of a Santa suit. Sam was in the bottom half and carrying his wig, beard, and hat. Anywhere else, we would have caused second glances and discreet cell phone photos, but this was New York. No one looked at us twice.

"First order of business, you need weather-appropriate clothes," Sam said. "Going to your apartment is obviously out as that's where people will search for you. Come on."

I followed him out of the park. My toes were frozen solid as I navigated the patches of snow on the hexagonal paving stones that made up the sidewalk. They were uneven, and my spiked heels had a hard time finding purchase on the terrain.

Finally, after a miserable block and a half, I spied a tourist shop with a sign lit up in neon full of *I heart NY* T-shirts, sweatshirts, mugs, and magnets and a whole section of Christmas-themed New York wear as well. I didn't care how obnoxious the clothes were I just wanted my feet to be warm.

Sam held the door open and gestured for me to lead the way. I didn't loiter and grabbed a red fuzzy hooded sweatshirt with a lot of ugly Christmas sweater energy. It had a big green tree decorated with dozens of multi-colored jingle bells on the front and a row of gold bows running down each sleeve.

I added a pair of flannel pajama pants in navy with tiny red Santas printed all over them and matching red Santa socks.

Much to my delight, there was a cheap pair of puffy, white slip-on snow boots that had the New York Yankees symbol emblazoned in red and green on the sides. Wearing all this, I'd look like the Christmas spirit had vomited all over me, but I was so cold I didn't care.

I shoved the pile at Sam. "I'm assuming my wardrobe is a part of our deal?"

"Of course. But don't you want to browse?" he asked. "You could get a refrigerator magnet to commemorate the occasion."

"Of me running out on my engagement? I'll pass." I made a circular gesture with my hand to indicate we needed to get going.

The store was empty aside from us and the older gentleman behind the register. His face was long and weary, and he looked as if he'd seen a lot of stuff in his lifetime. He also seemed eager for us to leave. He probably wanted to close and go home. I felt a mild pang of envy.

Sam dropped the items on the counter and the man rang it up. He went to bag it, but I shook my head and scooped the clothes in my arms.

"Do you have a dressing room?"

"Does it look like I have a dressing room, lady?" He held his arms wide indicating how small the shop was.

"Worth a try." I pulled Sam to the corner of the store away from the front window, shrugged out of the Santa coat, and handed it to Sam. "Hold this up, please."

Sam complied, staring at me over the top of red fabric. That was no good. I made a turnaround motion with my finger, and he did. I stood behind him and used his body and the Santa jacket as a makeshift curtain.

"What are you doing?" the man at the register cried. "No funny business in my store."

"I assure you there's nothing funny about it," I replied.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Sam argued. “I’m finding it as amusing as all get out.”

“Are you?” I purposefully moved so that my front was pressed against his back in the most provocative way I could manage. He immediately went rigid. “Is funny really the word you’d use?”

“Maybe not,” Sam said. I heard him swallow and I stepped back. Point made. I glanced down, hiding my smile.

“No funny business,” the cashier repeated.

“Don’t worry. I’m just changing my clothes so that I don’t freeze,” I said. “You don’t want my death on your conscience, do you?”

There was a marked silence coming from the cashier and I glanced up and over Sam’s shoulder. It was then that I noticed we were no longer alone in the store.



Chapter Three



The trio appeared to be tourists in their early twenties, out on the town. The guy looked sulky while the two girls squealed over everything with a NY logo on it. Hoping not to be noticed, I hurriedly kicked off my sandals, hiked up my dress, and pulled on the pants. I dropped the sweatshirt over my head for cover—jingling all the way—as I unzipped my gown, letting it fall as I slid my arms into the sleeves of the sweatshirt. I stepped out of the puddle of gold, pulled on the socks, and shoved my feet into the fake-fur-lined boots. They were toasty warm, and my toes sighed in relief. I kind of wished I'd taken the clerk up on the offer of a bag but...oh, well.

I scooped up my sandals and gown and poked Sam in the back. "I'm ready."

Sam lowered the Santa coat and turned around, giving me an assessing glance. "An ugly Christmas sweatshirt never looked so good."

I felt my face get warm again, which was ridiculous. "Stop trying to charm me. I'm not going to spill any big family scandals just because you're cute."

"Cute, huh?" he asked.

I frowned at Sam, then walked around him, leading the way to the door.

The other customers watched us go. One of the women stared at my gown with a shrewdness that belied her years. The hair at the back of my neck prickled but I shook my head. Nah, that was silly. I was just being paranoid because I was on the run—in my very overly privileged sort of way.

As soon as we stepped outside, Sam dropped the Santa coat around my shoulders. "Still too cold not to wear a coat

and Maine is going to be so much worse.”

“Fair point,” I said. “So, where’s your car?”

“Car?” Sam blinked at me. “Who lives in New York and owns a car?”

“People who want to drive to Maine,” I said.

“Well, I live in Hoboken, and I don’t own a car,” Sam retorted. “Come on.” He started to walk down the sidewalk. Given no choice, I followed.

“How do you suppose we’re going to get there?” I asked. “You are aware that Maine is five and a half hours away *by car?*”

“We’ll take the train,” he said. “Head right up the coast. It’ll give me plenty of time to interview you.”

I wrinkled my nose. I didn’t mind traveling by train. I’d done it before, and it would definitely get us there. It was the interview part that I wasn’t looking forward to. I still didn’t believe that Sam Carpenter wasn’t going to excoriate me in his article, but what choice did I have? A deal was a deal.

We were halfway down the block when I heard someone yell, “Hey, lady!”

I turned around to see the surly customer from the shop walking toward us. I glanced at the gown and shoes in my arms to see if I’d dropped something. Nope. I lifted my gaze. Up close, the guy looked older, which could have been the hardness of his expression.

“Yes?” I asked.

Sam was just ahead of me, but he spun around and doubled back, avoiding an icy patch.

“I’ll take the dress.” The guy gestured with one beefy finger at the gown I was carrying.

“Excuse me?” He was shorter than me, wearing a black parka with a fur-trimmed hood, sporting an eyebrow piercing, and a neck tattoo of a butterfly. I wondered if I could take him.

Accurately reading my expression, his brows lowered, and he looked irritated. “Just give me the dress.”

“No.” This was a five-thousand-dollar dress. There was no way in hell I was giving it to some strange man with a bad attitude.

“You heard her,” Sam said. He stood beside me and leaned forward, looming over the shorter man. “Shove off. Come on, Claire, we have a train to catch.”

“If you don’t give me the dress right now, you’ll miss your train for good.” The guy pulled a gun out of his pocket and aimed it at us with the practiced air of someone who knew how to use it.

Oh, shit! I froze. Sam tried to move in front of me, but the guy lifted the weapon so that it was level with Sam’s forehead. “Don’t move.” He turned to me. “Now hand over the dress.” He snapped open a big plastic bag and gestured with his head that I should put the gown inside.

My hands were shaking, and I thought I might throw up. For a nanosecond, I considered throwing the dress at his face and blinding him. The fabric had some heft thanks to the sequins. Maybe we could subdue him. But he’d probably flail his arms and shoot one of us which was not how I intended my night to go. I dropped the gown into the bag.

“Shoes, too,” the robber said.

Now he was pushing me. These gold Manolo Blahniks with the kitten heels were my favorites as they didn’t hurt my feet even after hours of standing around schmoozing the museum’s donors.

“Now,” he said, waving the bag at me.

I gave Sam a look of disbelief. He shrugged. I mean, it’s not like I expected him to wrestle a gunman to the ground over a gown and a pair of sandals, but still. I dropped the shoes in.

“And your wallet and phone,” the thug said to Sam.

“Now hold on,” Sam protested. The man clicked the safety off the gun with a hand that was alarmingly steady. Sam

cursed but didn't move.

"Do it," I hissed.

With a heavy sigh, Sam emptied his pockets and dropped his wallet and phone into the plastic bag with my shoes and gown.

"Now turn around and walk away," the man said.
"Quickly."

We did as we were told. I scanned the street. There were people up ahead at the corner, but they were out of shouting range. Aside from them, it was quiet as most people were staying out of the cold, had parties to go to, or were at home watching holiday movies on the Hallmark channel. I desperately wished I was one of them.

"We have to report this to the police," I murmured when we were out of earshot.

"We can, but it's a long shot, no pun intended." Sam matched his steps to mine and leaned close as if offering me comfort. "Clearance report stats on robberies in Manhattan are at forty-six percent and city wide its forty-one percent."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Reporter." Sam pointed to himself. "We can give them a description of a guy in a parka with a neck tattoo of a butterfly and eyebrow piercing, which will come in handy when he tries to pawn that dress."

"He's not going to pawn it. He stole it for one of the women who was with him."

"How do you know?"

"I saw her face when I walked by her," I explained. I shivered remembering her assessing stare. "She wanted that dress."

"Enough to have her boyfriend risk being arrested to rob us?" We were approaching the people on the corner, and Sam lowered his voice. "That's bold."

"Not exactly *The Gift of the Magi*, is it?"

“O. Henry,” Sam said. “My inner English major is impressed. What do you want to do, Macintosh? Report it?”

“I don’t think that will get my dress back.” I tried not to snivel. It took some effort. “But what about you? Don’t you want your phone and your wallet?”

Sam shrugged. “Work phone and work wallet.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I keep a separate phone for work,” he said. “And there is nothing in my wallet except an expense card issued by the magazine and a duplicate license.”

“Duplicate?” I asked.

“This isn’t the first, second, or third time I’ve been robbed,” Sam replied. “I carry nothing of value on me when I’m on an assignment.”

“Smart.” I was impressed. I was also reminded that he was a reporter. I should have jumped off the sleigh/carriage the minute I discovered that fact. This night was turning into a fiasco and my hands were still shaking from the terror of being held at gunpoint.

“I wish I had time to think,” I said. “But I know my mother. She’ll have one of my grandfather’s security people watching my place and probably scouring the city for me.” I sighed. “I have no choice. I should go back to the museum.” I glanced down at my outfit and recoiled in horror. “*Ack*, I can’t show up like this. I am so screwed. I should have just said yes to Trey, but no, I had to sneak down to the pantry and drink whiskey where the devil flew into me and now my life is a complete and total disaster. All I wanted was to get to Maine. Was that such a big ask?”

“I don’t want to sound harsh, but you’re beginning to whine, Macintosh,” Sam said.

“Might I remind you, we were just held at gunpoint. I’m surprised I’m not shrieking at the top of my lungs. Besides, you can use that for the lead of your story.” I raised my hands as if seeing the headline in the air. “Claire Macintosh does not disappoint in the whining arts.”

We reached the corner and Sam peered over his shoulder. He let out a breath that turned into a cloud of steam. "He's gone."

"With six grand worth of clothes," I said. "My mother is going to kill me."

Sam choked. "I'm sorry, what?"

"That was a designer gown," I said. "Right off the runway."

"Six thousand for a dress and shoes," Sam repeated. "I've covered the wealthy for years and I still can't wrap my head around that sort of expense."

"Wait until I tell you how much the wedding gown my mother wants me to be married in costs," I said.

"Please don't." He shook his head. "I don't want to shatter the illusion that we might have some common ground between us."

"We just got mugged together," I retorted. "So, there's a start."

"Shaky at best." The light turned green on the crosswalk, and Sam turned to me. "Time's up. Maine, or the nearest police station, you decide."

"Maine."

"The pine tree state it is." Sam sounded impressed. "Come on, we're going to have to run."

"Run where?" I protested. "We're stuck. We have no money which means no transportation for us. Without a phone, I can't even call my dad to send a car. I was only wishing out loud when I said Maine."

"Oh, ye of little faith!" With a wicked grin, Sam grabbed my hand and pulled me across the street at a brisk clip toward the entrance to the subway.

He headed down the stairs without breaking his stride, pulling me along with him.

“How are you going to buy tickets?” I asked. “The deal was you pay my way to Maine, and I give you an interview. No money. No Maine. No interview.”

“Who said we don’t have money?” Sam stopped in front of the ticket machine and bent down. “Ever since the first time I was mugged I’ve always kept cash in my sock. It’ll get us to Grand Central Terminal at least.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

He tried to hand me the wad of cash, but I shook my head. “I’m not holding sweaty sock money.”

Not hiding an eye roll, Sam turned to the machine, inserted the money, and bought our passage. We strode to the turnstile with our cards. Sam went first, swiping the card once and signaling me to walk through then he swiped again and followed me. He picked up the pace once inside and we hustled to the platform.

The train was just arriving. We waited while people poured out. Sam grabbed my hand and pulled me on board. It was packed, standing room only. We nestled close to a pole, and I gripped it tight to keep from falling during the stops and starts of the train.

“Not to be a badger, Carpenter,” I said. “But the subway doesn’t go to Maine.”

Sam smiled down at me from the other side of the pole. His hand was just above mine and I realized that he had about three or four inches on me. Being tall, I wasn’t used to looking up at anyone. Trey was exactly my height, six feet, although I sometimes thought he’d fudged and was really five eleven since his shoes appeared to have a little extra heel.

“No, it doesn’t,” Sam agreed. He was studying me with a calculating expression. I didn’t know the man well, but I could tell that whatever was going on in his brain was not going to work in my favor.

“What?”

“What what?” he countered.

I resisted the urge to bang my head on the pole in frustration. “What are you thinking?”

“That I’m going to need those jingle bells.” Sam pointed to the front of my festive sweatshirt.

There were about fifty colorful little jingle bells. They made noise with every move I made. Luckily, the Santa coat buffered the sound. They were heavy and I’d be glad to get rid of them, but I didn’t want to seem overly eager in case Sam’s plan was a bad one.

“But they’re mine,” I protested. “And they complement the sweatshirt.”

“Technically, since I bought it for you, I think they’re mine,” Sam replied.

“Well, that’s just not right,” I said. “You can’t give a gift and then take it back. Rude.”

“The outfit was not a gift,” he countered. “It was an emergency business expense.”

We were leaning in while we debated and he grinned at me, clearly enjoying himself. It was then that I realized I was smiling back, having a great time. Who’d have thought?

“You’re going to have to trust me, Macintosh. I have a plan to get us to Maine.”

“I’d be more inclined to trust you if I knew what the plan was,” I said.

Sam looked like he was about to say more but the train rocked to a stop. I fell forward against the pole. He caught me and I don’t think I imagined that he took his time helping me upright. Hmm.

“We’re the next stop,” he said. “Bryant Park.”

I frowned. “Why? Are we going to the New York Public Library, the one with the lions in front of it?”

“Patience and Fortitude.” I blinked at him, and he explained, “Those are the lions’ names.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “I always wished our museum had a pair of lions out front or maybe a pair of owls.” He stared at me. “Admit it, that would be cool.”

“It would certainly keep the pigeons away,” he said.

The train stopped and we lurched forward. Sam took my hand, tugging me through the doors. We climbed the stairs and were back up in the beating heart of the city. With Christmas Eve being the next day, the park was decorated for the holiday season, and I felt my spirits lift despite my current situation as Sam led me to a nearby bench.

“All right, I’m going to need those bells,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows. “You weren’t joking?”

“Nope.” Sam reached forward and plucked one off my boob area.

“Hey!” I smacked his hand away. “Watch what you’re grabbing!”



Chapter Four



“Sorry.” Sam didn’t look sorry at all. “Trust me, they will serve a higher purpose.” He dropped the one he’d taken into the pouch on the front of my sweatshirt.

“For the record, I do not trust you.” I opened my Santa coat wider and helped him divest my festive attire of bells. “Why am I taking them off only to store them in my pocket?”

“You’ll see.” Sam patted his pants’ pocket, obviously searching for his phone before he remembered it had been stolen. “Come on, we’d better hurry or we’ll miss the train.”

“How much cash do you have?” I asked.

“Fourteen dollars and fifty cents,” he said.

“How is that going to get us to Maine?”

“So many questions, Macintosh,” he chided me. “It’ll be better if I show you. Let’s go.”

With that, Sam tugged me up from the bench and we hustled toward Grand Central Terminal. By the time we arrived, I was sweating. Sam glanced at the board and pulled me in the direction of the platforms.

