

THE CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Ivy and the
GHOST OF
Christmas Past

KALI HART

IVY & THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

THE CHRISTMAS CAROLS BOOK 1

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IVY

AS THE PLANE touches down on the Anchorage, Alaska runway, two thoughts are on repeat in my head. One: my sisters are going to kill me. Two: this is the most insane thing I've ever done in my life.

I resist the urge to grip either of the occupied armrests as my seat rumbles and shakes. I *hate* sitting in the middle seat. It's why I buy my tickets months in advance. To avoid being wedged between the tallest man alive, whose elbow has apologetically been in my side most of this flight, and the lady who's been sleeping like the dead since the second we hit altitude. Tall man and I shared more than one *oh my god* look as her snores cycled between throaty rumbles and head back, mouth open gasps.

But that's what a last-minute ticket during the holidays gets you.

I close my eyes and try to force my breathing to slow down. It's an epic fail.

Fucking Betty White.

Okay, let's be real. I *love* Betty White. Especially the Grandma Annie version from my all-time favorite movie. But I didn't expect her to be in my dreams last night. Or to encourage me to do something completely irrational. How the hell do I explain this to my sisters? Were triplets for crying out

loud. We're supposed to be more in sync than this. Supposed to know when one of us is about to go off the rails.

Besides, I'm the calculated one. I have a carefully laid out plan for every occasion. So many plans in fact, that it drives my sisters bonkers.

Yet, after a dream involving *Grandma Annie* dancing and chanting around my bed in her ceremony garments, I started throwing things in my overnight bag with sleep still in my eyes. The dream, the mildly inappropriate comments about a man from my past, had my heart racing in a way nothing had in...well, way too long. Grandma Annie insisted I should be spending Christmas with *him*, and something inside me knew she was right. I bought the last plane ticket for the next flight out.

I'm so far off the freaking rails it's not even funny.

My sisters—Holly and Merry—don't even know I've left Denver, much less the contiguous United States.

I haven't been able to sleep a wink on this trip, unlike my aisle seat neighbor, who's *still* sawing logs even as the plane rolls toward the terminal, I'm too spun up about the call I have to make to my sisters. How do I tell them I probably won't be home for Christmas—the first Christmas without our mom? And, even if I manage to smooth that out, what am I going to say to Luke after all this time?

An automatic flutter of butterfly wings erupts in my belly at the mere thought of him. I can almost see Grandma Annie smiling down on me like some guardian angel, pleased with my bravery. Ah. She's proud of me.

Then the panic sets in.

What the hell was I thinking?

This is a *terrible* idea.

When Luke and I last saw each other, emotions of all varieties were high.

Three years ago, the summer before I started law school, I landed an internship with a family law firm in Caribou Creek.

It sounded like a dream. A cute, rugged town tucked in the mountains. A practice focused on helping families in need. A month outside of a toxic breakup that messed me up so badly I nearly didn't get into law school at all.

But I didn't expect Luke.

As the plane nears the terminal, I fish my phone out of my purse with heavy reluctance. If I didn't fear that my sisters would send out a massive search party for me, I'd leave my phone off another day or two. But I'm not known for going off-grid. I'm the one who has a meticulous schedule with a desk drawer full of planners to prove how serious I am about those time blocks. Since we're supposed to be baking Christmas cookies in my kitchen tonight, I have no choice but to rip off the Band-aid before I lose cell service.

I stare at the phone resting in shaky hands. They don't even look like my hands. Do I remember the pin to unlock my phone? I feel like I've stepped through a looking glass. I'm not sure what's up or down anymore.

Maybe this was a mistake.

I never told my sisters about Luke. I never knew how to explain him, or what might've been sparking between us but never had a chance to become anything. My heart was still battered and bruised. Steal walls were fortified around its remains. I didn't trust myself when it came to picking men. So my instant connection with Luke was too suspect for my comfort. I never allowed anything to transpire beyond a crush.

Luke, though patient, was not shy about his interest in me.

I thought the memories would've faded by now. I wouldn't still think about him. Or wonder what could've been if I'd just been ready to take a chance. But I was determined to stay the course, finish law school and get my degree. I wasn't going to let anything stop me. Not the trauma from my useless ex. And certainly not a *something* over a perfect guy that couldn't even be put into words.

I just didn't expect the pining I'd *still* feel for Luke over three years later. The dull ache in my chest that never quite

goes away.

A sharp elbow in my side, accompanied by a genuine apology from my window seat neighbor, and an echo of seat belts unbuckling throughout the cabin, knocks the phone out of my hands. It tumbles into my purse.

“First time to Alaska?” The woman who’s been snoring the whole flight asks as though we’ve been friends for the past three and a half hours.

“Second.” I dig in my purse for my phone, but it’s the Christmas card I find first. One June Ashburn sent me. It’s probably the real reason for the Betty White dream. I helped June and her husband draft a will during my internship. Every year she’s sent me a Christmas card. But this is the first time she’s mentioned Luke.

The words *I think Luke misses you* pop out at me as if they were written in bold red ink.

“You going to Caribou Creek?” she asks, nodding at the card’s image of the charming town as the front of the cabin starts to deplane.

“Yeah.”

“Careful you don’t get snowed in. Unless that’s what you want.”

“I checked the weather—”

“That’s cute and all, but those little mountain towns have their own weather patterns. Just be careful, huh?”

When I visited Caribou Creek the first time, it was during the summer. But I’m from Denver. I’m not exactly a stranger to mountain-based weather. Or snowstorms. As long as I can find a Wi-Fi signal on Christmas Eve so I can Skype in for the holiday I’m missing at home, I can work around the rest.

A good attorney can adapt to any situation.

The mere thought is enough to twist my stomach in knots as I follow the last of the passengers off the plane. My bar exam results will be in any day. Though I’m confident I passed, the sliver of doubt is enough to keep me from getting

cocky. My entire future depends on those results. Just passing isn't enough for me. I want the highest possible score.

I've barely stepped into the terminal when Ariana Grande belts out a Christmas song from inside my purse. Dammit. One of my sisters is calling *me*. Holly. The one who will take this news the hardest.

