

THE CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Merry and the
GHOST OF
Christmas Future

LANA DASH

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MERRY

As a kid, I loved listening for my mother at the stroke of midnight on November 1st. She'd creep into the attic and pull out all of the Christmas decorations to get set up overnight. No one loved the holidays as much as she did, and if you doubt her dedication to the holiday, I give you the names she gave her three daughters—Ivy, Holly, and Merry.

I'm Merry. But I'm not feeling very merry right now.

The twinkle lights I never took down from last year still hang around my studio apartment, sparkling like the night sky outside. The crooning voice of Dean Martin almost nearly drowns out the sounds of life in the streets of Denver down below as he sings about having a Blue Christmas.

I hear ya, Deano.

My merriment for the holiday season has lost its spark this year, and there is nothing I or anyone can do to bring it back. Because this will be the first year my sisters and I will be without our mother since she passed suddenly over the summer.

As the youngest of the three Carol triplets, I'd always tease my sisters that I was our mother's favorite child. And

whenever I'd ask Mom to back me up, she'd just smile and say, "You, my sweet Merry, are my favorite *youngest* daughter." Much to my disappointment and the amusement of Ivy and Holly.

The ornament I haven't stopped staring at since I opened my Christmas box says nearly that—Favorite Youngest Child. We each got one indicating our placement at birth last Christmas.

Ivy is the oldest, with the work ethic and responsibility that so many firstborns seem to possess. As for Holly, she's the Jan Brady of our little trio. That is to say that she's the middle child. And she's got to contend with Ivy's colossal shadow and my loud mouth, so her outgoing personality and stubborn streak keeps her from being forgotten. But never one to be outdone by my sisters, I quickly learned to embrace my flare for the dramatics and laissez-faire attitude. To me, the future can't be planned (don't tell Ivy) or perfect (don't tell Holly). Instead, it's limitless with all its possibilities, so I like to take each day as it comes.

The song ends, and Dean starts singing about marshmallows in the winter, but I'm not in the mood to hear anything happy.

"Allegra, next song," I yell to the speaker sitting on the bookshelf.

"Okay, turning up song."

"What?" I lift my head off the couch as Dean sings louder from the speaker. "I didn't say to turn up the song!"

"Okay, turning up song."

"No!" I yell, but the happy near-deafening notes swallow up my voice.

At that moment, the screen on my phone lights up with a smiling picture of my best friend, Amy, and me. We took it while we were backpacking through Europe after high school graduation and stopped in Prague.

“Hang on, Ames!” I yell by way of greeting.

She says something, but I can’t hear anything she is saying. I roll off the couch to stand up, but my foot catches on the Christmas box sitting on the ground near the coffee table. I spin around to try and avoid falling over but knock right into the undecorated Fraser Fir I lugged up five flights to get here. Neither one of us stands a chance of staying upright, and we both fall, with me taking the brunt of the impact.

“Son of a nutcracker!” I grunt under its weight.

Amy yells into the phone, asking if I’m okay. It just barely cuts through the sound of the blaring music. I reach for the phone a few feet away, but I’m trapped.

“Hang on, Ames!” I yell again as I stretch for the one thing I *can* get my hands on—the cord of the Allegra.

Yanking hard on the cord, I pull it free from the wall, ending the barrage of holiday notes.

“Are you dead?” Amy yells again, but I can hear her crystal clear now.

I shimmy a few inches until my fingertips brush across the phone’s edges, and I slide it over to me.

“Okay,” I say, holding it up to my ear. “I’m here.”

“What the hell just happened?” she asks.

I look down at the wreckage of the fallen fir lying on top of me. “You’d never believe it even if I told you.”

Amy chuckles on the other end. “Coming from you, I’ve learned to believe the crazy things that come from your mouth. Everyone does.”

She’s not wrong.

“What’s going on?” I ask, scooting myself out, inch by inch.

“I need you to come to Vermont.”

“I am,” I tell her. “I’ve already got my ticket for the new year. Don’t worry. I will be at your wedding, standing next to you on the second Saturday in January.”

Amy doesn’t need to know that Ivy was the one who reminded me for the umpteenth time yesterday to get my ass into gear and buy my ticket, or else I would be driving cross country to watch my best friend get married.

“No, that was the plan, but something’s happened.”

I don’t miss the note of panic in her voice when she says this. “What’s wrong?”

“Nathan’s grandmother hasn’t been doing so well, and his parents asked if we’d be willing to move up the wedding, you know, just in case—” she fades off, explaining without fully explaining. She’s worried about saying the words in front of me because of my mom.

“I totally get it,” I assure her. “When do you need me? I will find a ticket. And if I can’t get a ticket, I’ll borrow Holly’s car and drive there for you. Just name the date. I will be there.”

Amy lets out a sigh of relief that she’d been holding. “Christmas day.”

Uh oh. My sisters are not going to like this.

“Umm, okay. I know I said to name the date, but—”

“I know, Mere. I’m sorry. This whole wedding is spinning wildly out of control. It’s like it’s not even about us anymore. I didn’t get to pick the venue. I was told that I’d be wearing his mother’s dress like it was a done deal. And now this.” Almost as soon as the words come out of her mouth, she groans like she suddenly remembers why the date needs to be changed. “Now I sound like such a bridezilla.”

“You are not a bridezilla. Far from it. If anything, I think you’ve taken all this in stride.” It’s clear that Amy needs someone there by her side to make sure that she’s okay. “I’ll be there. I don’t know what I’m going to say to Ivy or Holly, but I’ll think of something.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” Amy says, sounding so relieved. “Which is why this next part will make you really not like me.”