“Don’t we need tickets?” I asked.

“Give me your coat.” Sam shrugged on the Santa coat, then put on his wig and beard, topping them with the red hat. The wig was askew, and the beard bunched up. He resembled a fired department store Santa on a bender.

“Stop. You’re a mess,” I said.

I fixed his costume, ignoring the fact that his face was just inches from mine. Mercifully, it was barricaded by inches of fake whiskers. I fluffed his ringlets and straightened his hat, then I dusted off his coat with my hand while he did up the buttons.

“Respectable,” I said.

“Thank you.” He gave me a once over and shook his head. “This will never do. You’re too pretty to be an elf.”

“An elf?” I asked.

“Of course.” He grinned at me, and I was struck by the irrepressible sparkle in his twinkling green eyes. Sam really could be old Saint Nick if he was about thirty years older and had a paunch.

Sam adjusted my hood so that the faux fur framed my face, which was heavily made up from the party. He shook my pouch. “You are the distributor of the bells. Got it?”

“Sure,” I said. “Bell distribution. I’m on it.”

“All right, let’s do this.”

He strode away, giving me no alternative but to follow. Hurry, hurry, hurry. The terminal was crowded, and we ducked and weaved our way through until we were on the platform.

“The train is just about to leave,” Sam said. “Excellent timing.”

He grabbed my hand and tugged me through the open door onto a half-filled train car. I immediately made for the first available seat, but Sam caught my arm. “Nope. No sitting for us.”

“What do you mean?” I was cold and tired, the buzz of the whiskey had worn off, and I was wracked with self-doubt. I needed to sit and think, listen to the train clickety-clack while I re-evaluated every decision I’d made in my life to date.

“We’re working for our passage,” Sam said. “The conductors just don’t know it yet.”

I stared at him. A voice announced that it was time to take our seats. I soooo wanted to do just that but Sam stood at the front of the car, looking calm in his chicanery. Suddenly, I feared distributing the bells was a heck of a lot more than I’d bargained for.

“Listen, if we can just make it to the Greenwich station, we can catch a ride to my grandparents’ house in Old Greenwich.” I hated this idea to my very core but what choice did I have? Whatever Sam was cooking up was probably going to get us arrested and I’d rather be with my uptight grandparents than in the slammer on the night before Christmas Eve, thank you very much.

“Are you planning to ditch me in Connecticut?” Sam asked.

“No, I’ll buy you a proper ticket to return to New York,” I said.

“And how are you going to do that?”

“I’m sure someone at the house can help us out,” I said.

“Staff,” he said. “You mean your grandparents’ house staff will help.”

I shrugged. It was true. My grandfather was loaded. The Old Greenwich house was the one in which my mother had grown up. Her entire life was about maintaining the social status of her birth. It made me wonder why she’d married my father. He hadn’t come from money but worked his way through university and law school. It was hard to imagine that my parents had ever been madly in love but now I wondered. Had they? Or had he been her big rebellion? I had no idea.

“Earth to Macintosh.” Sam waved a hand in front of my eyes. I blinked him back into focus.

“We’re about to—”

The train began to move. Sam, anticipating my inability to keep my balance, looped his arm about me and brought me up against his side. His padded coat made for a soft landing, and I leaned in until I adjusted to the motion.

“Thanks.” I glanced up at him and his eyes crinkled in the corners in a way that was becoming awfully familiar.

“All right, let’s do this!” Sam released me and strode down the aisle. “Ho ho ho!”

Most of the commuters paid him no mind. New Yorkers knew better than to make eye contact until a situation normalized.

Sam peered at me over his shoulder. “What do you think, Mac...er...Elf? ‘Jingle Bells?’”

MacElf? Seriously?

Before I could protest, Sam turned back around and in a surprisingly pleasant baritone started to belt out “Jingle Bells.” When he got to the laughing all the way part, he pointed at me. I glared at him and growled, “Ha ha ha!”

He grinned and kept going. It occurred to me that I was the passive captive of a man who clearly lacked impulse control and whose hair-brained idea was most likely going to get us tossed off the train, or at the very least detained at the nearest station. My mother would disown me. Not the worst outcome.

A child sat with his parents in the last seat in the car. His eyes were huge as he took in Santa. He was a believer, no question. I sincerely hoped Sam did not mess that up. Sam belted out the end of the song, stopping by the family.

“Ho ho ho,” Sam said. The boy, who looked to be about five, just stared. Sam was undaunted. “You’ve been very good this year, haven’t you, Jared?”

I glanced at the luggage rack above their seat and saw the Lego backpack with the name Jared on it. Score one for Santa.

The boy gasped, then climbed up so he was standing on his seat and lunged, hugging Sam hard around the middle. “You *are* real. I knew it. I have been very good this year, Santa.” He let go of Sam and leaned back to study him.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Sam said. “You always want to be on the nice list. Now what is it that you want for Christmas?”

Well, Jared had quite the list. Everything from Legos to action figures and for some inexplicable reason, a pogo stick.

I saw Jared’s mother’s eyes get wide. Clearly the pogo stick was an add on and with two days until Christmas, I was

betting she had no idea where she was going to find one. I leaned forward until Sam glanced at me and then I shook my head, indicating it was a no on the pogo. He stroked his beard in thought.

“A pogo stick?” he asked.

Jared nodded.

Sam heaved a big sigh. “You’d better tell him what happened to the pogo sticks, MacElf.”

“What?” I asked. Silly me. I had not expected him to turn it back to me so deftly. Damn it.

“You remember,” Sam said. In a stage whisper he said, “The fire.”

Jared’s eyes improbably got even bigger.

“Oh, right,” I said. “The fire. Tragic. All of the pogo sticks—*whoosh!*—gone.”

Jared looked shocked and I realized we might break his little brain by letting him think fire was a concern at the North Pole.

“Of course, that almost never happens,” I said. “We are very careful in the workshop, but one of our elves was taking his baby dragon for a walk and it had a case of the hiccups and—*oops*—he coughed on a pogo stick and they all caught on fire. No one was hurt and the dragon got over his hiccups but, yeah, no pogo sticks this year.”

Sam regarded me in open-mouthed astonishment while Jared seemed absolutely blown away by the revelation that the elves at the North Pole had pet dragons.

“That’s okay,” Jared’s dad said. “We can always ask next year. Right, buddy?”

“No,” Jared shook his head. “I don’t want a pogo stick. I want a baby dragon.”

Sam’s eyes twinkled.

“Maybe next year,” Jared’s mother said. She appeared a bit panicked that her son might remember this encounter next

year.

“Well, not just anyone can have a dragon,” I said to Jared. “You have to be fifteen years old for starters.”

Jared’s mother sagged back in her seat in relief. I figured we should go before we ruined their holiday any more than we already had.

“How about a picture with Santa?” I asked.

Jared’s mother used her phone to snap one of Sam and Jared. Sam said, “Let’s give young Jared a bell to remember us by.”

And now his need for my bells made sense. I took one out of my pocket and handed it to the boy.

“Thank you, MacElf,” Jared said. I sighed.

“Merry Christmas, everyone!” Santa cried as we exited the car and headed for the next one.

“Are we really planning to do this all the way to Connecticut?” I asked as we stepped into the space between cars.

“Unless you have a better idea,” Sam said.

“I don’t,” I admitted. “But this will only get us to Connecticut. How do you propose we get all the way to Maine from there?”

“I have a plan,” he said. Which I took to mean he had no plan at all.

We continued through the train, singing all the way. Most of the passengers were tolerant. A few looked annoyed. The kids, however, were overjoyed which was totally worth annoying the other ones. We were in the packed fifth car when a conductor appeared.

He stood at the end of the car and watched us finish our exuberant rendition of “Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer” as my palms started to sweat. This was it. This was where we got busted. What happened to people who couldn’t pay their train fare? Did we get thrown in the brig? Was there such a thing on

a commuter train or did they just have a jail car? My heart beat fast and my breathing was rapid, almost a full-on pant.

“Deep breaths, MacElf, trust me,” Sam said. I resisted the urge to kick him.

“Tickets!” the conductor called. He started walking down the aisle toward us.

“We should go now,” I hissed at Sam.

“Can’t,” he said. He pointed to a little girl who was watching us with a besotted expression. “We have to give her a bell. We’d be the worst if we skipped her.”

“When we get thrown from the moving train, we can comfort ourselves that at least we didn’t disappoint her,” I said.

“That’s the spirit,” Sam said. “Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas.”

He opened his palm, and I slapped a bell into it. The conductor was getting closer and closer. I turned back to nudge Sam, but little Anna, as she introduced herself, had gripped the lapels of Sam’s Santa coat and she looked as if she was going to shake her Christmas gifts right out of him.

“Now it has to be a yellow unicorn because I do not like pink, got that?” she asked.

“Noted,” Sam said. I saw his shoulders shaking and I suspected he was trying not to laugh.

I glanced at Anna’s parents. They were both scrolling through their phones, obviously relieved to have a reprieve from their daughter’s single-minded intensity.

“Tickets!” the conductor barked from behind me.

I jumped. Anna peered past me and glared at the conductor. She was not going to have her moment with Santa ruined.

“Anna, time to sit,” her mother said.

“But I’m not finished,” Anna protested. She was small but mighty and still had her hooks in Sam.

“Yes, you are,” her father said. He didn’t look up from his phone.

“But I was just getting to the really good stuff,” Anna complained.

Her mother handed their tickets to the conductor who punched them and then eyed us expectantly. I shifted my gaze from him to the door. How fast could I run if need be? Could I jump for it? Was there enough snow to cushion my fall or would I break my neck? A bead of sweat trickled down the side of my face.

“Ho ho ho,” Sam said to the conductor, who rolled his eyes.

“Tickets.” The conductor stared at Sam who grinned back.

Okay, this was ridiculous. I was the director of the Museum of Literature. I dealt with some of the most brilliant minds on the planet on a regular basis. Surely, I could manage to communicate with a conductor about a lack of paid passage.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said.

“MacElf,” Sam interrupted. “Why don’t you head to the next car? I’ve got this.”

Was Sam suggesting I make a run for it? I couldn’t tell behind the fuzzy whiskers on his face. Maddening!

“Start with ‘Deck the Halls,’” he said. “That’s a favorite.”

“Okay.” I backed my way toward the exit, aware that everyone was watching me. I stepped through the door and paused in the corridor connection to look through the window.

Sam handed Anna her bell and she sat down. He leaned toward the conductor and told him something that made the conductor glance at me through the door. His eyes held a look of pity and I suspected I had just been thrown under the bus, or in this case, the train. I had no doubt that Sam was using me to spin a tall tale as to why we had no tickets. Did he tell the guy I had gambled our money away, or drank it all? Either way, I was quite certain that it wasn’t a flattering portrayal. How had I gotten myself into this situation?

At this very moment, I should have been engaged to Trey, dancing on the highly polished floor of the conservatory while all our friends, family, and associates wished us the best. I hadn't looked at the ring Sam was carrying, but I bet it was a doozy. Trey took his status symbols very seriously. Instead, I was dressed like a fashion-impaired elf while freeloading a ride on a commuter train.

When I thought about it, I knew I'd still rather be here in this ridiculousness than there engaged to a man I didn't love. The door opened and Sam stepped through.

I hadn't left the passageway between cars. It was loud and cold. "MacElf, you're supposed to be in the next car singing."

"What did you say about me to the conductor?"

He cupped his ear. "What?"

I leaned close. "You heard me."

He edged away. "All right, fine. What makes you think I said anything about you?"

"I saw the look of pity the conductor sent my way," I said. "What did you tell him? That I'm a drunk? A gambler? A drug addict?"

"Nah." Sam shook his head. "Give me points for originality, MacElf."

"Stop calling me that," I snapped. "What did you say?"

"I told him you were a sex addict," he said.

"You did not!" I gasped.

"Did," Sam said. "And he felt so sorry for me that he gave us free passage all the way to New Haven."

I covered my face with my hands. "That does not make it okay."

"Come on, buck up." Sam jostled me with his elbow. "I also promised we'd keep entertaining the cars to earn our keep until we got there."

"So, I'm a sex maniac who sings?" I asked.

“Apparently. I told him it would keep you out of trouble,” he said.

“You are the worst.” I poked Sam in the belly with my finger. “The absolute worst.”

“Ouch!” He blocked my second poke by grabbing my hand. His shoulders were shaking, and it was then that I noticed he was laughing.

“You’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” he said. “I did tell him that we got mugged, however, and then Anna’s parents paid our fare.”

“That was nice of them.” I peeked through the window to see Anna’s father trying to pry her off the overhead luggage rack.

“Given that their daughter is feral, and we did keep her entertained for a bit, they felt it was the least they could do.”

“And now we can sit like normal people and just ride the train?” I asked.

“No, the singing in every car part was true,” Sam said. “The conductor was a little miffed with us.”

Sam spun me toward the door, and we entered the next car. As he began to belt out “Frosty the Snowman,” I started to laugh. It was a deep one that came up from my belly. The absurdity of the situation couldn’t be overstated and yet, instead of panicking, I was amused. How long had it been since I’d laughed like that? So long that I couldn’t remember.



Chapter Five



When we arrived in New Haven it was late, and everything was closed. The terminal was a big old stone building with rows of wooden benches. It had a church vibe which, given the season, seemed appropriate.

Sam perched on a bench, looking exhausted. We had jingled and jangled our way through every train car, and it was a relief to finally sit down.

“Now what?”

“We sleep here,” Sam said. “And then in the morning, we continue with my plan.”

“You have a plan?” I asked.

“Of course,” he assured me. “I always have a plan. A reporter has to be resourceful and ready to switch his play at a moment’s notice.”

“Uh huh.” I tipped my head back. The bench was hard, not inviting loitering, and yet here we were about to sleep on its unforgiving surface. I glanced at the other benches. There were a few passengers stretched out, obviously waiting for their next train. I’d never been in this situation before. Without a penny to my name, throwing my lot in with a man I wasn’t sure I could trust, all to escape the biggest personal disaster—okay, and the wrath of my mother—until I could regroup and come up with an explanation for why I’d ducked out on Trey’s planned proposal.

“Here.” Sam took off his jacket and turned me sideways on the bench so that my back was against his side and my head rested on his shoulder, then he covered us both with his enormous Santa coat. “Try to get some sleep.”

I snuggled against him, grateful for the ridiculous amount of heat he generated. My eyes were heavy, and I could feel

them droop. I desperately wanted to escape the events of the night by being unconscious. I was so close. I knew Sam's baritone would do the trick.

"Tell me a story, please," I said.

"A story?" he asked on a yawn.

"Yes, to help me sleep," I said. "Tell me about your favorite Christmas."

Sam was quiet for a moment, perhaps sifting through memories. When he spoke, his voice was soft as if he didn't want to disturb the people nearby.

"It wasn't my favorite when I was a kid, but it is now," he said. "True confession: I believed in Santa Claus until I was eleven."

"No way," I scoffed. "Most kids tap out at seven or eight."

"Most kids don't have my parents," he replied. "Chris and Jenny Carpenter took the believing about Santa bit to all new levels."

I tried to picture Sam as a little boy. I found it remarkably easy with his dark hair and big eyes and perpetual expression of curiosity and mischief. "How did they convince you?"

"Oh, there was the fact that the presents from Santa always had different wrapping paper and the handwriting on the labels wasn't my parents."

"Clever."

"Mom printed those labels on the computer. Then there was the noise on the roof in the middle of the night and the distant jingling of bells. Not sure how my dad pulled that off. The cookies and milk were always gone. And one year there was a singed bit of white fur by the fireplace."

"Fur?" I asked.

"Not real," he said. "I was certain my dad had left the fire going and we'd likely torched Kris Kringle to death, but my dad pointed to the presents under the tree. I assumed Santa's magic protected him from fires except for his coat."

“Naturally.” I laughed.

“Anyway, along came the Christmas when I had just turned eleven. It was a very big year for me,” Sam said. “I only asked for one gift. An Xbox.”