I step off to the side, take a deep breath, and prepare to break both my sisters' hearts.

IVY

THE DRIVE to Caribou Creek is snowy, treacherous, and one I should *not* have attempted in a compact rental car. My knuckles are still white and aching from how tightly I clenched the steering wheel the entire two hundred miles north.

“Checking in?” The woman behind the lodge counter smiles at me sweetly. It’s the first bit of reassurance I’ve felt since that crazy dream and impulsive plane ticket purchase. Spoiler alert: my sisters did *not* take my surprise news well. Holly laid on the guilt pretty heavily about missing the first Christmas together without Mom. Especially since I gave some lame excuse about visiting my old boss for the holidays.

“Yes!”

“Name?”

“Ivy Carol.”

Her fingers click quickly across the keys, but before I can tell her I don’t have a reservation courtesy of my impulsive decision to hop on the first available flight this morning, I hear a familiar voice from my past.

“Ivy Carol? Is that really you?”

I turn and lock eyes with the sweetest elderly man in existence, Art Matthews. Caribou Creek’s sole family law

representation. The last time I was in town, we celebrated his eightieth birthday. The only reason I know he's still practicing is because I looked up the firm online. Thanks to my encouragement, Art took my advice about getting a website. I scoured it a hundred times while I waited in the terminal, searching for any hint of his nephew, Luke. But there wasn't a single photo on the firm's site that captured the man I haven't been able to stop pining over these past three years.

"Mr. Matthews!" I wrap him in a warm hug, so damn happy to see a familiar face.

"It's Art," he corrects. "Or have you forgotten that?"

As I pull away, I can't help the automatic search I do for Luke. "I haven't forgotten."

"Didn't know you were coming back to town."

"It was a last minute decision—"

"Ms. Carol, I don't have a reservation under your name," the woman behind the counter kindly interrupts.

"I didn't make one."

Her smile drops. "You didn't?"

"Is the crazy expensive suite the only room available?" I tease, earning a chuckle from Art. The sound of the old man's laughter takes me back to the best month of my life. I can't believe how much I've missed Luke stopping by the firm every morning to drop off coffee. It was the little things I'm starting to realize that were the big things. I just hope he's happy to see me when I finally track him down.

"There aren't any rooms available."

My smile is the next one to die. "Really?"

"I'm sorry. Christmas is a very popular time in Caribou Creek."

My stomach twists in knots at the unexpected dilemma. I felt certain few would venture to a middle-of-Alaska mountain town in winter. It's a charming place, but not exactly a destination trip when it's ten below zero on a warm day. "You

don't have anything?" The words crack as they leave my lips. *I will* not cry.

"Afraid not."

"You can stay at Luke's cabin," Art offers, his kind smile loosening the worst of the knots churning in my stomach. I wasn't planning to run into Luke until at least tomorrow when I'd slept off the jet lag and formed a plan. I have no clue what I'm going to say to him, and I need time to figure it out. "He's out on a guided hunt."

"He's not here?" Relief and disappointment go to war inside my chest. Did I really fly all the way to Alaska only to miss the man I came to hunt down?

"He took out a group day before yesterday. Not expected back until Christmas Eve." Christmas Eve. That's three days from now. It's the day Holly wants me to fly home, but I guess a Skype call is the best I can promise. And three days gives me plenty of time to figure out what to tell Luke.

"You don't think he'll mind?"

"Not at all."

Luke's interest in me wasn't secret when I was here last. Art was constantly dropping hints that we'd be good together. I think the old man felt genuinely disappointed when I left. Maybe he's still trying to matchmake. The last thing I want to do is break his heart when I leave again —because I can't stay—but I don't have another alternative. I'm not about to drive back to Anchorage in the dark or sleep in my car in these frigid temperatures.

"I can put you on the list in case there's a cancellation," the woman behind the counter offers.

"Yes, please." With any luck, I'll be back at the hotel before Luke returns home. Me being in town will be enough of a surprise. Especially since I have no idea if he's moved on. Maybe he has a girlfriend. The thought sours in my stomach.

It's a risk I'll have to take.

LUKE

I CAN'T DECIDE if I'm pleased or irritated that the entire group I took caribou hunting hit their limit two days earlier than anticipated. I *should* be happy to be home early, but I fucking hate the holidays. The only reason I stick it out year to year is to make sure Uncle Art doesn't have to spend it alone. My sister is flighty and rarely in the state over the holidays, so I've accepted the obligation.

I lose the battle with a massive yawn as I pull into my driveway. I love the open wilderness, but I always come home with a greater appreciation for my bed. After a hot shower, that special order king-size mattress is my only destination. With any luck, I'll sleep right through the town festival tomorrow.

As I cut the engine, twinkling lights catch my eyes. I squint at the corner window, certain I'm hallucinating. Because it looks like there's a fucking Christmas tree in *my* living room window. Any hope that sleep deprivation is going to explain this shit away dies when the lights change from solid white to a variety of colors.

“The fuck...”

The only person I can think of who would be brave enough to invite themselves into my house and decorate for the holidays is my sister, Maggie. It's her decorations I've been

storing in my crawlspace since she took off on her second year-long trip to see the world.

The second I open the front door, my ear drums are assaulted by some female musician with an usually high voice belting out a Christmas tune about Santa.

I kick off my boots and shrug out of my snow-dusted coat, reining in my annoyance. If my sister's back from her adventure already, something's wrong. She doesn't need the asshole version of me to make things worse. Even if she made the holidays vomit all over my house. Maggie understands my disdain for the season. She went through that horrible Christmas Eve with me, but her resilience kept her love of the holidays alive. Mine, on the other hand, died a quick and painful death that awful night.

I need a beer if I'm going to put a hint of a smile on for Maggie. Fuck, is that garland hanging from the island in my kitchen? The fridge jingles when I open it, courtesy of sleigh bells wrapped around the handle.

I can't twist the cap off a bottle of CARIBOU CREEK STOUT fast enough. I lift it to my lips, turn, and nearly choke.

It's not Maggie dancing around the Christmas tree.

It's a ghost from my past.

Ivy Carol.

I haven't slept in thirty-six hours. Sleep deprivation is obviously doing a number on me. Did I go to the wrong fucking house and someone hasn't noticed? She hasn't turned around. Maybe I'm seeing things and when I realize who the woman really is, we'll both be horrified. But I can't stop staring at the hips in leggings adorned in Christmas lights swaying enthusiastically to the beat of the music.

When she turns around, my heart stops.

Ivy's eyes go wide, as if she's been caught robbing a bank vault. The round green ornament dangling from her fingers falls to the floor and bounces off a fluffy skirt that looks like an abdominal snowman rug beneath the tree.

Setting the bottle on the counter, I march into the living room, desperate to capture whatever seconds I can before the sleep-deprived fantasy fades into smoke. Three and a half years is a long fucking time to be stuck on someone. To still dream about them almost nightly. Wonder what would be different if I'd just taken a chance and kissed her before she drove away... Would she have stayed?

Without a beat of hesitation, I sweep her into my arms, grip her cheek, and capture the lips I've waited forever to taste. I do it all without uttering a single word. Without warning. And Ivy melts into me half a second after my lips meet hers, wrapping her arms around my neck and surrendering to my hungry mouth.

If anyone is brave enough to wake me from this dream, it'll be the last fucking thing they ever do.

IVY

WHEN LUKE BREAKS APART the kiss, my legs are no better than overcooked noodles. If he wasn't holding on to my waist so tightly, I'd be a puddle on the floor for sure. I've fantasized about this first kiss, but the reality has completely caught me by surprise. My entire body buzzes from the sheer force of it. The possessiveness. I've never experienced anything like it before. I could blame the unexpectedness of the kiss, but a voice that sounds suspiciously like Betty White in my head calls bullshit.

I shiver.

Luke's dark eyes drench with desire. I know I'm right because I've seen it once before in a heated moment where I almost gave in three years ago. *Almost*.

I've lost all ability for rational thinking.

The only thoughts swirling in my mind now are dirty. Dirty enough to get me on Santa's naughty list *very* quickly.

Words still unspoken, I can't help but wonder if he's going to whisk me off to the bedroom to have his way with me now. I'd ask him, if I was capable of using words. But I'm panting too damn hard and still struck dumb from shock. I wonder what he'd think if he knew I slept in his bed last night. In his t-shirt. And what the hell is going through his mind right now? Did his uncle tip him off about me being here?

“You’re here.”

“Yes.”

“You’re *really* here.”

“In the flesh.”

I lean in, hoping for another taste of those delicious lips. But Luke steps back, dropping his arms. I stumble from the unsteady legs but manage to stay upright with concentrated effort. “*Why* are you here?” His gaze lifts from mine and stares hard at the Christmas tree I’ve nearly finished decorating. The ice in his tone is chilling enough to rival the Alaskan wilderness right now.

“Do you like it?”

“No.”

His answer delivers a punch I wasn’t expecting, and my weak but hopeful smile drops completely. “It’s your tree—”

“It’s not.” His harsh tone cuts like a razor. “Take it down.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” He turns and struts down the hall. The bedroom door slams behind him leaving me even more confused than ever.

I expected some resistance from Luke when he discovered I was here. I’m the one who turned him down that summer. Even though deep down I *wanted* to say yes. But I suspected my heart couldn’t survive surrendering to him and then leaving. I was fighting the fall. A fall that would’ve kept me from going to law school or taking the bar exam. Of following my dream to practice family law and make a real difference in people’s lives.

So why are you here then?

The voice in my head sounds an awful lot like Grandma Annie. Automatically, I scan the room. Though unless Betty White has come back from the dead, I know she isn’t standing in a corner nearby. Is it too late to blame the jet lag on this insanity?

“You tell me,” I mutter in answer.

The Christmas lights on the tree switch from solid white to multi color, causing me to turn around. I’m half a dozen ornaments from being finished decorating it. I’m *not* taking it down just because Luke is being extra grumpy. The man is probably tired and not thinking straight. Add in the surprise of finding me in his house... He used to tell me about the guided trips he led and how little sleep he’d get while on them. “He just needs some sleep.”

Where are you sleeping, Ivy?

Okay, Betty White. Get out of my head please. This is getting creepy.

My gaze drifts down the hall to the closed bedroom door. It’s the only bed in the cabin. And the couch ... has seen better days.

You didn’t come all this way to sleep on that old thing.

I gasp, as if Grandma Annie herself had just handed over the baby maker quilt and winked at me. I wait for any more inappropriate words of wisdom to come, but her voice has fallen silent inside my head.

I glance between the couch and the closed door.

Betty White is right. I *didn’t* come all this way to sleep on a ratty couch. I didn’t plan to immediately seduce the man, either. But hell. I didn’t show up with any kind of plan, which means I’m running blind. Since Luke showed up two days earlier than expected, I’m winging it. A good attorney can wing it. *Right?*

I’m *sooo* off the fucking rails. I half expect my phone to vibrate. One of my sisters sensing that something is up. But the phone doesn’t ring. I have to make a choice.

I tiptoe down the hall and press my ear to the door. The hiss of a shower leaves me hopeful I can simply sneak into his room and crawl under the covers. Maybe he’ll sleep like the dead and not even notice me. Or maybe we’ll have wild, hot sex all night long. I squeeze my thighs together at the thought. God I could use a good orgasm I didn’t give myself.

But will Luke be interested when he finds out I'm not staying this time either?

"Never again," I mutter about my lack of planning as I sneak into the room and change into the t-shirt I stole last night. The only light comes from the ajar bathroom door. A yawn assaults me as I crawl beneath the covers. If Luke doesn't want to share his bed, he's going to have to carry me out of it.

LUKE

THE SCENT of peppermint drifts lazily to me, taking me back to a time when the world revolved around one woman. When I lived to see her smile every morning and refused to accept she would leave. If sleep deprivation is the only way to be close to Ivy, then I'll keep myself tired forever.

A warm body shifts against mine in the dark room. My dick's already wide awake thanks to the memories conjured by that peppermint shampoo.