“Nice,” I said, because it seemed like the appropriate response.

“It was a few days before Christmas. I was cleaning out the garage for my dad, going the extra mile in the good category, when I opened the closet where he kept his tools and found it.”

I winced. I could just picture young Sam’s face when he discovered the truth.

“Disillusioned?” I asked.

“To put it mildly,” he said. “I was distraught. I didn’t tell my parents that I’d found my gift, but I started to badger them about Santa details. I wanted specifics. I wanted to know how it all worked.”

“What did they say?” My curiosity was dialed to high.

“All sorts of things. They tried to explain a man in a sleigh delivering presents all over the globe with quantum physics, sorcery, and even time travel.”

“An A for effort?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Finally, I badgered my mom so much that I knew she knew I had guessed. She looked me right in the eye and said, ‘Samuel, it’s pretty simple. If you don’t believe, you don’t receive. Now do you believe?’”

“How did you answer?”

“With an Xbox on the line, I said, ‘I believe’ and I’m sure I sounded like a religious convert.” He laughed and I joined him.

“Why is that memory your favorite?”

“Because I realized then that the magic of Christmas is really just having a mom and dad who love you so damn much,” he said.

“Do they still celebrate Christmas with that much enthusiasm?”

A stillness moved over Sam, and I knew before he said the words that tragedy had hit the Carpenter family.

“No.” He cleared his throat. “They were killed in a car accident four years ago.”

“Oh, Sam.” I turned around to face him. He’d removed his wig and his beard. The grief etched into the lines around his eyes and mouth made my heart hurt. “I’m so sorry.”

He shrugged. “My little sister Ginny and her husband picked up the torch and they’ve got my nephews firmly bamboozled at ages eight and nine. My parents would be very proud.”

“No kids for you?” Why was I asking? His personal life was none of my business, except I had noticed how terrific he’d been with the children on the train. It seemed a shame if he didn’t have any of his own.

“None for me,” Sam said. “You?”

“None.” I narrowed my eyes. “But you know that already.”

“I do,” he conceded. “Claire Macintosh, daughter of Hildy and Reed Macintosh, Director of the Museum of Literature for seven years, after working in museums all over the country—including the Getty in Los Angeles, during which time your name was romantically linked with all the hot male movie stars, namely the Chris(es) plural.”

I smiled. “Only the single ones.”

Sam studied me. “It’s true then. You actually dated them?”

“Hmm. I would say I was more of a charming pickpocket than a date.” The line between his eyebrows deepened, so I explained, “I wined and dined them to solicit hefty donations to the museum but nothing more. My heart has always belonged in New York with the Museum of Literature.”

“Ah.” He grinned. “I’ll bet you were very good at it.”

I batted my eyelashes at him. “Me?”

Sam leaned close until we were nose to nose. “You.”

Everything went still around us. I could no longer hear the noise of people chattering and laughing, the sound of luggage being dragged across the floor, the hum of the building itself as trains came and went. I don’t know how long I sat there, staring into his eyes. It felt like a second and it felt like forever. All I knew for certain was that for the first time someone—Sam—actually saw me, all of me, and he liked what he saw.

A bell rang. The chime pulled me from my stupor, and I leaned back. Good thing, too, because in another second I was certain I might have kissed him, which would be even stupider than running out on my own engagement party.

“Your turn,” Sam said. “What’s your favorite Christmas memory?”

“It’s actually a Christmas Eve memory.” I resumed leaning against him. He was getting under my skin, and it was better if I maintained some boundaries. “Amma, my grandmother on my dad’s side, was Icelandic.”

“Unusual,” Sam said.

“Not if you’re from the Upper Midwest, there’s about forty-thousand living there,” I said. “My father didn’t come from wealth like my mother. Amma was a teacher and Popi was a civil engineer so they were comfortable but not what one would call affluent. My dad grew up in the suburbs of Indianapolis in what he describes as an idyllic childhood. They enjoyed the usual holiday traditions of a Christmas tree, big family dinner, you know, normal stuff but Amma had one tradition that she insisted be shared with me and all of my cousins, which was Jolabokaflokkur.”

“A what flood?”

“It translates to Christmas Book flood,” I said. “In Iceland it’s a tradition to give new books as gifts on Christmas Eve and then spend the evening reading.”

“Seriously?” Sam asked. “As a writer and avid reader, I have to say that is awesome.”

“Amma was widowed when I was very young, so I always spent Christmas Eve with her because she was alone. Also, my parents had social engagements, which were not my thing. My best holiday memories are of sitting by the fire with Amma, reading my new book while we drank hot chocolate and ate cookies and admired her Christmas tree.”

“Do you still spend Christmas Eve like that?”

“No one has given me a new book on Christmas Eve since she passed away twelve years ago.” My voice dropped, heavy with the grief I still felt for Amma even after all these years.

“I’m sorry.” He sounded as if he meant it and I had the feeling Sam understood me and my love of books in a way no one else ever had.

“Me, too. The cottage I’m trying to reach in Maine was Amma’s. She left it to me when she died and ever since, I’ve spent Christmas Eve there by myself, reading. It’s my happy place even though I have to get up before dawn to drive back to my parents’ house in Connecticut in time for Christmas dinner.”

“It sounds like a perfect way to spend the holiday.” His voice was wistful.

“Yeah.” I didn’t want to be a downer, but felt compelled to add, “I don’t think I’m going to make it this year.”

“Oh, yes, you are,” Sam argued. “We had a deal, and I am now fully committed to getting you to Maine. I’m serious. I have a plan...”

My eyelids drooped. I could hear him talking but it seemed faraway like the distant rumble of a train on the tracks.

“Are you sleeping here, Santa?” a voice asked.

“Hmm...what?”

Even from my fitful doze, I recognized Sam’s voice. Exhausted, I decided to let him deal with this. The part of me that was always in charge was happy to relinquish authority for a change.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to disturb you, but this is no place for Santa Claus to be sleeping.” It was a woman and she sounded amused.

“Santa had the bad luck to miss his train,” Sam said. I was nestled against his warmth and his sleepy tones were a low rumble in his chest. I had no idea how long we’d been here. Judging by how tired I was, I suspected I hadn’t even clocked in a full twenty-minute power nap.

“It’s late,” the woman said. “There won’t be another train for hours.”

Sam shifted beneath me. I knew I should open my eyes, sit up and help him, but I just wanted it all to go away.

“Looks like we’ll be here for a few hours then,” he said.

“I watched you two singing on the train. You were quite entertaining. I don’t like the thought of you being stuck here for so long. Can I offer you a meal and a more comfortable place to sleep in exchange for spreading a little Christmas cheer in the morning?”

“Why?” Sam straightened, full-on suspicious.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” the woman said. “Isn’t the meaning of the season to care for each other, especially weary travelers?” She lowered her head closer to Sam. “Your wife looks exhausted.”

Sam’s arm tightened about my middle, and I realized he’d been holding me against him. It was oddly intimate. Small wonder the woman thought we were husband and wife. I waited for him to deny the relationship, but he didn’t.

“My name is Estelle, and I have a driver waiting for me,” the woman said. “We have room for you, too, if you’d like to take me up on my offer.”

“That’s incredibly kind of you,” Sam said. “If I could take a moment to rouse my...wife and see what she thinks?”

Oh, the conniver was going along with the wife thing. I don’t know why this made me want to laugh but it did.

“Of course,” Estelle said. “I’ll wait by the door.”

“MacElf,” Sam whispered in my ear. I was certain it wasn’t meant to be seductive, but the feel of his breath against the sensitive skin of my ear got my attention, stirring to life a dormant desire I’d thought long dead. Horrified, I pushed away from him and sat up.

“Don’t call me that,” I said.

“Fine,” he said. “Gorgeous, we need to—”

“Don’t call me that either!” I cried. Now I was flustered, and I could feel my face grow hot. Argh, how did this guy do that to me?

“Okay, Claire.” Sam drew my name out, making it multisyllabic. “We have a situation.”

“What’s that?” I asked even though I knew.

“We’ve been offered a place to sleep and a meal,” he said. “And I think we should take it. It’ll be hours before we can catch a train to Boston so we might as well get some decent shuteye.”

“Where are we going?”

“With her.” Sam jerked his thumb in the direction of a woman standing by the exit. She looked like the Hollywood version of a grandmother. Very Betty White with her fluffy white hair, sensible shoes, royal blue wool coat, and her purse hanging off one elbow.

“And how do we know her?” I asked.

“She heard us singing on the train,” he said.

“She could be a mass murderer for all we know,” I said.

Sam looked from me to her and back. “I think I can take her.”

I sighed.

“She also offered us a meal,” he said.

My stomach clenched. How long had it been since I’d eaten? I’d been too nervous all day and I didn’t even get any of the fancy shmancy appetizers at the gala, which was

probably why the whiskey had overridden any common sense I'd ever had. I bolted up from the bench. "Move out, Santa. There's a sandwich somewhere with my name on it."

Sam laughed and, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. My hood had fallen off and he kissed the top of my head. I let myself lean into him, but just for a moment. The woman clasped her hands under her chin as we approached.

"Estelle, we would be happy to accept your hospitality," Sam said. "Claire, this is Estelle."

"Lovely to meet you, Claire." Estelle took my hands in her gloved ones. She had a sparkle in her pale blue eyes that was infectious.

"Likewise," I said.

"This way," Estelle said. "My driver Ben is waiting."

I don't know what I expected. A Lincoln Town Car, a Cadillac Escalade, or perhaps a smaller Toyota Avalon, but when she said she had a driver waiting, I did not expect the short bus from—

I squinted at the sign on the side—the East Shores Retirement Village.



Chapter Six



I turned to look at Sam and he shrugged. Clearly, he was not fazed by the bus or Estelle or our entire situation. No one in my usual circle of acquaintances would have made it this far without a Xanax and an emergency call to their therapist. I had to admire Sam's adaptability.

An imposingly large man in a dark-green puffy coat, gray beanie and gloves, greeted Estelle by the open door to the bus.

"Hello, Ben," Estelle greeted him. "So nice of you to come collect me in this weather." She took his hand as he assisted her onto the first step as if she were as delicate as a daisy. I decided I liked Ben.

"I'm always here for you, Mrs. Archer," Ben said.

"I keep telling you to call me Estelle," she gently chastised him.

"Doesn't feel right." Ben shifted our way and noted our disheveled appearance. He squinted one eye as if to let us know he didn't like what he saw.

"These are my friends, Sam and Claire, and they're coming to the Village to entertain everyone over breakfast tomorrow morning," Estelle introduced us from where she'd paused on the top step. "Isn't that nice?"

"Uh huh." Ben sounded dubious.

I didn't blame him. My hair had fallen out of its twist, my makeup was likely smeared, and I was pretty sure I smelled like a sweaty gym sock from the very acrylic fiber Santa suit Sam and I had been sharing.

"Come on, wife, let's dazzle him," Sam said.

"Huh...what?" I gaped at him. Where did this guy get his energy? At best we'd had a short doze in the station, and I was

exhausted.

Sam didn't wait for me to speak, however, but launched right into song, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas..." He looked at me, clearly queueing me in. I sighed.

"Just like the ones I used to know," I sang. He grinned at me, and we finished the verse together.

Sam half-bowed to Ben. "Not bad, right?"

"If you're a Dollar Store Bing Crosby, it'll do." Ben gestured for us to follow Estelle onto the bus.

Sam wagged his eyebrows at me. I shook my head at him. I would not be charmed by this man who, despite his promise, was probably going to write a scathing piece about me being on the lam from my own engagement party. Nope, nope, nope.

The little bus was surprising comfortable on the inside. We each took a bench seat and Ben pulled onto the road that ran along the train tracks. I wanted to ask about the Village and where it was located but I was too tired.

Instead, I listened to Sam ask Estelle about her day in the city. She had gone to see a show with a friend of hers who lived in Manhattan. They did it every year around the holidays as they were both widowed.

I watched as the streetlights illuminated the light sprinkle of snow, which was getting thicker, and wondered how much we were supposed to get. I would have checked the weather app on my phone but didn't have it. I thought I'd be panicked without my cell, but surprisingly, I felt at peace. No one could reach me. It was an incredibly liberating feeling.

In no time, Ben pulled the little bus up to the front door of a large sprawling red brick building. He hopped off first and helped Estelle down the steps. He gave Sam and I a warning look as we followed our new friend inside.

"I'm just a phone call away, Mrs. Archer," Ben called after us.

"Thank you, Ben," Estelle answered. "But I'll be fine. See you at breakfast!"

I leaned close to Sam. “I don’t think he likes us.”

“I think it’s more that he cares about Estelle,” Sam countered.

There was a front desk, very much like a check-in station at a hotel. A lone woman with brown-turning-to-gray hair which she wore up in a ponytail was seated behind the desk. She was scrolling through her phone and raised her gaze when we arrived.

“Good evening, Mrs. Archer.” Her smile was warm as she greeted Estelle. “Did you have a fun day?”

“It was wonderful, Maddie,” Estelle said. “And I’ve brought some entertainment for tomorrow’s breakfast. They’re a husband and wife singing duo.”

Maddie looked at us as if we were roaches who had just crawled up out of the drain. “Mrs. Archer, I don’t think—”

“Don’t you worry,” Estelle interrupted her. “Even Ben adores them.”

“Ben approved this?” Maddie gestured at us as if she wasn’t sure what to call us.

“He did.” Estelle didn’t even blink when she flagrantly fibbed. Impressive. “I’m putting them up for the night in the guest suite since it’s vacant.”

“All right.” Maddie didn’t sound as if she thought it was all right at all. She opened a drawer in the desk and took out a keycard. She glanced at Sam and me and then handed it to me. “Room 127.”

“You’re right down the hall from me,” Estelle said. “I’ll show you the way.”

“Thank you,” I said to Maddie. She nodded without smiling, clearly indicating that I was not welcome.

“Good night, Maddie,” Estelle said.

“Good night, Mrs. Archer,” Maddie said. She then stared lasers at Sam and me. “I’ll be here all night, keeping watch.”

“Of course, I appreciate you.” Estelle turned and headed down the passageway to the right of the front desk. The walls were painted a soft buttery cream and the floor was a light-colored gray stone with a matte finish, probably to keep the elderly residents from slipping. The air smelled faintly of lavender, which was remarkably soothing.

“With so many of our residents being elderly, we have frequent emergency visitors, so the guest suite has a stocked kitchenette, a living room, and a bedroom with a king-sized bed. It also overlooks the garden. I think you’ll be very comfortable there,” Estelle said.

“This is incredibly generous of you,” Sam said.

“Not really,” the older woman replied. “The holidays are very difficult for some of our residents, whose families are too far away to visit. Your appearance at breakfast tomorrow will bring them some much needed joy on Christmas Eve.”

A pang of different guilt hit me then. My parents would be wondering what happened to me. I hoped there was a phone in the suite where I could call and leave a message for my father. My mother would likely need a year or two to cool off first.

“Here you are.” Estelle gestured to the door in front of us. “If you need anything, do not hesitate to knock on my door. I’m in suite 115.”

“Estelle, can I ask you something?” Sam said.

“Sure.”

“You seem to have an awful lot of authority around here,” he said. “You’re not just a resident, are you?”

Estelle smiled and her eyes twinkled. “You’re very clever, Sam. That must be helpful in your writing.”

Sam’s brow rose in surprise, and she laughed.

“Oh, yes, I know who you are. I read your magazine and recognize you from your picture.”

Sam grunted, obviously impressed that she knew him.

“My husband, Earl, and I built this place when his mother needed more care than we could give. We retired here when we reached a certain age. Sadly, my Earl passed away five years ago. Looking after the Village gives me something to do with my grief. It’s my home and I treat all our residents like family.”

“You’re full of surprises, Estelle Archer,” Sam said.

She grinned. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Good night, you two, sleep tight.”

“Good night,” we said together.

I opened the door with the keycard and stepped into a delightful suite. It was also painted in a cream color, but the furniture and drapes were a rich navy blue with gray accents. Original artwork was displayed on the walls and upon closer inspection, I realized it had been done by the residents.