Peppermint shampoo.

My tired eyes snap open wide.

Ivy's curvy body is tucked up against mine, her back to my chest. Her ass softly wriggles against my throbbing cock. No wonder the fucker is standing at attention.

The brief memories of last night assault me. Discovering Christmas had thrown up all over my fucking house. Ivy dancing around the tree with an ornament dangling from her fingers. The earth-shattering kiss with a ghost who turned out not to be a ghost at all.

And now she's in my bed.

The memory of *how* is one I can't place. After a hot shower last night, the last thing I remember is collapsing in bed.

I dare to move the arm wrapped around her and drop my hand to her hip. My fingers dig into her soft, exposed skin, promising me she's real. Fuck me. She's wearing one of my t-shirts. How many nights has she been sleeping in my bed? If I'd known she was in Caribou Creek, I would've called the hunt early and refunded everyone's money just to have more time.

Ivy moans softly as my hand greedily caresses her thigh. She shimmies against me, turning slightly. Her thighs open a sliver, parting in what seems like an invitation. Making me wish time would stand still so I never had to leave this room.

Time.

I have no fucking clue why she's here or if she plans to stay. I might only have a day or two to convince her this is where she belongs. But why does it have to be at fucking Christmas time? I hate the holidays and the loss it reminds me of. The pain I relive year after year.

But remembering the sparkle in her eyes when she turned around at the Christmas tree and spotted me ... I can't imagine a torture I wouldn't endure to see her happy. To see that glow every day.

My fingers graze the edge of her panties and she moans again. Her face turns and her hand searches for my cheek. "Luke?" she whispers, my name a fucking dream coming from those lips.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Touch me?"

My dick throbs at her plea. *Calm the fuck down.* "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"It's the only thing I want."

I slide one finger along the silk of her panties, pressing against the damp fabric to tease her swollen button. Fuck she's so wet I might lose my damn mind. Before she tries to leave me again, I'm going to claim that tight, perfect pussy for my own. But when I do, she'll be begging me to be inside her. Tonight—or this morning as I have no concept of how long

I've been asleep—I'm going to bring her to heights of pleasure she'll never forget.

If she leaves again, I'll have ruined her for all other men.

Because Ivy Carol is mine.

I'll make her believe it one delicious touch at a time.

I stroke her pussy through the silk, pressing firmly against that button. She whimpers at my touch, parting her thighs wider. She rocks her hips to the rhythm of my touch. When she lets out a moan, I take my hand away.

“Is this my t-shirt?” I growl against her ear as that same hand slides up her soft skin beneath my shirt, discovering no bra and hard nipples. I take my time teasing each peak, gently pinching them between my thumb and index finger, enjoying every sexy noise that escape her throat.

“Y—yes. It's your—*shirt!*” The last word comes out an octave higher.

“Good to know your nipples are so sensitive, sweetheart. I bet they'd like my mouth on them.” I slowly push up the shirt, exposing her bountiful tits to me in the dim light. Fuck me they're perfect. I take the nipple closest to me in my mouth, lazily stroking my tongue around it. I cup her other tit in my hand, gently squeezing it. One of these days, I'll rub my dick between these beauties and cum all over them.

Because I can't leave out her other nipple, I straddle her body to give me better access.

“Luke,” she moans.

“Yes, baby?”

“I want you.”

I let out a deep, low chuckle. “Soon, baby. But not yet.”

After I've given both nipples ample and equal attention with my mouth, I slide down her body, kissing a trail passed her belly button. When I reach the top of her panties, I grip the hem with my teeth and tug them down. Inhaling her sweet

scent nearly does me in. It takes all my restraint not to plow into her now and claim her as my own.

Patience.

With her panties pulled partway down, I dip my tongue into her folds. She moans my name and lifts her hips. I tease her nub with lazy circles until she arches hard into my face. When I pull back, she audibly groans.

“You’re going to kill me,” she says.

“No.” I peel away her panties, tossing them across the room for me to find and keep later. “I’m going to take you to a place you’ve never been, baby.” I scoop my hands beneath her ass and lift her fully exposed pussy to my eager mouth. As much as I want to devour her like she’s a starving man’s last meal, I force myself to slow down. To savor every lick.

When I slip my tongue into her channel, she bucks.

I place my hand over her stomach and press her back down into the mattress. “I’ve got you, baby. Don’t you worry.”

I feel her body relax and she opens wider.

With agonizing leisure, I use every stroke and flicker of my tongue to take her over the edge. When she fists her hand in my hair, shoving my face tight against her pussy, I decide I can live without oxygen. I just can’t live without *her*.

Ivy comes hard and loud, her pussy convulsing around my tongue. My cock throbs. The fucker’s angry he’s not the one inside her tight channel right now. I damn near nut as I drink in every last drop of her ecstasy.

Only when her body stills do I break my lips apart from hers. I lock eyes with Ivy as I run my tongue along my lips, lapping up every last drop. “You taste divine, baby. I could eat you out all day. Stay through New Years and we never even have to leave this bed.”

IVY

FRESHLY SHOWERED, I search for my panties on still wobbly legs. Never in my life have I had an orgasm that powerful. I'd only ever read about them in romance novels. I didn't think they were real. Why the hell didn't I give into Luke sooner?

A single chime of my phone pulls my attention to the screen and a text from my bestie wanting to know if the bar exam results have come back yet.

Oh right.

I resisted Luke because my life is back in Denver.

Which makes what happened between us all the more problematic. Where's Grandma Annie when I need her?

Honestly, I haven't thought about the bar exam since Art dropped me off at Luke's remote cabin two days ago. And because the signal here is weak at best and I haven't been able to figure out the Wi-Fi password, I haven't even checked to see if results were posted. It seems less likely they'll be out before Christmas the closer the holiday gets.

After one last sweep of the bedroom, I give up on finding my favorite pair of panties back. I glance at my suitcase. I *could* get dressed. Or I could stay wrapped in a towel that conveniently falls to the floor in Luke's kitchen. I'm hungry for breakfast. But I'm hungrier for him.

I tiptoe down the hall to surprise him, trying to come up with some cutesy quip about unwrapping a Christmas present early with each quiet step.

The aroma of bacon and eggs drifts to me as I find Luke standing at the stove, flipping an omelet. My heart melts a little. *He remembered.*

“Luke?”

“Hmm?”

“Merry Christmas.” As he turns his head, I drop the towel like I planned. But before I can say the line I rehearsed in my head, I hear another voice.

“Tree looks good, Luke.”

I drop to the ground like I’m taking fire and scramble for the towel. Son of a bitch. No one warned me Art was here! It’s only the island that’s keeping me shielded. For now. Luke has the audacity to grin from above at my dilemma. There’s no way naked squatting like this is sexy. Not with all my curves. Damn that donut shop down the street from my apartment.

Luke crouches down slowly, like he has all the time in the world. He helps me wrap the towel around my body and lifts me to my feet. His hand drops possessively to my hip, tugging me against his side. If I wasn’t wrapped in a towel, this might feel more special.

But I feel Art’s curious eyes on me. I’m pretty sure if you give an eighty-three-year-old man a heart attack at Christmas, it’s a ticket straight to hell.

“I, uh, dropped a bobby pin.” Never mind that my hair is still wet and hanging loosely over my shoulders. “I think it’s gone.”

Luke turns back toward the pan on the stove, flipping an omelet as if nothing happened.

“I stopped by to invite you both to the Christmas Festival,” Art says, staring awkwardly at the counter. “I can never convince Luke to join me. But I thought you might enjoy it while you’re here. Maybe you can change his mind.”

“You won’t,” Luke chimes in, his attention fixated on the pan.

His instant dismissal reminds me of his reaction to finding a Christmas tree in his living room. One he claims that isn’t his. Is it Christmas he hates or did I put up decorations that belong to an ex and hit a sore spot?

“That sounds lovely, Art. I’d love to join you. Why don’t I go get dressed and you can tell me all about it?” I scurry down the hall and close the bedroom door behind me. I press my back to it and slide to the floor.

You didn’t die of embarrassment, did you?

The voice is back.

“It was a close call,” I grumble.

You just going to sit there or you going to get dressed?

Betty White’s voice is stern but coated in a sweetness that makes it impossible to be mad at. *If* she were real. But it’s enough to force me to my feet and get ready. I’m bummed Luke isn’t interested in the Christmas Festival, but it would be rude to turn Art down when he came all this way. I’ve missed him.

Bet that job offer is still open.

“Bet it’s not. Art has to be close to retirement.” Great. Now I’m talking to the Grandma Annie voice. If Luke or Art catch me talking to myself, I’m pretty sure they’ll eagerly welcome my departure from Caribou Creek. Whenever that is. I’m not expected back at work until January. What if I stayed a few extra days?

The warring thoughts in my head make me really regret not making a plan. Because a plan has steps and a predictable outcome. A known target. I have no idea what happens when I leave Caribou Creek. Is this simply a holiday rendezvous or could this be ... more?

“You sure you won’t come?” I hear Art ask Luke as I pad quietly down the hallway toward the kitchen.

“You know how I feel about the festival.”

“I know, son. But do you think she’d want you living this way?”

I freeze at the word *she*. The way Art says this makes me think Luke lost someone special. Oh shit! Did he lose a wife during the holidays and I put out all her decorations to remind him of it? This is so not happening.

With breath halted in my lungs, I wait for Luke to say something. Anything.

“This isn’t the way to honor your mother’s memory, Luke.” Art’s words are gentle, like a hug. I feel its embrace as if he’s speaking the words too. Guilt squeezes my chest. Would my mom be upset that I ran off to Alaska for the holidays and abandoned my sisters? Or would she applaud me for taking a chance on my heart for once?

“Ah, Ivy. You look lovely.” Art’s smile eases the ache I feel inside my chest for both me and for Luke. “We best be going. It’s a full day you know.”

I glance at Luke, silently pleading for him to change his mind. But I know what I’m asking of him and can’t voice the words. I touch his arm. “Will I still have a place to stay when I get back?” I mean to tease him. To lighten the mood.

“You’ll always have a place here, Ivy. Always.”

LUKE

I BLAME Maggie's fucking Christmas tree for this mess. If it weren't for her holiday decorations littered all over my house, I wouldn't have felt so trapped within the logs. I'd have stayed home and caught up on sleep. After plowing my long, winding driveway thoroughly enough that Ivy's little rental car could easily make the trek, I should be exhausted.

But here I am, in the middle of Caribou Creek during their annual Christmas festival. Abandoning my plans to take down all the holiday decorations before Ivy returns. The second I reached for the first ornament on the tree, the image of Ivy's curvy body moving to the beat of the music replayed in my mind.

Reminding me exactly how fucking bad I wanted to be inside her this morning. A cold shower did nothing to solve my dilemma.

Tonight, I'm making her mine. Ticking clock be damned.

Falling in love with Ivy more than three years ago was effortless. Something that happened the moment I saw her. I'd never tell another person because they'd call me a fucking sap. But I swear my soul recognized hers. As if we'd already spent lifetimes together and were finding each other again.

Except she left to chase her dreams, and I couldn't allow myself to be the one to hold her back.

But this time, dammit, I want to be selfish. I want her to stay.

The main streets are blocked off from the ROSE'S DINER to the CARIBOU CREEK BREWERY so people can wander around without worrying about traffic. Vendors brave enough to deal with the seven-degree temperature are stationed along the sidewalks, propane heaters keeping them thawed out. Muffled conversation lifts from the growing crowd, taking me back to a simpler time.

I haven't attended a single Christmas festival since Mom died. It feels like there's an ice pick in my heart right now.

But that sharp pain fades the moment I spot Ivy handing a cup of hot chocolate to Art. Her smile is illuminating. One I'll never forget as long as I live. Even if she leaves again. She's the only one for me.

I weave my way through the crowd, turning several heads. Damn small town. Most of these people know how much I avoid anything to do with Christmas aside from a quiet family dinner with Art. They're shocked expressions say it all. I nod a few hellos and keep moving through the masses to finding Ivy.