Sam did not care about any of this. He made a beeline for the kitchenette and opened the refrigerator, then the cupboards. “I am starving. What can I cook you, MacElf?”

“Are there any knives in there? Because if you call me that one more time, I will stab you,” I said.

He laughed like I was joking. I glowered. He laughed harder.

“All right, darling, how about an omelet?” Sam unloaded food items to the counter. I slid onto a stool and watched him.

My face heated at the endearment. “I am not your darling.”

“Estelle thinks we’re married,” he said. “I’m practicing for tomorrow.”

“What should I call you then?” I asked. “The old ball and chain has a nice ring.”

He chuckled but then grew serious. “What did you call Trey Thurmond?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, my eyes stayed glued to Sam as he melted butter in a frying pan, whipped up the eggs, grated cheese, diced up ham, and chopped a variety of vegetables.

The man knew his way around a kitchen. I'd hoped he was pre-occupied with cooking and would let it lie. He didn't.

"Well?" he asked. "What is your pet name for your fiancé to be?"

My chuckle lacked amusement. The idea of using an endearment on Trey was ridiculous. "Trey," I said. "I called him Trey."

Sam fanned himself with a potholder. "So romantic. I'm swooning."

I filched a red pepper chunk off his cutting board and threw it at him. He thwarted me by catching it in his mouth. I tried not to stare.

"What about you?" I asked. "What do you call your significant other?"

I told myself I didn't care and that the question was me just trying to get his reporter's attention off myself. I sat very still while I waited for his answer. A shadow passed over his features and I immediately felt like an idiot. I knew Sam was about the same age as me. No one gets to their forties without suffering some sort of loss, be it through divorce or death, although admittedly, I was the exception to that rule. Sam was probably suffering some sort of heartbreak and I went and poked at it like an insensitive lout.

"I'm sorry, it's none of my business," I apologized.

"No, you're fine," he said. "I asked about you. Turnabout is fair play."

"You don't have to share anything, really," I said.

He poured the egg mixture onto the hot pan. It rose light and fluffy. My stomach gurgled. He sprinkled the meat, cheese, and veggies and then with a deft flick of his wrist, folded the egg over, making a perfect omelet. He plated it and set it in front of me with a glass of juice and a fork.

"I'm forty-one," Sam said. "It never occurred to me that I'd still be single at this age. I was so sure I'd be married with

a couple of kids by now.” He sounded equal parts bewildered and disappointed.

“There’s still time,” I said. “You’re a man. The biological clock doesn’t tick quite as loudly for you.”

“Maybe.” Sam poured more of the egg mixture into the pan and glanced up at me. “But if I haven’t found her by now, what are the odds that I ever will?”

The same odds that had me almost engaged to a man I didn’t love. Slim to none. I didn’t say that, however. I scooped up a bite of his amazing omelet. “If you can cook like this, you’ll find her.”

He met my gaze and the intensity of his stare caught me off guard. My entire body flushed with heat, and I had a hard time swallowing. Awareness coursed between us like a live electric wire, and I tingled as if I’d been zapped. Sam reluctantly returned his attention to the frying pan. He sprinkled the filling into his eggs with a shaky hand and his breathing was unsteady. Could it be he felt the same current... nah.

That was ridiculous. He was a reporter, and I was a story. That was all that was between us, and I’d do well to remember that.

He sat beside me at the counter and our conversation stayed on neutral topics. Whether the Rangers stood a chance for the Stanley Cup, how much snow we were going to get, and what our favorite holiday movie was.

“*It’s a Wonderful Life*,” I declared. “Hundred percent.”

“Yawn.” He patted his open mouth, indicating boredom. “It’s absolutely—”

“Do not say *Die Hard*,” I interrupted. “That is *not* a Christmas movie.”

“You’re one of those, huh?” Sam looked me over as if assessing me. I refused to get flustered. “Good to know. For the record, I wasn’t going to say *Die Hard*, although it absolutely is a Christmas movie. I was going to say *A Christmas Story*.”

“Not as impactful as *It’s a Wonderful Life*, but it’s hard to argue with the leg lamp fiasco and ‘you’ll shoot your eye out,’” I acknowledged.

“Of course, the greatest Christmas story is Clement Clarke Moore’s *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*,” Sam said.

“That’s a poem, not a story,” I corrected him, although I was impressed with his choice as it was a favorite of mine, too.

“It’s a story-poem,” he countered. He pushed his empty plate away and rested his chin on his hand.

“Still not a story,” I said. “If we’re talking best story, it has to be Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*.”

“Bah-humbug!” he cried. “My mother would recite Moore’s poem every Christmas Eve. I used to know it by heart.”

“One of the books I always read during Jolabokafloð is *A Christmas Carol*,” I said.

“We’ll have to agree to disagree.” Sam stood and gathered our plates.

“I’ll do that,” I said. “You cooked. I can do the dishes. Fair is fair.”

“I’ll dry,” he offered.

We stood together at the double sink. I scoured and he wiped. With so few dishes, we were done in no time. I glanced at the clock. It was almost two o’clock in the morning. Despite the late hour, I needed to call my father. I didn’t want him to worry.

There was a phone on the desk in the corner and I picked up the receiver. I called my father’s cell phone, one of the few phone numbers I had memorized, but he didn’t answer. I left a voice message telling him that I was fine. I apologized for my abrupt departure and said I’d call him tomorrow. I still maintained a landline at the cottage in Maine, so I figured I could call him from there.

I ended the call and held out the receiver to Sam. “Do you need to call anyone?”

He shook his head. “My sister isn’t expecting me until Christmas day. I’ll deliver you to your cottage in Maine and then double back to her place just outside of Boston.”

I crossed the room and moved the drapes to peer outside. The snow was really coming down with inches of the white stuff building on the statuary in the garden. I hoped it eased or getting to Maine was going to be an endeavor.

“Well, would you look at this?” Sam asked.

I turned around to find he’d wandered into the adjacent room. I felt a moment’s pause at walking into a bedroom with a strange man but then shook it off. This was Sam. It hit me then that I trusted him.

When I entered the room, he pulled two bathrobes from an open closet. I lifted my eyebrows.

“There’s a stackable washer-dryer in the hallway. We can wear these robes while we wash our clothes.”

“And take showers.” I was practically giddy. The heavy makeup I’d worn for the gala felt like paste and my hair was stiff from product.

Sam tossed a robe at me. “You go first. Throw your clothes out the door and I’ll start the wash.”

I would have demurred, but I was desperate to clean up. “Thank you.”

Sam nodded, his lips turning up at the corners in a small smile. An awkward awareness pulsed between us as we stood in the bedroom and after a beat, he backed away and then turned and left the room.

I heard the television switch on in the living room and it pushed me out of my stupor. A hot shower beckoned, and I couldn’t wait to cleanse away the day’s drama.



Chapter Seven



With my hair wrapped in a towel and wearing the plush white robe, I left the bathroom and entered the living room. I would have felt provocative, being naked in just a robe, but Sam sat on the couch in his matching robe, with his feet on the coffee table crossed at the ankles, and an enormous bowl of popcorn in his lap. Somehow, the situation just felt normal and weirdly comfortable.

His eyes were half closed but they opened as soon as he heard me. “Your turn.”

He rolled off the couch. “Excellent. But I have some bad news.”

“Oh?” I raised my eyebrows as he handed me the popcorn.

“The only Christmas movie on this late at night is *Die Hard*,” he said.

I glanced at the television just as Bruce Willis said, “Yippee Ki Yay...”

“Of course, it is.” I picked up the remote with my free hand and changed the channel to one with all the made-for-television Christmas movies. I looked at him and asked, “Or is it?”

Sam put his hand over his heart. “Thoughts and prayers for every slick city boy about to get dumped by his girl on Christmas for a hometown hero wearing flannel and carrying a kitten.”

I laughed and he disappeared to take his shower. I began to ponder what had happened at the museum after my abrupt departure from the gala and how it would likely affect my future. An uncomfortable pressure built in my chest, so I crammed a fistful of popcorn in my mouth and refocused on the movie.

Sam was quick. The heroine had barely gotten back to her hometown when he flopped down on the couch beside me and retrieved his bowl of popcorn.

“Catch me up,” he said.

“Our female lead has just inherited an inn in her hometown,” I said. “So, she left her fiancé in the city—”

“Architect?”

“Lawyer,” I said. “And he fully supports her, because he’s busy trying to make partner, so there’s only one problem.”

“Only one?”

“She found an abandoned litter of puppies in the basement of the house and her high school ex is—”

“A dogcatcher?” he said.

“No, he’s the town veterinarian.”

“Of course, he is.” Sam threw a piece of popcorn in the air and caught it.

I tried to ignore him. I did. But he radiated heat and humor in equal measure, and I just wanted to melt into him.

“I’m surprised you’re not asleep.” He muted the movie. “It’s late.”

“The consequences of my actions are keeping me awake,” I said.

“Ah, yes, those good old consequences.” Sam put the popcorn aside and turned to face me. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “I feel like I won’t be able to figure it out until I get to Maine, where I can clear my head and think.”

“Onward then,” he said. “In the meantime, we should try to get some rest.”

I nodded. “I can take the couch.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Sam waved me off and stood up. He held out a hand and I took it, feeling the strength of him as he

pulled me to my feet. There was a low banked fire of awareness in my belly, warming me from the inside out. I ignored it. “Take the bed and get some shuteye. We have a big breakfast show in the morning!”

I closed my eyes and exhaled. “No one is ever going to believe this story.”

“The way I tell it they will,” Sam said.

And there it was, the thing that kept a healthy boundary between us—no matter how many laughs we shared or how attractive I thought Sam Carpenter was, at the end of the day I was just another tabloid story for him.

“Good night, Sam.”

“Good night, Mac...er...darling.” He grinned unrepentantly at me, and I closed the bedroom door, pretending I wasn’t utterly charmed by his endearment.

Sam had asked me what I called Trey, but he hadn’t asked what Trey called me. Unsurprisingly, Trey called me Claire. It had never bothered me, in fact, it had never occurred to me that Trey could or should call me anything else. Not until right now.

I didn’t think I’d sleep. Mulling the wreckage of my life and the apologies I owed, I thought I’d lie awake for hours. But a faint voice from the other side of the door distracted me. It wasn’t the television. It was Sam.

“Twas the Night Before Christmas, and all through the house...” His voice was low as he savored each word. I released a slow breath and sank deeper into the soft mattress. I was unconscious before Saint Nicholas came down the chimney with a bound.

The smell of coffee roused me. I’d crashed hard. I was even in the same position I’d fallen asleep in, and my arm tingled from being pinned beneath my side.

I climbed out of bed and tightened my robe, trying to shake the feeling back into my fingers. Other than the smell of coffee, all was quiet in the suite. I wondered if Sam had

abandoned me here. It was Christmas Eve, and he most likely had a million other things to do than get me to Maine.

I found I was surprisingly panicked at the thought of abandonment, which was ridiculous. I had no claim on Sam. He might have gotten a better story idea and bolted. It was just a business arrangement, and I really couldn't blame him if he took the offer.

I opened the door and entered the suite to find Sam dressed in his thermal shirt and Santa pants, sitting at the kitchen counter. His hair was mussed, and he looked tired. My heart gave a lurch at the sight of him. I told myself it was just relief that he hadn't stuck me in an old-age home and disappeared.

"Hey." I stepped into the kitchenette and found a mug.

"Hey back." Sam sipped his coffee and then cleared his throat. "How did you sleep?"

"Surprisingly well," I said. "And you?"

"Same." He watched me fill my mug from the coffee pot and add a dash of milk. "I don't know how to say it, so I'm just going to come out with it. There was a situation with the laundry."

"Situation?"

"I forgot about your engagement ring," he said. "And it went through the wash."

"Technically, it's not mine—it's Trey's. Given that it's a diamond set in precious metal, unless it went down the drain, I'm sure it wasn't damaged."

"It wasn't. The ring is fine, but the box is a soggy mess." Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out an exquisite emerald cut diamond on a platinum setting. He set it on the counter where it winked at me as if it were a witness to the impulsiveness that had landed me here.

"Oh." I didn't know what to say. I also didn't know what to do with the ring that belonged to neither of us. "I guess we're lucky that our robber didn't pat you down and find this."

“Or my watch,” Sam said. He pushed up his sleeve and I saw an old analog watch on a brown leather band. “I don’t think he was very good as his chosen profession.”

“Clearly not.” I smiled.

“I’m afraid I’m going to lose it,” Sam said. “Can you wear it?”

“No.” I shook my head. “That would be totally inappropriate, wouldn’t it?”

“Better that than losing it,” he said. “Besides, everyone here thinks we’re married. They’ll expect to see a ring on your finger.”

I cringed, but Sam didn’t give me a chance to balk. He picked up the diamond and slid it on my finger. It felt heavy and complicated.

“Darlin’, will you—”

“Don’t say it,” I interrupted him. I did not want to hear a joke proposal. “This is weird enough.”

He grinned. “I was going to ask if you’d refill my coffee.”

Of course, he was. I rolled my eyes and grabbed the pot. It felt strangely domestic to be here with Sam and not entirely unpleasant.

I moved around the counter to sit beside him and found my clothes folded, even my delicate underthings. I’d never had a man do my laundry before. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“What time do we perform?” I asked.

Sam glanced at the clock. “In a half hour. Estelle called a while ago.”

I saluted him with my coffee cup. “I’d better get dressed. MacElf reporting for duty and all that.”

“Oh, so it’s okay when you call yourself that?”

I shrugged. “Elf prerogative.”

He shook his head. “You are something, Macintosh.”

I liked the way he said my last name. It sounded affectionate, which was not something I was used to from the men I dated.

“As are you, Kris Kringle,” I retorted. I poked him in the belly and surprised a laugh out of him. “We’d better get a move on. I don’t want to let Estelle down. Sleeping here was infinitely better than the hard bench in the train station. Speaking of which, what’s our plan to get to Maine?”

“Don’t worry,” Sam said. “I have it all under control.”

I chose not to question him and took my clothes into the bedroom to get changed. We had no money, no identification, and no cell phones. How he was going to pull this off, I had no idea, but I was definitely curious to see him try. Instead of fretting or trying to take over, which would have been my normal impulse, I found I was more than willing to let him take the lead on our adventure. Huh. Would wonders never cease?

“You two are marvelous,” Estelle gushed. She was very festive in her red turtleneck sweater and red-and-green plaid skirt. With her hands clasped together she looked like an enthusiastic schoolgirl. Her joy was infectious, and I found myself grinning back at her.

“Thank you.” We’d been singing for forty-five minutes as the residents filed in for breakfast.

“We’re just getting started,” Sam said.

“Now, I insist you take a break and get something to eat,” Estelle said. “It won’t do to have the entertainment faint from hunger.”

“I saw a cinnamon roll with my name on it.” Sam rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“Coffee,” I said. “I could definitely use more coffee.”

Breakfast was served buffet style. Sam and I grabbed our plates and hopped into the chow line. The average age of the retirement village seemed to be about seventy-five, making me feel like a kid.

We found two empty seats at a table with an older couple. He was shrunken, stoop-shouldered, and seated in a wheelchair. His hair was dyed a dark black which did not match his wizened face, but this little show of vanity made me warm to him. She sat beside him, her blunt cut, thick silver hair framed her handsome face, which had more laugh lines than WTF lines, and that seemed like a win to me. They wore Christmas sweaters; green with a jovial Mr. Claus on the front for him and a matching Mrs. Claus for her.

“May we join you?” Sam asked.

“Yes, please.” The woman beamed. “I’m Mildred and this is Donald.”

“Sam and Claire.” Sam introduced us.

“Have you been married long?” Mildred asked. Her eyes twinkled and I suspected she was hoping for a romantic story. She’d have to look elsewhere.

“No,” I said at the same time Sam said, “Yes.”

Donald started to laugh, which turned into a wheeze. He clapped a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “It just feels longer for the man.”

Sam grinned while Mildred and I exchanged an exasperated look.

“Without me watching after you, you’d have been dead and buried five times by now,” Mildred chided him.

Donald reached for her hand. His gnarled fingers curled around hers and he brought the back of her hand to his lips. “No doubt about it, my dear. You’ve kept me on my toes for sixty-three years.”

Mildred appeared mollified and I raised an eyebrow at Sam. He’d already taken a big bite out of his cinnamon roll, and he quickly swallowed. “It just feels longer to me because I’ve spent so many years pining for you to notice me.”

Mildred sighed and put her hand over her heart. “Aw. That deserves a kiss.”

I was mid-gulp in my coffee and it took all my control not to spit it across the table. I choked it down and Sam turned toward me. His eyes were crinkled in merriment and one corner of his mouth turned up. Oh, he thought I was going to balk? Ha!

I beamed at Mildred and put my cup in the saucer. I faced Sam and leaned close. “She’s right. Kiss me, honey.”

His eyes widened in surprise, and it was my turn to be amused. His gaze dropped to my lips and then lifted back up to mine. The amusement was gone and in its place was a hot intensity that made my heart shift into a higher gear. Wow, the man sure could smolder.

He moved in so that our faces were just inches apart. “Last chance to run away.”

“I’m not running anywhere,” I said.

Sam swooped in and captured my mouth with his. It should have been a chaste peck; the firm press of lips-on-lips with a hint of underlying ardor. We were sitting in a room full of senior citizens, after all. It started that way but the feel of his mouth on mine was such a surprise that I let out a faint hum of awareness. Sam hesitated for just a second and the next thing I knew he was cradling my face while he deepened the kiss. The hint of cinnamon on his tongue tasted like an invitation and I gripped him by the lapels of his Santa suit and pulled him in. The texture of the faux fur between my fingers reminded me where we were and what we were doing. I immediately let go and pulled back, breaking the kiss.

Again, I felt the unfamiliar heat of embarrassment warm my face and I peeked at Mildred and Donald, expecting disapproval. Instead, they were beaming at us.

“Young love.” Donald winked at us. “There’s nothing like it.”

I couldn’t even look at Sam. I sipped my coffee while trying to gather my composure. It was like trying to catch snowflakes in my bare hands.

“My dear, may I examine your ring?” Donald asked. “I used to be a jeweler and that is an exemplary setting.”

“Oh, of course.” I slipped it off my finger and handed it to him. I could feel Sam’s gaze on the side of my face. I wondered if he was as uncomfortable as I was. I refused to check and see. I was certain I could never look at him again after that kiss.

“Here.” Mildred took a jeweler’s loupe out of her purse and handed it to Donald.

“She always carries one for me,” he said. “Retired but not out of the game completely.” Donald lifted the magnifier to his eye and studied the ring. He frowned. He gave it back to me with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “A stunning piece.”

I slid the ring back on my finger. There was something in Donald’s expression that didn’t fit right. Was he suspicious of how we, seemingly homeless singers, got our hands on such a valuable piece? “Is there something wrong?”

“No, not wrong.” He shook his head.

Sam glanced from the ring to Donald. “You can tell us. We won’t be offended. It’s supposed to be a family heirloom. Has something happened to it over the years?”

Donald nodded, looking relieved. “Ah, that explains it. Jewelry that’s been passed down through the generations occasionally doesn’t live up to the family legend, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I do,” I said. “But if you could spell it out for us, that would be grand.”

“It appears that someone, at some point in the family history, switched out the diamond for a very nice facsimile.”

“Are you saying the rock in that ring is a fake?” Sam asked.

“Yes, it’s lab created and not a genuine diamond.”



Chapter Eight



Sam slowly turned his head to look at me. I imagined I appeared quite shocked. Trey had told me that the ring had been in his family for generations. I was as apathetic about the engagement ring as I was about the marriage, so I hadn't really cared. He'd puffed his chest and told me his mother had it appraised for fifty thousand dollars, which was obviously nonsense. Trey most likely didn't know that the ring he'd been about to propose with was a phony. Or did he? For the first time, I wondered if I'd known the man I was about to marry at all.

"Do you have a pen?" Sam asked Mildred.

"I do." She pulled a ballpoint out of her purse. Sam took it and began to scribble on a napkin.

"What are you doing?" I leaned over his shoulder to see.

"Story idea," he answered. "Someday, I'm going to write a novel, and this has given me an amazing idea."

"Really? After all we've been through this ring kick starts an idea for you?" I asked.

"The muse appears on her own time," Sam replied. He didn't look up but kept writing.

I rolled my eyes and then frowned at the ring. I turned to Donald. "Would it be possible for an appraiser to not notice the diamond was fake?"

"Unlikely." Uncomfortable, Donald continued, "I expect the family went through some hard times. Lots of old pieces get the stones swapped out like that. Still, it's a spectacular three-carat imitation."

"I don't know what to say," Sam said. He stuffed the napkin in his pocket and handed the pen back to Mildred. "Sorry, darling."

I met his gaze. Everyone here thought he'd given me the ring. His apology appeared to be that of an embarrassed groom, but I knew what he was thinking. He believed Trey had put one over on me and felt sorry for me, which was likely inspiring his story idea. Well, to heck with that.

I shook my head. Suddenly, it seemed as if dipping out of the gala and fleeing the engagement was the smartest move of my life. "Don't be. I know you have a plan, but I think I may have just figured out how we're financing our journey to Maine." I glanced at the ring and up at him with a wide smile. He caught on immediately and grinned back at me.

"Very resourceful, MacElf," he said. I groaned.

Newly motivated, we tucked into breakfast and finished our show, as it was. We exchanged hugs and kisses with Estelle, who told us to come back and visit any time.

Ben drove us to a nearby pawn shop, and I hocked that fake ring for enough money to buy an ancient dark-green Jeep from a used car lot on the west side of town. It started when you turned the key, heat blasted over our feet, but the driver's side door tended to stick. Sam and I had to climb in through the passenger's side door to get to the driver's seat. It was a damn good thing I'd left my dignity back in New York.

I also picked up a small gift for Sam in the pawn shop as a thank you for his help and a potential bribe for him not to write a scathing story about me.

By late morning, we were on I-95 headed north with the radio dialed to the all holiday music station. Maine was so close I could almost smell the pine trees. We'd gassed up and bought food for the road trip, getting a righteous New England side-eye because of Sam's Santa outfit and my de-jangled Christmas tree sweatshirt and Santa pants. I'd always thought you could tell a lot about a person by the snacks they chose for a long car ride. Sam had a solid mix of salt and sweet with Mike and Ike's and beef jerky, while I was fully loaded on Hostess snowballs and chili cheese Fritos.

The snow had stopped sometime last night but as we reached the Massachusetts border, it started again. It was

pretty, the light little flakes falling from the sky adding to the festive atmosphere. Then it began to thicken to larger, wetter flakes that obscured my visibility and made the road slick. We were taking turns driving and I was at the wheel. Sam stared out the window and I wondered if he was thinking about his sister and how he'd be missing Christmas Eve at her house.

"You don't have to go all the way to Maine with me," I said. "I could drop you off at your sister's place near Boston. We'll be going right passed it."

Sam turned from the window and crossed his arms over his chest with a frown. "So, we're not going to talk about it?"

I glanced from the road to him. "About what? The Jeep? The ring? The weather?"

"No, none of that." Sam shook his head. "I was talking about the kiss. We're just going to pretend it didn't happen and not discuss it?"

"What's there to discuss?" I started to sweat.

"Seriously?" he asked. "I felt like I got walloped upside the head."

"I'm...flattered?" I was determined to keep it light. The man didn't need to know I'd been undone by our kiss, too. It served no purpose since he'd be leaving for his sister's place in the morning. Wait, that meant we'd be spending another night together. Uh oh.

"You know what I mean," Sam said. "There are kisses and then there are *kisses* and that one definitely belonged to group two."

"And what is group two made up of?" I asked. "People pretending to be married?"

"No, people whose chemistry is off the chart," he said. "Admit it, darling, that kiss surprised you, too."

I reached for the second half of one of my snowballs and took a huge bite. I chewed nice and slow, trying to think of a way to plead the fifth without being obvious about it.

Sam uncrossed his arms and turned in his seat to watch me. Well, didn't that make a gal self-conscious? I swallowed and the preservative-loaded cake went down hard.

"Take your time," Sam said. "I figure we have at least two and a half hours, more if the storm gets worse, until we get to your cottage in Maine."

"There's nothing to admit." I took a sip of my hot coffee. "It was nice."

"Nice?" Sam sounded completely offended. "A daisy is nice, puppies are nice, that kiss was not nice."

"What was it then?" I shouldn't have asked. I knew better and yet the question flew right out of my mouth.

"It was hot, sexy, and not nearly long enough," he said.

A thrill raced through me, and I resisted the urge to fan my face with my hand. I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

"Sam, I—" I began but he interrupted.

"Are about to get engaged to Thurmond," he said. "I know. But if you'd really wanted to get engaged to that guy, you wouldn't have hijacked my sleigh."

"It wasn't a sleigh."

"Not the point," he said.

"I panicked," I protested. "I just need some time to think."

"About what?" he asked. "Whether you want to spend the rest of your life with some mediocre man who tried to propose to you with a bogus ring?"

"He's not mediocre." Although, to me he was. "Trey works for the same environmental law firm as my father. He's trying to make a difference in the world."

"He's not what you—" Sam stopped talking and blew out a breath. I got the feeling he had something to say about Trey, but he shook his head instead. "I bet he kisses like soggy French toast."

I burst out laughing. Partly because I was surprised, but also it was true. There was no heat when I kissed Trey. It was nice but utterly forgettable. My kiss with Sam, however, I'd remember until the day I died.

A few miles later we stopped at a Dunkin' in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, to use the restroom and load up on more coffee. The snow was coming down harder which slowed the driving. I handed Sam the keys. If he could get us through the Bay State, I could take over when we crossed into Maine and drive the rest of the way to the cottage.

"I'm going out on a limb here," Sam said. We boarded the Jeep with Sam going feet first from the passenger's side into the driver's seat.

As he maneuvered his body over the console, he looked like a cat stuck in a fishbowl. I didn't mean to laugh, truly, which is why it escaped out my nose.

"Macintosh, did you just snort?" Sam raised one eyebrow as he met my gaze while he wriggled himself into position.

"No." I shook my head. "I have never snorted in my life. It must have been a bird."

"The great horned snow snorter?" he asked.

"They're a protected species, very rare." I slid into the passenger seat and held up a bag of jelly donuts. "If you want one of these, you'll embrace the narrative."

"Too bad we didn't get a picture of the elusive snorter." Sam offered an open palm.

"Pity," I agreed. I put a donut on a napkin in his hand. He started the car, and we made our way back to the highway. In just a few hours we'd be there. I could almost picture myself in front of the fire, enjoying a hot cup of cocoa, and reading a book. Heaven.

"What do you mean the road is shut down?" I asked. I'd fallen asleep and woke to see a police officer waving a red flare in the direction of the exit.

“Five-car pile-up on the icy road ahead,” Sam said.
“They’re closing the interstate until they can get it cleaned.”

I glanced out the window. It was almost a full white-out. The only reason I could even see the police officer was because of his flare. A shiver went through me.

“Were there any fatalities?” I asked.

“According to the radio, no,” Sam said. “It was a very slow-moving crash but it’s filling all the lanes.”

I heard the muted voice of a news reporter from the speaker. It was barely audible, and I suspected Sam had turned it down so as not to wake me. I reached out and cranked it up.

The national weather service has declared a state of emergency for New England. All travelers are advised to get off the road and seek shelter immediately.

“Where are we?”

“No idea,” Sam said. “I haven’t been able to see a street sign for miles.”

“Do you want to stop?” I tried to make my voice sound neutral even though the very last thing I wanted to do was stop.

“Nah,” he said. “We have a Jeep—we’ll be fine.”

I relaxed into my seat. I appreciated that the man never quit, and I wanted to believe it was because this had become more than just a story for him, but I was afraid to ask so I said nothing.

“It might take us several more hours, but we’ll get there.”

“If we find Route 1, we can take it into New Hampshire. The Route 1 Bypass turns into the bridge over the Piscataqua River. Halfway across and we’re in Maine.”

“That’s a solid plan,” Sam said. “It would be even more amazing if we had a GPS to get us to Route 1. Any idea which direction to turn at the light?”

Through the swirling snow, I could just make out a flashing red streetlight. Cars stopped, or at least tried to. Most

skidded a few feet into the intersection. Thankfully, there were only two cars aside from ours and we managed to stop at the end of the exit.

“When all else fails, go right.” Sam signaled and very cautiously pulled out onto the street. The Jeep’s headlights flashed across a sign. It said Route 1 with an arrow pointing ahead.

“Well done,” I said.

“Sheer dumb luck,” he countered. “But I’ll take it.”

We inched our way down the road. The heater blasted steady warmth and I was grateful for it. Through the snow I caught a glimpse of something on the side of the road.

“Stop!” I cried.

Sam slammed on the brakes and the Jeep went into a slow skid. We weren’t going fast enough for anything more dramatic.

“Shit! Sorry.” Sam stepped off the brake and steered into the swerve. The car stopped, facing the wrong direction. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine, but I saw a person, walking in the snow,” I said. “We should help them.”

“Let’s hope I didn’t hit them.” Sam forced the reluctant door open with a horrific screech and hopped out of the Jeep, calling, “Hello! Anyone there?”

I exited my side, too. The wind tore at my clothes with frigid fingers, and I shivered. Within seconds, out of the drifts of snow, a man appeared. He was bundled up under a heavy wool coat and carrying a large backpack. His shoulders and hat were covered in snow, but he jogged toward us with a look of concern.

“Are you all right?” the man cried. He lowered his scarf, revealing his face. He appeared to be in his late twenties with deep-brown skin and dark eyes. Beneath his coat, he wore fatigues and combat boots.

“We’re fine,” I shouted over the wind. “It’s you we’re worried about. You could get killed walking on the side of the road like that.” Good grief, I sounded just like my Amma when I was a kid. “Can we give you a lift somewhere?”

“If it’s not too much trouble, I’d sure appreciate it.” He smiled and it lit up his eyes.

“Of course,” Sam said. “Hop in.”

We all piled into the car. I turned around in my seat. “I’m Claire Macintosh and this is Sam Carpenter.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Lt. Isaac Kelly,” he said. “But everyone calls me Iz.”

“Huh. Everyone calls me Santa,” Sam joked.

Iz laughed as he took in Sam’s outfit. “You’ve made a believer out of me with your excellent timing.”

“Where can we take you, Iz?” Sam asked. He started up the car and wheeled it around, so we were facing in the right direction.

The lieutenant pushed up his sleeve and lowered the cuff of his glove to check the time on his watch. “My family is gathered at my parent’s house in my hometown, Bellhaven. It’s just two towns up the coast. I was hoping to surprise my wife and daughter. They don’t even know I got leave, no one does, but my car service refused to take me in this weather, not that I blame them, but I didn’t come all the way from Germany to sit in a bus terminal. Any chance you could drop me off at my parents’ house?”

Sam glanced at me. I knew he was leaving the decision up to me. How could I possibly refuse? “Absolutely,” I said.

Sam put the Jeep in drive and eased onto the road. Iz gave him directions and we followed Route 1 up the coast to Bellhaven. Iz told us all about his wife and his little girl. His eyes became a bit watery when he mentioned that he hadn’t seen his wife and four-year-old daughter, Everly, in over six months and he’d heard Everly had grown three inches while he was away. He shook his head as if he couldn’t process it.

His smile when he talked about her was as wide as the sky and my heart swelled at the family reunion that awaited him.

Iz's excitement to be home increased with every mile until by the time we reached the outskirts of town, he was practically vibrating in his seat. Mercifully, the storm had eased and we could actually see the buildings around us.

Iz directed us to a neighborhood just beyond the town green. Sam pulled up in front of an old two-story white colonial with black shutters. There was a single white candle shining in every window and the front door sported a large evergreen wreath trimmed with red and silver ribbons.