"Luke Matthews, is that really you?" June Ashburn stops me with a gentle hand on my bicep. I follow Ivy with my gaze until I see her and Uncle Art stop at a vendor selling baked goods before I respond to June.

"How are you Mrs. Ashburn?"

"Fabulous! Did you hear I'm going to be a grandma again?"

"Congratulations. Who this time?" As much as I'm eager to get to Ivy, I can hear my mother's voice clearly in my head telling me to take my time. She always loved talking to people at this festival. Always gave them the kind of attention that never made them feel rushed or unimportant. It's the same way Ivy always was with Art, in or outside the office.

"Zach and Rilee. Baby number two!" June gives me the once over, her gaze dropping up and down. "When are you

going to start working on a family? I know you want one.”

I regret allowing June to con this information out of me one night at the brewery. It was weeks after Ivy left. What I wanted had never been cleared. But the key component to that dream—Ivy Carol—was gone. I pat June on the shoulder. “I’m working on it.”

“Heard your girl is back in town.” The twinkle in her eyes is suspect, but before I can call her out on it, her husband waves to her from across the street. “Good luck, Luke. I mean that. And Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.” Surprisingly, the words don’t taste so sour leaving my lips. Mom’s been gone five years now. The sting *has* lessened. And Art is right, as much as I hate to admit it. She wouldn’t want me hiding from the celebration. She’d been disappointed. Maybe I just needed someone to remind me.

I spot Ivy and Art moving to another vendor booth and weave through the crowd, refusing to be stopped until I reach my woman. I know she plans to leave again, but I’m going to do everything in my power to convince her to stay.

Stepping up behind her at a scarf vendor, I drop my hands to her hips and my lips to her ear. “I’d like to see you in that red one.” I kiss the top of her ear. “And nothing else.”

She turns her head over her shoulder, a wicked smile spread across those delicious lips. “That can be arranged.”

“Good. Because as soon as this festival is over, I’m taking you home where you belong and making you mine, baby.”

IVY

AS MUCH FUN as the Caribou Creek Christmas Festival was all day—from the hot chocolate to the sleigh ride down Main Street, to the tree lighting ceremony—I’m so happy to be home with Luke. *Home*. Could I really ...

Really, Ivy. Your sisters have been so much easier to convince than you.

I turn in a full circle, fully expecting Grandma Annie to materialize. The voice was so loud and clear. Either I’m losing my mind or I need to take a serious break from marathoning my favorite movie. It’s probably unhealthy anyway.

“You okay?” Luke asks, helping me out of my coat at the front door.

“Um, yeah.”

After he’s hung my coat on a hook, he pulls me back against his chest. His hot breath tickles my neck. “Are you sure, baby? Because if this isn’t what you want, tell me now. Tell me before I plunge my cock inside you and ruin you for every other man. You’ll belong to me. You’ll be mine and *only* mine.”

His possessive words spoken in a low rumble against my ear have my inner thighs dripping wet with need. No one has ever made me feel the way Luke has. I think I knew it three years ago as much as I know it now. I don’t know how any of

this works. Not when I have a job waiting at a top family law firm pending my bar exam score. A firm that helps hundreds of families in need every year. Would working at Art's firm really be fulfilling enough for me? And how would I feel living this far away from my family?

"Ivy, it's time for you to get out of your own head." His hands slide from my shoulders, cupping my breasts with a playful squeeze. "Let me help you."

"Okay."

Luke leads me to the bedroom where he slowly strips away my clothes. Each layer he peels away is a form of seduction. The way his finger tips drag across my hot skin. The molten lava in his eyes as he drinks in my body. Any insecurity I may have felt about my curves vanishes when he sheds his jeans. The way his cock tents his boxers tells me all I need to know. This man wants *me*. And badly.

I grab his wrist before he can pull down his boxers. "Let me."

Luke watches me as I slip my thumbs into the waistband of his boxers at either hip and slowly drag them down. His cock catches on the fabric, and I reach inside to guide it free. Wrapping my hand around his massive length. This rod of steel is either going to split me in two or give me pleasure beyond my wildest dreams. My dripping wet pussy doesn't seem worried.

"You like what you see, baby?" Luke asks, his low voice gives me the best kind of chills.

"Yes." As I pull his boxers down the rest of the way, I drop to my knees.

"Ivy," he growls.

"You could sit on the edge of the bed." My voice is shaky, but it's not just nerves. It's anticipation. I've never wanted to suck a man's cock before. But with Luke, I want to watch him lose control at my hand.

He sits on the edge of the bed, moving my hair to one shoulder with his hand as I kneel between his open legs. "I've

never done this before,” I admit.

“Good. Because mine is the *only* cock your mouth belongs on, baby.” If I didn’t know Luke the way I do, I might consider this possessive talk a red flag. Hell, I’d tell any of my friends to run. But Luke is familiar. It’s like our souls know each other. I think I knew it years ago, but wouldn’t allow myself to admit it.

I take him into my mouth, suckling his swollen head. Running my tongue along the rim. He groans in approval.

Luke leans back on his elbows, watching me as I work his cock with my mouth. Taking him in an inch at a time. Running my tongue up and down his shaft. Exploring and tasting all of him. I use my hand to twist the base of his cock as I quicken my mouth. “Fuck, baby. That feels so good.”

I got faster.

Luke springs off his elbows, and pulls my mouth from his dick.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, baby. You did everything right. And next time, I’ll come in that pretty mouth of yours. But tonight, I’m coming inside your pussy.”

He pulls me up from the floor and tosses me on the bed in one quick motion that leaves me a little dizzy. He hovers above me, his hand reaching between my legs. He strokes a finger through my folds.

“So fucking wet.”

“So fucking horny.”

We share a moment of laughter before the sheer need takes over. He rubs circles around my button with this thumb as he slips a finger inside me. “I’m selfish,” he says, his dark eyes serious. “I want to fuck you without a condom. But the choice is yours, baby.”

“I’m on the pill.”

“For now.”