"Do you want to come in?" Iz asked. "It's an open house and all are welcome."

"I don't—" I began.

"There'll be food and coffee. You haven't lived until you've had my Aunt Tansy's pineapple upside down cake."

"I'm in!" Sam declared and shut off the engine.

I turned toward him. "We can't go in there dressed like this."

Sam looked down. "You're right." He grabbed his wig, beard, and hat off the backseat beside Iz and quickly slipped them on. "Now I'm ready."

I rolled my eyes. Nothing screamed *party crasher* louder than my cheap tourist shop outfit.

"You'll be fine," Iz said. "Trust me, my dad is a teacher, and my mom is a high school principal. They have seen it all."

"Except I'm a forty-year-old woman in pajamas, not a sixteen-year-old," I said.

"Pineapple upside down cake." Sam wagged his eyebrows. He had a point.

Normally, socialite me would have rather died than be seen in public like this but the events of the past twenty hours had taken the starch out of me, and my standards were dusted and done.

“Okay, fine,” I agreed. We had miles to go, and coffee would be welcome, okay, and cake.

“Did you say your family isn’t expecting you?” I asked Iz, an idea brewing.

“That’s right,” he said. “And if you two hadn’t picked me up when you did, I likely wouldn’t have gotten here until tomorrow, if ever.”

“I think Santa should deliver you like a proper present,” I said.

Iz looked at Sam and grinned. “That would be amazing.”

Sam patted his belly. “Ho ho ho. Yeah, I can do this.”

It became a covert op to hide Iz by the front door without anyone seeing us. He told Sam to ask for his wife, Tegan, and their daughter, Everly. Sam nodded as he pulled on his white gloves. I stood just behind Sam on the opposite side from Iz to draw attention away from him.

Sam rang the doorbell. I was excited and cold and began to bounce on the balls of my feet.

“Steady, MacElf,” Sam said.

“Don’t call me th—

The door opened and a woman in her fifties stood on the threshold. She had black hair that was just turning gray at the temples, but her eyes were the same shade and shape as Iz’s, identifying her as Mrs. Kelly, his mom.

“Well, hello,” she greeted us. “I didn’t expect Santa to be dropping into our open house, but come on in.”

“Ho ho ho,” Sam said. He really did a good Santa laugh. “My assistant and I would love to but first we have a special delivery for Tegan and Everly.”

Mrs. Kelly raised her eyebrows. She looked Sam up and down and side to side as if he was a suspect in a line up. After due consideration, she said, “All right.” She turned away and called, “Tegan, Everly, there’s someone here to see you.”

A little girl came racing toward the door with her mom right behind her. When Everly saw Santa, her eyes widened, and her mouth popped open. She immediately hid behind her mother's skirt. They were wearing matching dresses of red velvet with full skirts, and even had their hair styled alike in a riot of long braids. Everly's were short, just reaching her shoulders, while Tegan's ended in the middle of her back. They looked beautiful.

Tegan put her arm around Everly's shoulders as she joined her mother-in-law in the doorway. She smiled and asked Mrs. Kelly, "Did you do this?"

"Nope." Mrs. Kelly shook her head. "I think the storm blew Mr. Claus and his elf in."

Sam laughed and I grinned. She wasn't entirely wrong.

"Ho ho ho," Sam said. "Tegan and Everly, what would you like for Christmas more than anything else in the world?"

Tegan tipped her head to the side. She glanced behind Sam at me. She appeared amused as if two strangers could not possibly understand what her heart's desire would be.

"Daddy!" Everly popped out from behind her mom. "My mommy wants to see my daddy. Sometimes she cries because she misses him so much." Then she disappeared, tucking herself back into her mom's skirt.

Tegan pressed her lips together and sighed, clearly embarrassed. "I'm sorry about that." She peered down at her daughter and said, "Sweetie, we talked about how Santa can't bring your daddy home for Christmas. I think it's best that you just ask for what was on your list and see if it appears under the tree tomorrow."

"But he's Santa and he's here," Everly whispered. "I think that's special."

"Well, it certainly is very kind," Tegan said. "But we can't expect—"

"Ho ho ho," Sam interrupted her. "I have an idea. Why don't you three ladies close your eyes, and my elf will get your gift."

Mrs. Kelly and Tegan exchanged a glance and Mrs. Kelly asked, “You’re not trying to con us, are you?”

“Grammy, he’s Santa,” Everly protested. She sounded aghast, as if the mere idea of Santa doing something naughty shocked her to her core.

“Who’s conning who on Christmas Eve?” A man who had to be Iz’s father, judging by his wide smile and broad shoulders, stepped behind the women.

“Hello, Mr. Kelly,” Sam said. “Merry Christmas. I’m just here to deliver your gift. Now if you’ll all close your eyes.”

“If you say so.” Mr. Kelly agreed but he spread himself wide, filling the doorway. If Sam was going to try something, Mr. Kelly was making it clear that he was not getting past him.

“All right,” Sam said. “Close your eyes and don’t open them until I say so.”

The group closed their eyes. Sam waved a hand in front of their faces, and no one flinched. I signaled to Iz to come over and he stealthily moved across the porch. Sam and I stepped back, leaving Iz alone in the middle. He took off his hat and scarf. I saw a sheen of tears as he absorbed the sight of his family. He turned to Sam and nodded.

“Ho ho ho!” Sam said. “Merry Christmas! You can open your eyes now.”

Tegan was first and as soon as her eyes opened, she gasped and threw herself into her husband’s arms. “Iz! You’re here!”

Mrs. Kelly let out a cry of joy and immediately burst into tears, covering her mouth with her hands. Mr. Kelly put his arm around his wife while clearing his throat and surreptitiously wiping his own cheeks.

When Tegan released her husband, he crouched down and scooped up Everly who stared at her father as if she couldn’t believe he was real. “Daddy!”

“I’m here, baby girl, I’m here,” he said.

“Oh, Daddy!” Everly threw her arms around his neck in a hug that strangled.

Iz glanced over to where Sam and I stood. I was crying buckets and I heard Sam sniff, repeatedly. Iz grinned at us and said, “Thank you for this. Thank you.”

Everly smiled over her father’s shoulder. “I knew you were real,” she said to Sam. “I just knew it.”

She pushed off her dad and gave Santa a hug. Sam took her in his arms and carried her into the house at Mrs. Kelly’s insistence that we stay and eat, an invitation we were delighted to accept.

The Kelly house was full of people, but everyone was happy to make room for Santa and his elf. Our plates were loaded several times over and we drank enough coffee to keep us awake for the last leg of our journey. I was thrilled to discover that Iz had not exaggerated. His Aunt Tansy’s pineapple upside down cake was the best I’d ever tasted.

Sam and I borrowed the Kelly’s phone. He called his sister and let her know he’d be arriving the next day, and I called my father’s work number, knowing he’d get the message but wasn’t likely to pick it up—I wasn’t ready to talk yet, and left a voice message that I was on my way to Maine and not to worry. It was late in the evening before we said our good-byes. Mrs. Kelly packed up food for the ride that would last us at least three days. I could see that Everly was concerned that we were leaving in a Jeep and not a sleigh, but Sam leaned close and said, “I have to go to the stable now and pick the reindeer up.”

She nodded wisely. “I’ll leave some cookies for you.”

Sam patted his tummy. “Thank you.”

The storm had stopped. While we’d been enjoying the Kelly’s hospitality, the roads had been plowed and though still thick with snow they were much more passable than before. I felt optimistic that we’d be at the cottage in a little over an hour. Jolabokafloð was still a possibility.

We crossed into Maine and headed up the coast. My cottage was a half hour out of Portland, a small village on the water. If it wasn’t so cold out, I’d have rolled down the

windows so I could smell the brine on the air. Instead, I concentrated on the road, turning down the small side streets toward the place I'd always considered home.

The headlights of the Jeep lit up the gray shingle cottage with the white trim. A motion activated security light snapped on as soon as I turned onto the gravel drive. Amma's cottage looked the same as always, neat and tidy even while buried under the new snowfall.

I parked the car and stepped out. The bitter air made me hurry along the walkway and up the steps of the small porch. Sam was right behind me, carrying the bag of food, and I had a moment of doubt.

Sam Carpenter the reporter knew me as the daughter of a wealthy socialite and an environmental attorney. My life was supposed to be endless glam parties with celebrities, premier seating at restaurants, and exotic vacations to the Seychelles. This cottage was none of that.

It was my sanctuary, my safe space, the place where I could just be myself. I never invited anyone here. Even Trey had only visited the cottage once and he'd been duly horrified by the collection of recovered buoys hanging off the porch railings, the stacks of books, the treasure trove of seashells scattered throughout the house, and the fact that it had just one bathroom. What would Sam say? What would he think? Would he use this against me in his article?

I glanced over my shoulder at Sam, still in his Santa suit. He'd ditched the beard and wig but retained the hat, probably for warmth. He grinned at me. "We made it. What are you waiting for? Let's get out of the cold."

I nodded. Of course, I didn't have my key, so I brushed the snow off the fake rock in the flowerpot beside the door. I picked it up and flipped it over. The bottom was removable, and the key fell into my hand. I put the rock back and fit the key in the lock.

"High security you've got there," Sam said.

"Just wait until you meet my guard dogs."

He laughed. When I opened the door, the motion activated alarm went off, complete with the sound of ferocious barking dogs. Sam jumped. I stepped inside and typed in the code to deactivate the alarm.

“Gees, MacElf, that scared the sugar cookies out of me,” Sam said. He put his hand over his chest. “Warn a guy next time.”

“I did,” I protested. I flicked on the lights illuminating the cottage. My heart did a somersault of joy to be here, but I was curious and a bit nervous to see what Sam would think. I took off my snow-crustrated boots and set them on the doormat to dry out.

Sam removed his shoes and left them beside mine. He stepped into the main room and scanned the place with a sweeping glance. I tried to view it through his eyes. There was a large stone fireplace, hard wood floors, and an area rug in front of the navy-blue loveseat and matching armchairs. Pillows and an afghan Amma had knitted decorated the couch, giving the place a restful aesthetic. I heard Sam let out a big sigh.

“I can see why you were so desperate to get here,” he said. “It feels like...home.”

My shoulders dropped as I realized he understood. I took the food he’d carried and brought it into the galley kitchen where I left it on the counter.

“Make yourself comfortable, there’s plenty of food and beverages,” I said. “I was just here a few weeks ago, so I am full up on non-perishables and booze. I’ll check and see if I have some clothes that might fit you. You must be tired of that Santa suit.”

“A bit,” Sam said.

I walked down the short hallway to the rear of the house, unlocked the back door, and stepped out into the cold. The large deck had a built-in hot tub on one side, and I removed its cover, firing it up. In daylight, the porch overlooked the ocean, but tonight post snowstorm, there was nothing to see. No

lights from passing ships or reflected moonlight on the water. The occasional snowflake continued to fall, adding to the fluffy white blanket that covered the deck and my small yard. The cottages around mine were quiet as the year-round residents had settled in for the night. I breathed in deeply, the most at peace I'd felt in days.

I ducked back inside and entered the master bedroom where I changed into a bathing suit and donned a thick winter robe. There was a smaller guest bedroom that I used as an office. It had a twin bed that I hoped would fit Sam...or did I?

Sam was puttering in the kitchen, and I could hear him humming a Christmas carol. It was charming and I realized that I was happy to have him here with me. I had to admit, at least to myself, that I really liked Sam Carpenter. He was smart, funny, kind, and ridiculously handsome even in a Santa suit.

Why couldn't he be the man I was supposed to get engaged to? I pictured my mother's reaction to Sam—the horror! Better not to think about it. I searched my closet and found an old bathing suit and robe from an ex-boyfriend I hardly remembered. I had planned to be in the hot tub, drinking champagne by myself, but maybe there was a reason Sam was here now. Maybe I was supposed to be spending Christmas Eve with him.

An image of the Kellys came to mind, and I thought about how Iz and Tegan had looked at each other—with warmth and affection like Mabel and Thomas Stewart in the painting at the museum, too. I wanted those feelings for the person I married. Truthfully, I'd felt more with Sam in the last twenty-four hours than I had over months of dating Trey, and I didn't think this was something that I should just walk away from.

I had champagne in the refrigerator and suddenly a glass or two celebrating my liberation seemed in order. I entered the kitchen with my robe hanging open, revealing my bathing suit. Sam glanced up from the charcuterie board he was creating and let out a low whistle. "Darling, you do realize we're in Maine and not Key West, right?"

“It’s hot tub time.” I tossed the suit and robe at Sam, and he snatched them with one hand.

“This day just keeps getting better and better.” With his free hand, Sam threw an olive in the air and caught it in his mouth. Placing the robe and suit over his shoulder, he strode down the hallway to the bathroom. I watched him go, feeling a nervous thrum in my belly.

“Have I told you how much I admire you?” Sam asked.

We were sitting on opposite sides of the hot tub. The steam rose around us while the bubbles churned in a steady hum. I sipped my champagne and considered him.

“What’s to admire?” I asked. “I’m the director of the museum because my parents—meaning my mother—has money.”

“Don’t.” Sam shook his head at me, then took a long sip of champagne. “Don’t be dismissive of what you’ve accomplished. I saw the numbers when doing my research. The funding for the museum has tripled under your watch and not because of your family.”

I shrugged. Although it was really nice that he regarded my work in such a positive light, did any of that matter? My mother was going to work her connections and exact her revenge. I’d be lucky if I had a job when I returned to New York. It would undoubtedly take a Christmas miracle for me to keep my position as director.

“I appreciate the support,” I said. “But I don’t want to think about it right now.”

“Understood.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Weren’t you going to write a story on the engagement? Aren’t you going to be in trouble with your editor if you don’t turn something in?”

“Yeah, about my story...” Sam’s voice trailed off and he peered up at the sky, then me. A slow grin parted his lips. “You know something? I really don’t care right now.”

I laughed. He leaned back and closed his eyes. The picture of contentment. *Exactly.*

Maybe because we'd survived being robbed, poor, and homeless together, I appreciated my simple cottage and the shelter it offered more than ever. I wanted for nothing, and I knew in that moment how very blessed I was. I had no doubt that I could have made it home without Sam, but it would've been much more difficult, and less fun, without his help.

I studied my companion, admiring his broad shoulders just visible above the water, and the way the rising steam caused his dark hair to curl on the ends. He was too attractive for my own good and I found I couldn't—rather, I didn't want to—look away. I hadn't forgotten how his kiss had made me feel—*had that only happened this morning?*—and wanted to do it again.

“If you could have anything in the world for Christmas, what would it be?”

His thick dark lashes lifted, and his gaze met mine. The intensity in his green eyes made my throat go dry. His voice was a low growl when without hesitation, he said, “You.”

We stared at each other through the steam. If I didn't leave the hot tub right then, things were going to happen that would change the course of my life and there would be no going back. I set my glass of champagne down on the ledge and slipped into the water.

Anticipating my trajectory, Sam put his glass down, too, and met me halfway. He grabbed my waist and pulled me toward him. I slid my hands up his arms and across his shoulders, tugging him close until we were pressed against each other. We fit perfectly. I sighed with contentment.

Sam stroked my bare back with one hand while the other cupped my face. He peered into my eyes. “Do you know how long I've thought about kissing you?”



Chapter Nine



“Since breakfast this morning?” I guessed.

The steam from the hot tub rose around us, enveloping us in its heat. Sam shook his head, leaned in, and kissed me quick. I followed him when he pulled away, wanting him. He studied my face before lowering his mouth to mine. He kissed me more deeply this time. There was an urgency to it as if he was trying to savor every drop of champagne on my tongue.

We broke apart when we needed to breathe. I slid my fingers into the curls at the nape of his neck, not wanting to let go of him completely. He kept his hand on my lower back, anchoring me to him.

“I’ve wanted to do that since you jumped into my sleigh,” Sam said.

“Not a sleigh,” I countered.

“Not the point.” He chuckled. “You still hijacked it.”

“Borrowed,” I corrected him. “I was planning to return it.”

Sam sat back on the built-in seat and arranged my body over his lap so that I straddled him, my legs on either side of his, then he placed my hands on his shoulders. “Don’t move.”

It was incredibly hot. He caressed my body, touching, teasing, and taunting until it was almost impossible not to move, to push myself up against him. Desire was making me practically cross-eyed, and I needed relief.

“Until I draw my last breath,” Sam said, pausing to run his lips up the side of my neck to nestle just below my ear, “I will remember seeing you, this glorious woman in gold, grabbing the reins of my horse and carriage and trotting right toward the gate. What a sight you were, like Helen of Troy. Absolute perfection in female form.”

My face grew warm. “That might be the best compliment anyone has ever given me.”

“Your turn,” Sam said. “How long have you thought about kissing me?”

“Who said I ever thought about it?” I asked. “You’re the one who started this line of questioning.”

“I assume the thought never occurred to you, before yesterday.”

“In my defense, you’ve been dressed as Santa Claus for most of the time we’ve been together.”

“Santa’s not your kink?” Sam made an expression of mock surprise and I laughed loud and long.

“Why is being with you so effortless? I’ve met a million men in my life, but I can’t think of one who I could run away with so easily.” I shared more than I meant to, and I opened my mouth to explain or deny or both. Sam didn’t give me the chance.

He pulled me close until we were pressed against each other in a cloud of steam and bubbles and kissed me. It wasn’t like the teasing tender kisses we’d shared before. This one was hot and sultry, and made my body hum.

“Let’s go inside,” I said. My voice came out low and breathy.

Sam looked at me. “I get the feeling you’re not inviting me in for cookies and milk.”

I sifted his hair through my fingers and watched his eyes get heavy lidded. “Maybe I am...after.”

His chuckle was throaty and sexy as hell before he turned serious. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said. “One hundred percent. And not to brag, but I’ve been very good this year and feel that I should get what I want for Christmas.”

“Well, when you put it like that...” Sam rose out of the water, scooping me into his arms on the way. The cold air

made me gasp, but he gathered me close to his chest, giving me his warmth as he carried me inside. It might have been the single most romantic moment of my life.

Once in the house, Sam turned so I could lock the door. He proceeded to the master bedroom where he dropped me onto the mattress and climbed up beside me. We didn't bother undressing each other but tossed our wet bathing suits to the floor and then burrowed under the thick comforter together.

Sam's mouth claimed mine while his hands ran over every inch of my skin. I was completely at his mercy.

"The train," I gasped as he kissed the length of my body, making every bit of me ache with wanting.

"What about it?" he murmured in my ear. My back arched from the shot of hot need that knifed through me.

"That's when I first wanted to kiss you," I said. "You were so charming and devious and determined to get me to Maine. Then again, maybe it was the Santa beard. Should I go get it?"

"Ha!" Sam put his full weight on top of me and it was delicious. "I can see I have my work cut out for me, making you forget the bearded one." He kissed me long and deep, and not only did I forget teasing him about his Santa beard, I forgot my name, my address, my purpose in life, and any consequences I might be facing for this course of action. Yes, Sam Carpenter was just that good.

"Tell me about the museum," Sam said. "Of all the things you could do with your life, why choose director to a museum of literature?"

Sam and I were dressed in pajamas, his again from an ex-boyfriend I hardly remembered, lounging on the rug in front of the fireplace as we sampled a smorgasbord of food from the Kelly's open house, the charcuterie Sam had prepped, as well as what we'd found in my cupboard. The crackling fire emitted a cozy warmth and we sipped hot chocolate spiked with Baileys and lazed in its glow.

"Books have always been my best friends, libraries were my sanctuaries, and when I graduated with a degree in

literature, I knew I wanted to do more than teach or be an archivist. I wanted to invest in the preservation of language and stories in all their many forms, so I took a position as a docent and then went back to school to get an administrative degree. I worked my way up until I was the assistant director.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “I started on third base with a well-connected family.”

“Perhaps, but I’ve met my share of the city’s elite and not everyone is like you. What you’ve accomplished with funding, public outreach, and the collection itself is unequalled.”

I felt a surge of pride and basked in his compliments. “Thank you.” I sipped my cocoa. “Why journalism? I’ve read your articles. You have a gift with prose. Why write for a magazine when you could be writing books, non-fiction bios, or even crime novels?”

To my surprised delight, Sam blushed and put a hand on the back of his neck as if he could contain it.

“I don’t have the attention span for writing a book,” he said.

I stared at him.

“Or, more accurately, I’m not too keen on rejection,” he confessed.

“Why do you think you’d be rejected?” I asked. “You have the credentials and the ability.”

“If only that sold books,” Sam said. “Speaking of books, while you were negotiating the pawning of your would-be engagement ring, I found something I thought you might like.”

He reached under one of the couch cushions and handed me a brown-paper-wrapped package. It was more tape than paper with a small sprig of pine attached to the front.

“Happy Jolabokafloð, although I think we missed it as we were engaged in other activities.” He grinned and my face heated. “Merry Christmas, darling.”

I didn't tell him not to call me that since our relationship had obviously changed.

"How did you manage to buy me a book when we had no money?" I asked.

"Remember when I went back inside to use the bathroom?" he asked. I nodded. "I pawned my watch."

My throat tightened and I sniffed. He'd pawned his watch to get me a book because he knew the Christmas Eve tradition of exchanging books meant so much to me. I didn't know what to say, so I reached behind the basket where I kept an evening's supply of firewood and handed him a paper-wrapped parcel tied with a repurposed blue ribbon from my junk drawer.

"For you." Those were the only words I could manage.

Sam's eyes went wide. "When?"

"While haggling over the ring, I had the pawn broker throw this in," I said. "It's been snug in the pocket of my sweatshirt all day."

"Mine was in my pants." Sam wagged his eyebrows and I burst out laughing. "On the count of three?"

"One, two, three," I said. We both unwrapped our presents. Mine required a bit more effort but when the book fell out of the brown paper, my heart flipped. A small well-worn burgundy leather volume of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* landed in my hand. It was beautiful with gilded edges on the pages and deep-green paisley endpapers inside. I loved it.

"Thank you." I clutched it to my chest. "It's perfect."

Sam grinned at me and then looked at the book in his hand. It was a very old, very loved, small picture book of *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. His smile melted me. "Clearly, great minds think alike. This is fantastic."

"Just wait—it gets even better," I said. "Open the cover."

Sam did and a green tissue paper Christmas tree sprang out with a ruffle of its pleated folds, very trendy in the nineteen fifties, which was when the book had been published.

“Okay, that’s super cool.” He gently fingered the old paper. “This is like something I’d have found in my parent’s attic as a kid.”

“Read the inscription,” I said.

He glanced to the side of the 3D paper tree and there on the faded yellow endpaper, someone had written: *Merry Christmas, Sam. Love, Mom and Dad.* He traced the words with his finger.

“I know *that* Sam isn’t you,” I said. “But after your stories about Chris and Jenny and how much they loved Christmas, when I saw it, I felt like it was a message for you.”

Sam didn’t move. He didn’t say anything. His head was bowed, and I thought maybe the book had upset him. I was about to apologize for overstepping, when he carefully closed the volume and put it on the end table by the couch. He took my book out of my hand and put it on top of his. He reached for me.

I dared a peek his face and glimpsed the raw emotion he was feeling. He held me close for a beat and a shudder rippled through him. He leaned back and said, “That means everything.”

He swooped in and kissed me. It was a thorough plundering, and I was delighted to be on the receiving end of it. He moved our mugs and plates out of the way and then laid me down on the couch pillows that we’d tossed onto the floor.

He sprawled beside me, his hand on my hip, as we faced each other. I liked the way the fire highlighted the copper-colored strands of his hair and shoved my fingers into the thick wave that fell over his forehead. It was soft in my fingers as I combed it away from his eyes.

“You are the most unexpected thing that’s ever happened to me,” Sam said.

“Unexpectedly good, like winning the lottery...or unexpectedly bad like your car blowing up?”

“The lottery, definitely the lottery.” Sam met my gaze, and I felt his affection for me all the way down to my core. It was

heady stuff. When was the last time a man had liked me just for me? I couldn't remember. I cleared my throat, trying to build up my courage.

"I feel the same way," I muttered.

"Um...what?" He ran his hand up and down my spine. It should have been soothing. It wasn't. Before I lost my coherence under a tsunami of lust, I forced myself to try again.

"I. Feel. The. Same. Way." I punched out each word so that he understood that I meant it but also that this was hard for me.

"This is a very interesting situation," he said in a perfect imitation of Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life* and I was certain in that moment that no one had ever understood me as well as this man.

I looped my arms around his neck and pulled him in for a deep kiss. I loved his mouth against mine, his strong hands on my skin, the softness of his hair, and the way he hummed in the back of his throat, almost like a cat purring.

So consumed was I with Sam and the way he made me feel that I didn't hear the knock on the door. It didn't even penetrate the passionate fog I was in until Sam pulled away and frowned.

"Expecting someone?" he asked.

I glanced at the mantel clock. "Not at two in the morning."

"Stay here." Sam rolled up to his feet and crossed the room to the front door. In a voice just tinged with menace, he called, "Who is it?"

"Who the hell are you?" a man's voice responded. "Claire? Are you in there?"

My heart sank. I knew who was on the other side of the door. I had no doubt he'd come to collect me. He banged on the door again, and I hurried across the room before he woke my neighbors with his yelling.

"Who am I?" Sam asked. "Who are you, bud?"

“It’s all right,” I said. “I know who it is.” I stepped around Sam and unlocked the door.

I pulled it open and there was Benedict Thurmond the Third, Trey, wearing an overcoat, cashmere scarf, and dress shoes, looking as out of place as a flamingo at the north pole.



Chapter Ten



“Claire, are you all right?” Trey cried. “Everyone is worried sick. What happened to you? Were you abducted by this...?” He seemed to run out of words, but he raised his fists as if he’d fight Sam. I moved between them.

Sam released an exasperated sound. “If you’d let her talk, she’d tell you.”

Trey glared at Sam standing behind me. “Who the hell are you?”

“He’s a friend,” I said.

“Friend?” Sam sputtered. “I’d say I’m more than that after tonight.”

“Tonight?” Trey echoed. “What’s he talking about, Claire?”

“Trey, this is Sam—”

“Carpenter?” Trey asked. “I knew I recognized you. You’re the reporter, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.” Sam looked tense with his shoulders bunched as if to ward off a blow.

“Oh, this is rich,” Trey said. He walked into the house and took in the full picture of us in our pajamas, then at the fire and the plates of food. “What exactly is going on here? How did you get here, Carpenter?”

Sam opened his mouth to speak but I put my hand on his arm. This was my mess and I’d handle it.

“Sam and I bumped into each other,” I said. “When I took the horse and carriage from the museum, Sam was the Santa in the sleigh.”

“What?” Trey cried. He eyed Sam. “So, that’s your angle. You’re romancing her to get information for your hit piece on me and her father, Reed Macintosh.”

Sam’s jaw tightened. He didn’t deny it. I felt as if my entire world had suddenly been knocked off its axis.

“What’s he talking about, Sam?” I asked. “Are you writing a piece on my dad?”

Sam ran a hand over his face. “Yes, but it’s not what you think. I’ve been investigating their law firm for some time and there are some irregularities—”

“So, you admit it,” Trey said. “You’re trying to ruin Reed and you’re using her to do it.” He pointed his finger in Sam’s face. “I hope you didn’t tell him anything important, Claire.”

In a flash, I reviewed every conversation Sam and I had shared to see if I’d said something I shouldn’t have about my father and his practice. Panic made my heart race and my breath shallow.

“It’s not like it seems,” Sam said to me. “I was only at the museum that night to witness your big engagement as part of a larger story about Thurmond.”

“You infiltrated what was supposed to be the greatest night of our lives,” Trey snapped. “How dare you? Hey, wait, where’s my ring? That’s a family heirloom, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” Sam retorted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Trey asked.

“It’s safe,” I said. “I have it.” Okay, that was a slight exaggeration, but the pawnshop broker had assured me he’d hold it for a few days as I fully intended to get it back and return it.

“You have some nerve, Carpenter,” Trey began but Sam interrupted him.

“At least I’m not trying to pass off fake—”

“Enough,” I said. I was getting a headache.

“Tell her the truth about what you’re doing,” Trey said. “And how it will impact her father.”

I looked at Sam. I wanted him to deny it so much. He didn’t.

“The truth is—yes, I’m writing an article about Thurmond, which he knows from how often I’ve called his office and he’s hung up on me.”

“I don’t talk to jackals,” Trey spat.

“I’m not—Claire, don’t listen to him,” Sam said. “There’s no way I could have known you were going to take my horse and carriage that night. Every life-changing thing that has happened to us since we left the museum has been one hundred percent real.”

“Ha!” Trey barked out a laugh devoid of humor. “Then why is social media all ablaze about the spoiled little rich girl, runaway heiress, who raced off in the middle of what should have been her engagement party?” He took his phone from his pocket and opened an app. Sure enough, there was an endless stream of photos of me driving the carriage out of the museum yard, and then, much to my horror, there were several from the train ride and the retirement village where I was dressed as an unkempt elf. “How did the tabloids get these shots unless reporter boy over there was the one sending them?”

I stared at Sam, feeling as if I’d been stabbed, the betrayal was that sharp. I thought I was going to be sick. He’d been using me all along and I’d been so blind, I’d never even seen it.

“Claire, I had nothing to do with any of that,” Sam said. “You know that. We were mugged. I didn’t even have my phone.”

I wanted so desperately to believe him, but I knew better. I’d seen Sam in action. He was smart and resourceful. He’d borrowed his friend’s horse, carriage, and Santa suit just to crash my engagement. He’d managed to get us free train passage by singing. And the whole time, he’d never been interested in writing about me, oh no, it was all about Trey and

my dad. I glared at him. “Who did you call when we were at the Kelly’s open house?”

“What? My sister. I told you that,” Sam said.

I didn’t believe him. How could I when there was evidence right here in my hand that someone had taken pictures of us—*me!*—on the train and at the East Shores Retirement Village and the only person who knew my real identity was Sam.

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

He sucked in a breath and backed up a step as if I’d checked him with a body blow. “Really? Just like that? This guy waltzes in and suddenly you become Upper Eastside socialite Claire again?”

“She was always socialite Claire, no matter what happened between you two while—” Trey’s voice faded as if he didn’t want to put words to what might have happened between me and Sam.

“While what?” Sam stuck his chin out and stepped forward, clearly angling for a fight. “While we were in the hot tub?” Trey’s lips thinned to a severe line and his nostrils flared.

“Stop it, both of you.” There was no way I was putting up with two idiot males on top of everything else tonight. “Sam, I think you should go. Take the Jeep to your sister’s. We can figure out what to do with it later.”

“Darling, you can’t listen to him,” Sam said. “He’s not who you think he is. I know things about him...” His voice trailed off when he realized what he’d said.

It was true. Everything Trey had said was true. Sam was working an angle and I was just a means to an end. “Don’t call me darling. I’m going to get dressed. I expect you to be gone when I return.”

I strode to my room with as much dignity as I could muster, softly closing the door behind me. I didn’t cry. I wouldn’t cry. Even though everything I had believed about Sam and me had proven to be a lie.

“It’s about time you came to your senses, Claire,” my mother said. She flitted around my parent’s Connecticut house, preparing for her annual New Year’s Eve party—by directing the army of help that she’d employed for the yearly Macintosh bash. “Honestly, I don’t know what you were thinking running out on Trey like that. You’re so lucky that he’s willing to take you back.”

“Take me back?” I repeated. The mere idea made me ill, and yet here I was brought to heel like a well-trained puppy. I recalled Sam saying he wanted to write about me being a woman who exercised her own self-determination. With a sharp pang, I missed the version of myself that Sam had seen, but maybe that had been another lie. As Trey kept telling me, Sam was probably just trying to romance information out of me. I felt like such a fool.

We stood in the library, removed from the main traffic of the caterers but close enough to the front door to hear guests arrive. My mother whirled away from the massive flower arrangement she was examining. Her emerald-green skirt revealed a nice set of legs for a woman her age and she arched one eyebrow at me.