Before I can ask what that's supposed to mean, I feel his cock press against my entrance. I've never craved another man the way I do Luke. Hell, sex has never been all that exciting for me. I've never wanted it so badly. Maybe because I've been meant for Luke all along. I spread my thighs wide and push against his cock, inviting him in.

"How do you want it, baby?"

The word "hard" slips out of my mouth unexpectedly. I never thought of myself as that type. But with Luke...

"I'll take you hard and fast this first time, baby. But then, I'm going to spend the rest of the night taking it slow." He lowers his mouth against my ear. "You won't be able to walk tomorrow. Hope that's not a problem."

He plunges inside my channel and my hips buck. The shock of his massive cock filling me so quickly is almost too much.

"Hey," Luke says, locking eyes with me. "Look at me, baby. I've got you. All you have to do is hold on."

I wrap myself around his hard body and do exactly as he says. I hold on for dear life as he pummels into me. I've never been more turned on in my entire life. Never felt so desired and wanted by another man. The headboard taps the wall with each powerful thrust. The bed creaks. Every symphony of noises we're creating turns me on even more, building the pleasure inside me until I feel ready to burst.

"Luke," I cry out. "Now! It's *now!*"

It feels as though my body is floating as Luke's arms wrap around me tightly. Everything is so fast and intense it's all I can do to keep my strangle-hold on him as every cell in my body explodes in ecstasy. Luke thrusts over and over as my channel convulses around his cock until finally, he stills deep inside me.

I feel his cock pulse as he fills me with his seed. Effectively staking the claim he promised.

"You're mine, Ivy. *Only* mine."

LUKE

Ivy and I sleep late into the morning and beyond, both of us exhausted from all-night love making. After I fucked her good and hard, I spent hours worshiping every inch of her body. Slowly bringing her to climax multiple times. There is nothing on this earth sexier than the noises she makes when I take her over the edge of that pleasure cliff.

I love her.

I knew I loved her three years ago.

I knew I loved her the moment I first spotted her sitting behind the reception desk in Art's firm. My entire world changed that day.

"Do you know what time it is?" Ivy asks with a yawn as she starts tracing lazy circles across my chest.

I reach for the phone on my nightstand, unsurprised by the number of unread messages and missed calls. I'll have to check in with Art about dinner tonight. Maggie urgent texts seem more concerned about me being in hibernation than anything. "It's almost noon."

Ivy sits up quickly, untangling our legs. "Oh no!" She tosses the covers aside and hops up.

"What's wrong, babe?" I drag my gaze up and down her body without apology. Every inch of her has been kissed,

licked, or touched in the past several hours. I've memorized it all.

"I have a Skype call with my sisters! I need your Wi-Fi password."

"Ivy Carol."

She narrows her eyes at me. "I don't have time for a quickie, Luke. Holly's already pissed at me for missing this holiday at home. I can't miss the call too. What's your password?"

"Ivy Carol. That's my password."

That stops her from scurrying around the room, collecting mismatched clothes. A look of love fills her eyes. "It is?"

"What else would it be?"

She pulls one of my t-shirts over her head before kneeling onto the bed, stealing a quick but thorough kiss. "We're talking about this after my call." I pull her in for one more, sliding my tongue into her mouth. Only when she moans do I set her free.

The moment Ivy rushes out of the room, my stomach decides to growl in objection. Apparently, I can't live on sex alone. Though, when it comes to Ivy, I wouldn't mind trying.

LUKE

“ART, THAT DINNER WAS AMAZING,” Ivy says to my uncle as she helps to clear away dishes. Every Christmas Eve, Art makes a traditional Christmas feast to honor his late wife. This year, he made most of it at my house. I have to admit, the decorations are even growing on me. My hatred of Christmas is no longer so strong. It’s nearly gone.

But Santa needs to deliver on one last thing before I submit completely.

“We can take care of the dishes, Art,” Ivy insists.

Art shoos her out of the kitchen. “I’ve always done the dishes. Not about to give up that tradition now. You two go enjoy the tree. Watch out for the mistletoe!”

Luke tugs me into his arms, wrapping me in his embrace. I still haven’t figured anything out, but I feel less stressed about operating without a plan right now. Winging it. Maybe that’s what I really needed all along. I wait for Grandma Annie to chime in, but I don’t hear anything now.

I’m going to tell Luke I love him.

“Let’s go find that mistletoe,” I say to him after stealing a soft kiss. One that hopefully doesn’t make Art blush. I take his hand and lead him into the living room, relieved that he’s no longer demanding I take down the Christmas tree. In fact, I

think his grumpiness toward my favorite holiday has faded almost entirely.

We find the mistletoe hanging in a corner tucked away from the kitchen's sightline. Our lips come together over and over, the need between us growing. I won't rush Art home, but I'll be happy to have Luke all alone tonight. Best Christmas Eve ever.

Luke's hand is up my shirt fondling a breast when my phone rings. I'm tempted to ignore it, but that ring is reserved for my bestie.

"You're lucky we still have adult supervision," Luke growls into my neck. "Answer your call. It's Christmas Eve."

I answer on speaker phone because I plan to introduce Luke. I might as well start prepping everyone now that I may not be staying in Denver. I wasn't quite ready to tell my sisters on our call, but I will soon. By New Year's Eve for sure. "Hey Sara!"

"Did you get your results?" she asks, her tone very excited.

"I don't know."

"You haven't checked?"

Luke looks at me curiously. "I've been a little busy. Listen, I want to tell you something—"

"I can't put this in writing, but Daniels, Daniels, and McMullen are going to make you an offer. I may or may not have some insider information. I may or may not have slept with Daniels Junior."

"Wait, what?"

"Check your email, girl! Your biggest dream is about to come true. Merry Christmas! Text me your flight itinerary so I know when to pick you up from the airport tomorrow. Gotta run." The phone goes silent. I feel Luke's intense stare boring into me. His entire body has tensed.

"Your biggest dream?" Though his words are cold, I sense the hurt in them.