“You know Trey’s going to propose tonight, don’t you?” she asked.

“Is he?” My insides spasmed. “We didn’t talk about it.”

“Of course, you didn’t,” she said. “Trey knows you’ve been under the weather for the past week.” *Under the weather* being my mother’s way of explaining to her socialite friends why I bolted from the Christmas gala. She reached up and straightened the high neckline of my white lace dress. It screamed virginal bride and now I knew why she’d insisted I wear it.

“Trey wants to surprise you.” My mother stepped back to examine me and then nodded. I supposed I would do.

Why would Trey want to surprise me? Given how catastrophic his last attempt at a proposal had been, I was shocked he’d even consider it. We hadn’t discussed it, and I wasn’t prepared. I had no intention of marrying him, not after

the way I felt...I shook my head. I refused to think about Sam anymore. Maybe I should just say yes to keep up appearances, but I didn't want to.

I knew Trey had the ring because I'd hurried to the pawn shop in New Haven the day after Christmas and retrieved it. When I gave it back to him, I didn't mention the bogus diamond because I didn't want to embarrass either of us. He hadn't said he was going to ask me again. I thought we were in agreement that we weren't a good fit. I mean, he had to know that Sam and I...I shut that line of thought down. It hurt too much to think about Sam.

I could feel my mother's shrewd gaze upon my face. "What are you thinking, Claire? You know you have to say yes."

I studied her right back. Despite the hold she had over me, I found myself arguing. "No, I don't."

"What alternative do you have?" my mother asked. "Your reputation is in shreds. I didn't share those photos of you having your little manic episode with the tabloids so that you could blow your second chance." She sauntered over to the next floral arrangement. A tower of pink roses, blue delphiniums, and eucalyptus boughs. It was stunning but I was too shocked to appreciate it right then.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You shared those photos with the tabloids?"

"Of course, who else?"

"But how?" I asked.

"Friends of mine who were out for the evening spotted you leaving Central Park, wearing half of a Santa suit, and called me, concerned. I hired your grandfather's investigator and had him follow you."

"All the way to Maine?"

My mother nodded. "You appeared to enjoy your time in the hot tub."

“How could you do that? You had no right,” I said. “I thought it was Sam who leaked the story. I thought he’d used me to get to Dad.”

“Exactly.” My mother’s eyes blazed with fury. “I needed you to realize that you couldn’t trust him. He’s a mere reporter when you could marry an up-and-coming lawyer in your father’s firm. Besides, you and I had a bargain. I spend millions in donations to your precious museum and you get married and start having babies. I am the only one who upheld her end of the bargain. I have been waiting for seven years while you reject one man after another. Enough. I will not wait another day.”

“I’m not going to say yes to Trey,” I said. “If he asks, it’s a no from me. You’ll never get the grandchildren you want.”

“You will say yes.” Mom shook her head, allowing her tousled blonde curls to fall about her face. She looked completely unperturbed by my resistance. “You’ll say yes or you’ll lose your job. I’ll make certain of it.”

My mother swept out of the room, leaving me alone to contemplate her floral arrangement when I really just wanted to knock it on the ground and crush the blooms under my heels.

“That won’t solve your problem,” a voice said.

I glanced toward the end of the room and saw my father peering over the top of his wing chair at me.

“Dad, how much did you hear?”

“All of it.” My father rose from his seat and crossed the room to stand beside me. “I only have one question for you. Do you love him—the reporter, I mean?”

“Sam? I...no...yes...maybe.” My voice went up higher with every word. “But he was investigating Trey and you.”

“So? Isn’t that his job?” Dad asked. “It’s men like Sam Carpenter who keep powerful fellows like me and Trey in check.”

“That’s not the point.” He was deconstructing my argument, always a hazard with an attorney for a father, and I didn’t know how to maintain my ire.

“Isn’t it, though?” Dad asked. “You’re about to agree to marry someone you don’t love just to protect your career while Sam is writing an article—also to keep his job.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Sounds like you’re both making decisions based on your professional lives and not your personal ones.” Dad put his arm around my shoulders and gave me a half hug. “I want to tell you something about the choices we make and what it means to live with them.”

“Okay.” I gave him side-eye. There was a somber note in his voice that I’d rarely ever heard.

“When I was twenty-five, I met a woman who took my breath away.” He observed the flower arrangement my mother had been fussing over rather than look at me. “She wasn’t your mother.”

“Oh.” I had long suspected that my parents didn’t have a love match, but it was disquieting to have it confirmed.

“I was ambitious, a trait I believe you inherited. I was informed that if I wanted to go far in my career, I needed a wife who would give me access to the life to which I wanted to become accustomed,” Dad said. “Beatriz, the woman I loved, was an artist. She had no interest in social climbing or wealth. So, I let her go, the woman who made my heart race, who laughed at my jokes, who saw the best in me, and I married your mother instead.”

There was no need for him to say that he shared none of those things with my mother. I knew.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I said. “Although, I wouldn’t be here had you made a different choice, so…”

“That is the only thing that makes my poor decision-making bearable.” Dad hugged me again. “I’d make the same choice all over again, if it meant I got you for a daughter.”

My throat tightened and my voice was rough, “Thanks, Dad.”

“That being said, what kind of father would I be if I let you make the same mistake I did?”

“I haven’t fallen in love with a female artist named Beatriz,” I argued.

He chuckled. “No, I think yours is a reporter named Sam.”

“I hardly even know him,” I protested.

I heard the doorbell ring. My mother hurried to answer it, shouting last minute instructions all the way. After a pause she cried, “Trey, sweetie.”

My stomach cramped. Dad frowned. “I suppose I must go and greet him. Listen, I’m not telling you what to do, but my Bentley is parked in front of the garage and the keys are in it.” I leaned back and stared at him. His gaze was steady when he said, “Real happiness doesn’t come often, so when it does, you should grab it with both hands and hang on tight.”

He kissed my forehead and left the library to join my mother in greeting their guests. I watched him go and then eyed the French doors at the far end of the room. I could slip out onto the terrace and dash across the yard to the car. Was I really going to run away again?

“Oh, and Clarabell.” My father reappeared in the doorway. “Your purse.” He set it on a small table just inside the door, before shutting it behind him.

“Here’s your hat, what’s your hurry,” I muttered. In my entire life, my father had never given me a bad piece of advice. I trusted him, but even more importantly, I trusted myself.

I scooped up my purse and slipped out the French doors. In minutes, I was behind the wheel of my father’s car and headed to the city. I parked in the garage reserved for my apartment building and rushed upstairs to grab a coat, having left mine at my parents, and then walked to the museum. On the way, I called the office of the magazine that Sam worked for and reached the administrative assistant. She said Sam was out, but

she'd give him my message. I ignored the four texts and three voicemails from my mother.

It was early evening and given the holiday, businesses were closing in preparation for the count down to the new year. I strode through the staff entrance of the Museum of Literature. The place was quiet as most of the staff were already gone for the day. I was relieved. I didn't want to talk to anyone except the security guard, Jones, to let him know that I might be expecting someone. I hoped so anyway.

I hurried up the backstairs to my office. It was an opulent space with plush carpet, ornate antique furniture, a fireplace with a seating area, and an unparalleled view of Central Park and the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir. As I stepped into the familiar room, I could breathe again. I supposed because for the first time since I'd hijacked the horse and carriage at the gala, I was taking charge of my life.

I slipped off my coat and put it in the narrow closet by the door. I flicked on the overhead lights and as I crossed the room, a movement from the seating area made me jump. A man was sprawled in one of the chairs, his feet crossed at the ankles, while he sipped a deep amber liquor from a rocks glass.

Sam!



Chapter Eleven



“Pretty dress, MacElf,” Sam said. “Going to a party?”

The man before me was a far cry from the bedraggled Santa I’d known. He was clean shaven, and his thick dark hair trimmed—the wave that fell over his forehead duly contained. His green eyes were a deeper shade as they reflected the olive hue of his sweater which hung off his broad shoulders becomingly. He wore black jeans and black lace-up boots and looked so achingly handsome it was difficult not to stare.

“How did you get in here?” I asked.

“A terrifying woman named Olive let me in when I told her I’d come to talk to you,” Sam said.

“Olive?” I blinked. “Tall, thin, dressed in black?”

“As pale as a corpse with long black hair,” he added.
“Yeah, that was her. She also gave me the whiskey.”

“How...odd.” I truly didn’t know what else to say. This was extraordinary behavior for Olive Prendergast, who as far as I knew, hated everyone. Why on earth would she be polite to Sam? It boggled.

“Did you get my message?” I asked.

“You left me a message?” Sam countered.

“It doesn’t matter.” I waved my hand dismissively. “If you didn’t get my message, why are you here?”

“Darling, we need to talk.” Sam’s words came out on a heavy sigh.

I sucked in a breath. Is this when he’d tell me that he’d written a horrible piece about my father? That he’d used me to learn about my family for his expose? I thought I might pass

out. Without thinking, I took the glass from his hand and downed a healthy swig. It burned but I refused to cough.

“I’m listening,” I said. His phone chimed in his pocket; he pulled it out and checked the display. I tried not to be impatient.

“My office,” he said. “Apparently, you called.”

“It was no big deal. As you said, we need to talk.” I put the glass down and began to pace. I was ridiculously nervous. I had thought I was prepared to see him but Sam Carpenter in real life was much more distracting than I’d anticipated. I wanted to tell him about my father’s advice. I wanted to tell him that I understood that he had a job to do. I wanted to tell him how I felt but the words wouldn’t come.

“Agreed, but you go first.” Sam warily leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees.

“I want to offer you an exclusive.” My heart pounded so hard in my chest that I worried he’d see it. Would he agree to what I was suggesting? What if he refused? My stomach rolled.

“In regard to what?”

“A feature story about my wedding.” Sam’s eyes flitted to my left hand. There was no ring there. “But there’s a condition.”

His nostrils flared a bit and his jaw set. He nodded but it looked like it pained him to do so. “I’m listening.”

I stepped forward and took his hand, pulling him to his feet so that we were facing each other. “The story is yours...on the condition that you’re my groom.”

“I’m your...” His voice trailed off. He blinked at me in shock.

“Groom,” I repeated just to make certain I was being clear.

Sam stared at me for a beat before tugging me into his arms. His mouth landed on mine with a fierce possessiveness that made my toes curl. I clung to his shoulders and kissed him

back with all the love I felt in my heart. I had missed him, us, this so much.

“Are you sure?” he asked, breaking the kiss and resting his forehead against mine.

“Positive,” I said. “All I want is to spend my life with you. Nothing else matters.”

“Ah, darling,” he said. “That’s why I’m here. I’ll do whatever it takes to get you to give me another chance. I even quit my job.”

“You quit?” I was stunned. No man had ever made a sacrifice like this for me.

“Yes, but fear not, I am not unemployed. I met with a publisher friend of mine and pitched a novel—a Christmas caper, if you will—and she made an offer. I handed in my notice at the magazine right before I came here.”

“So, there’s not going to be a story about my father?” I asked.

“No, Reed Macintosh is a stand-up guy. There was no story there. Trey, however, does have some ethics violations pending. Things are going to get very rough for him I’m afraid. That’s the other reason I’m here. If you wouldn’t give me a second chance, I wanted to warn you away from marrying him.”

“No need.” I tightened my arms around his neck, pulling him in close. “I know where I belong.”

“I like the way you think, Macintosh. I do have to tell you something first.” His face grew serious, and a nervous tremor rippled through me.

“Okay.”

“I’m deeply, desperately, decidedly in love with you.”

“Oh, Sam, I feel the same way about you,” I said. “I know it happened ridiculously fast but the two days we spent together were more intimate than any other relationship I’ve ever had. I’m crazy in love with you, which is why I think we should elope right now.”

“Elope...right this minute?”

“Yes, right now.” I hadn’t planned to ask him to elope but as soon as I said the words, it felt right. “Let’s go back to Maine. We can get married there and start the new year as husband and wife.”

Sam grinned and hugged me tight. When he pulled back, he asked, “Do I have to wear the Santa suit and sing the entire trip?”

“Not if I don’t have to wear the ugly Christmas sweatshirt and be your elf,” I said.

“Deal.” He kissed me thoroughly, then led me to the door.

We were married the next day, after tracking down the town clerk of our little village at home and a justice of the peace. Despite being a bit under the weather due to the prior evening’s festivities, both performed their duties admirably.

I called my dad right before the service from the living room of the justice and told him that I was about to marry Sam. Given his wise advice, I didn’t want him left out of the biggest moment of my life.

“Sam Carpenter, the reporter,” Dad said. “The same one who had an envelope of material delivered to my house this morning detailing the ethics violations Trey will be facing.”

I turned toward Sam, who cleared his throat. We were on speaker phone. “I’m glad the information arrived, Mr. Macintosh.”

“Call me Reed, son, we’re going to be family.”

I grinned so big I was surprised my face didn’t split in two. “Break the news to Mom for me, would you?”

My dad sighed. “All right, but only on the condition that when you get back to the city, you have a second ceremony where I can give the bride away properly.”

“Of course,” I said. “Love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too, Clarabell,” he replied. I ended the call.

“Clarabell?” Sam repeated.

“Don’t say a word,” I warned him. “You don’t have a lock on me yet.”

“Noted.” There was a wicked twinkle in his eye that let me know the teasing would commence later. I was weirdly looking forward to it.

When we exited the justice’s living room as husband and wife, we discovered a horse and carriage with a driver decked out in a top hat and cloak waiting for us.

“Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter?” he asked.

We nodded in bemusement.

He doffed his hat and bowed low, opening the door to the carriage. “I’ve been hired to take you home, courtesy of the staff at the Museum of Literature. They wanted me to tell you that it was only appropriate for you to begin your marriage just like you started your romance—in a one-horse open sleigh!”

Sam and I glanced at each other and burst out laughing, rich deep belly laughs that echoed around us like wedding bells. Marriage was not the end of my life as I’d feared, but the beginning of a brand-new adventure. I couldn’t wait to get started.

Did you love *It Happened One Christmas Eve*? Then you should read [Royal Valentine](#) by Jenn McKinlay!



Molly Graham doesn't believe in love at first sight or fairy tales. She's been burned too many times before. When her best friend, Brianna Cho, challenges her to aim high and go for men who are out of her league, Molly can't imagine a worse way to spend Valentine's Day. When she stumbles across a very handsome British professor, Albert George, seeking refuge in her office during the Museum of Literature's Valentine's Day gala for the opening of their Austen exhibit, Molly can't help but be drawn to the fellow introverted academic. Together they ghost out of the event and embark upon a month long love affair. Molly is rethinking her stance on happily ever afters and plans to tell Al how she feels, but he disappears. Afraid something bad has happened, Molly searches for him only to discover there is no Albert George affiliated with the university. She's been played for a fool!

Molly is devastated. As registrar for the Museum of Literature, she is tasked with a trip to England to return the Jane Austen exhibition materials on loan from the Whitmore Estate in Bath. When she and Brianna arrive at Whitmore Manor, they are introduced to Earl Whitmore and his grandson Lord Insley, or as Molly knows him Albert George. She is shocked and dismayed to discover her introverted professor is

a viscount in line to be an earl. James Albert George Insley Whitmore, called Jamie by his friends and family, hasn't been able to forget her and he wants to win her back. Molly isn't having it. She refuses to be taken in twice. Jamie will have to channel his inner Fitzwilliam Darcy to prove to her that love conquers all and win her heart for good.

Read more at [Jenn McKinlay's site](#).



About the Author

Jenn is the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publisher's Weekly* bestselling author of several mystery and romance series. She is also the winner of the RT Reviewer's Choice Award for romantic comedy and the Fresh Fiction award for best cozy mystery. A TEDx speaker, she is always happy to talk books, writing, reading, and the creative process to anyone who cares to listen. She lives in sunny Arizona in a house that is overrun with kids, pets, and her husband's guitars.

Read more at [Jenn McKinlay's site](#).