I'm not going to lie to Luke. He deserves to know what I'll be giving up. But I've already had a chat with Art. I'd have to retake the bar for Alaska, but he's willing to bring me on and make me partner before he retires. Caribou Creek is no Denver. But there are still plenty of families in need. "They're the biggest family law firm in Denver. It's been my dream job to work for them for years."

"You're leaving."

"Luke, I—"

"You're leaving *tomorrow*." When I reach for him, he steps back. The rejection stings more than I expected. It's a misunderstanding. One I'll have cleared up in a couple minutes if he'd just listen.

"I knew this was a mistake."

I glare at him. "Don't say that."

He looks at the Christmas tree with disgust. "There's a reason I don't celebrate Christmas. This comes down tonight."

Now I'm just pissed. I could pack up my suitcase and sleep in my car until daybreak. Drive to Anchorage and catch my afternoon flight and never look back. But I'm not backing down this time. I'm not running.

"No."

"It's my fucking house. The tree is coming down."

"What's going on in here?" Art asks, approaching cautiously.

"Nothing," Luke grumbles.

"It's not *nothing*," I argue.

"You're right," he says, his eyes shooting daggers at me. "You don't know what it's like to lose your mom at Christmas."

My heart plummets into my stomach and tumbles all the way to my toes. He may as well have punched me in the gut. I've done a pretty damn good job of handling Christmas without Mom for the first time. Until now. Until the harsh

reminder. My desire to stay and fight until the lug lets me talk has died.

“Guess it’s better I found out now.” My heart cracks in two as I march down the hall to pack my suitcase. I’m going home.

LUKE

“I ALWAYS KNEW you were a little thick when it came to women, but this is a new low even for you.” Art’s disapproval is strong in both his stern tone and narrowed eyes. It’s rare the man is ever upset, much less angry.

But I’m angry too.

Ivy had a dream job lined up this whole fucking time. She was *never* going to stay. So why the hell did she come? If I’d known she was only here for a fling, I would’ve stayed away from town until she left. I didn’t take her for the kind of woman to use a man. “She lied to me.”

“About what?” Art folds his arms over his chest, challenging me to prove him wrong.

“She didn’t tell me about the job waiting for her back in Denver.”

“Did you ever *ask* her?”

Fuck. I scrub a hand over the back of my neck, pointing my head toward the floor so Art can’t see the embarrassment on my face. I feel like a kid getting scolded for doing something fucking dumb and careless.

“Or did you just assume she didn’t have a life to get back to?”

“I—”

“Maybe the same way you assumed she didn’t know what it was like to lose a parent.”

“What are you talking about?”

Art narrows his eyes at me even more. It’s a terrifying look for an eighty-three-year-old man. Especially pointed at me. “You should *ask* her.” He pokes me in the chest hard. Something Aunt Helen used to do. It would make me smile if this situation weren’t so damn tense. “You’re not the only one who’s lost, boy.”

I look over my shoulder to the hallway, feeling pulled toward Ivy. Hell, I felt that the second she stormed away.

“If you don’t get your ass moving, I’ll make sure Santa fills your stocking with coal, young man.”

Because this time I am going to laugh, I spin on my heel and walk away before he can call me out. I’m at the bedroom door before I realize I have no fucking clue how to fix the mess I just made. I don’t dare look back at Art, though. I can feel those narrowed eyes drilling me with fire beams.

“Ivy?”

“Go. Away.”

“Ivy, I’m sorry.” I twist the knob slowly, daring to go into my room. Ready to dodge anything that might get thrown at me. She has every right to be mad. “I’m sorry for what I said.”

Her narrowed eyes are even scarier than Art’s. “What part?”

“All of it. If you really want your dream job, I’m not going to ask you to stay. I felt blindsided. You never told me.”

“You never—”

“—asked. I know.” Cautiously I approach her, relieved when she doesn’t shrug from my touch. “I’ve always known you were it for me, Ivy. And when you came back into my life, I thought I was hallucinating. But there you were shaking that very fine ass in front of the Christmas tree I never wanted. The idea of losing you all over again—”

“I want to stay.”

“You do?”

“I was trying to tell you. Yes, that’s my dream job. But it’s not the only family law firm I can work at that will make a difference in people’s lives. There’s one much closer.” Her eyes soften, giving me hope that I haven’t completely ruined this with a few careless words. “Art offered me a job. A real one. Partner in a year.”

“Really? He never told me.”

“I asked him not to so I could.”

I want to take her into my arms and never let her go, but I have one more thing to apologize for. “I’m sorry for what I said about my mom. That wasn’t fair either.”

“No, it wasn’t. I lost my mom, too.” Her eyes shine with unshed tears, leaving me feeling lower than low. In that moment I know I will never allow my fear to cause her pain again. I’m never going to shut her out or be the asshole who wants her to take down a Christmas tree. I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving I’m worthy of her love.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I didn’t know.” I wrap her in a tight hug and hold her close for several long, silent beats. I feel her tears soak my shirt. I’ll stand here all night holding her if that’s what she needs.

“My mom loved Christmas,” she admits. “I hear yours did too.”

“She did.”

“Then let’s make sure we honor their memories every Christmas, okay?”

“Baby, if you’re willing to give me every Christmas, I promise to make sure we celebrate it however big you want to. I love you, Ivy. I’m going to spend every day from here on out proving it to you. But I only want you to stay in Caribou Creek if it’ll make you happy.”

“It will.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Because being without you is miserable. My home is with you.”

“And your sisters?”

“They’ve never been to Alaska. Guess they’ll have a reason to visit now.”

A gentle knock on the door stirs us from our moment. “I’m heading home,” Art announces. “Before you two get too carried away with making up. This old man can only take so much. Breakfast is at nine tomorrow, so don’t stay up too late. Or do. You’re both young.”

The second I hear the front door close, I turn to Ivy and cup her cheek. Tilting her head up toward me. “I’m ready to get carried away if you are.”

One corner of Ivy’s mouth lifts wickedly. “Why are we still dressed? Better get to work unwrapping your present.”

THE END

CLICK [HERE](#) TO read the epilogue (no newsletter signup required!)

WANT to read the next book in the series? [Holly and the Ghost of Christmas Past](#) is next!