“Not possible.” I smile.

“Katherine’s bringing a date,” she blurts out.

“Nathan’s sister? I’m pretty sure I was expecting to see your fiancé’s sister at the wedding.”

“Yeah, but there’s something you need to know about who she is bringing.”

I laugh. “As long as you tell me it isn’t Chad, I can handle whoever he is.”

The silence on the other end makes my heart sink like a rock into my stomach. This can’t be happening.

“Amy.”

Silence.

“Amy!”

“I’m sorry!” she finally says. “I didn’t know about it until this morning, and I’ve been working up the courage to tell you all day.”

Katherine’s schoolgirl crush on my ex-boyfriend Chad was a point of contention between us at the end of our relationship. It wasn’t the only issue we had, but it certainly was a big one. He claimed that she was just friendly, but I thought the constant flirting and touching him was inappropriate. Of course, I knew it was the right call at the time, but it sucks to find out just how right I was with my suspicions.

“Mere, what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I need a date for your wedding.”

O SCAR

“What do you mean they are going forward with the list?” I ask angrily into my phone.

The substitute driver that the car service sent over, since Thomas is back in Dublin with his family for the holidays, glances into the rearview mirror and we lock eyes. He makes the tiniest sound like a nervous squeak before his eyes dart back to the road.

I like that I have that effect on people. All it takes is one look, and they don't know what to do or where to look. They get so flustered that I quickly hold all the power in this equation. It's helped me immensely in the corporate world. I've built my company up from nothing and made myself one of the wealthiest people in the country.

“I did everything I could to try and get you off the list,” my publicist, Anna, says calmly into my ear. “But after you sold your company and joined the billionaire boys club, did you really think they were going to leave you off the Most Eligible Bachelors under Forty list?”

“I thought that's what I was paying you for,” I growl.

“Down, boy,” Anna chuckles. “I did manage to get you off the cover. At least I spared the world from having to see that surly face glaring up at them from the magazine racks while they stand in line at the grocery store.”

Anna is one of the few people that still talks to me this way. As much as I enjoy giving off that grumpy demeanor to most of the people I come across, I only let the people I really care about see that there is a softer side of me.

“I should fire you.”

“Ha!” She laughs. “Good luck finding someone new that could do what I do.”

“You know I hate fake people buzzing around me, looking for some handout.”

“We both know that you have no problem opening that rather large wallet of yours to help anyone in need, not that you’d let me share that with the world.”

“I don’t do it for the recognition.”

“I know, I know.” She sighs. “Your lack of interest in sharing this knowledge with the world is probably the only reason the magazine was okay with replacing you on the cover with Matteo Baez.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“The baseball player.”

I shake my head. “Doesn’t ring any bells.”

“You are unbelievable. Maybe your complete lack of knowledge when it comes to pop culture is the reason you haven’t found some lucky girl to settle down with.”

The car starts to slow down near the front of my private hanger and I look up to see a woman I don't know standing at the foot of my jet's steps, bouncing on her toes, like a kid who is about to meet Santa Claus. She's wearing a trapper hat with flaps hanging down on each side of her head. This must be Amy's maid of honor I'm taking with me to Vermont.

"I'm never going to settle down," I say.

"Never say never," Anna sing-songs before hanging up the phone.

"We're here, sir," the driver says, pulling to a stop. His eyes are cast down like he's still afraid to look at me.

A pang of guilt hits me when I think of someone treating Thomas this way. I reach into my front pocket and pull out my wallet. I pull a few crisp hundred-dollar bills out and lean forward in my seat.

"Merry Christmas," I say, reaching over the seat and handing him the folded cash.

His eyes light up when he turns to see what I'm offering him. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't mention it," I tell him, meaning it literally, and opening my door for myself to step out of the town car.

I'm not sure if it's because I've become accustomed to a certain level of recognition since I sold my company or what, but when the woman's eyes meet mine, there is no recognition. It's an odd feeling, almost a relief, when she doesn't change her demeanor as I approach. But the relief is fleeting when she turns back to the pilot and continues to talk animatedly to him like I don't exist. A surge of possessiveness hits me from out of nowhere when I realize I don't want to share her hazel-eyed attention with anyone, especially with this pretty boy pilot.

“I’d say a little over five hours,” the pilot responds to her question about how long the flight will be.

I’m about to tell him that I’m ready to go when she turns to me and asks, “Can you believe Nathan’s family sent this for us to fly to the wedding?”

I’m confused for a moment, but before I can respond, she continues. “I mean, I figured he was from old crusty New England money with a name like Winthrop-Bower, but this is nice.”

Pretty Boy Pilot starts to open his mouth to clear up her misunderstanding by explaining that this is in fact my plane, but I give him the smallest of headshakes to stop him.

“Yes,” I agree with her. “Very generous.”

“I’m Mere, by the way.” She holds out her hand to me.

I take it in mine. “Oscar.”

“I hope you aren’t anything like the green fella you share your name with,” she chuckles to herself.

I don’t miss the side-eyed smirk that Pretty Boy Pilot shares with his co-pilot. But when they catch my narrow-eyed gaze on them, they both look down at their feet nervously.

“I think we should get going,” I say and gesture for her to go up the steps first.

The excitement that lights up her beautiful face awakens something in me that I haven’t felt in a long time, but I push it away. I’m not looking for any romantic entanglements right now. I don’t need the complications and hassle that they always seem to bring into my life.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” Mere shouts when she gets a look at the inside of the plane.

I wait patiently, standing behind her as she takes in the luxury cabin. After traveling this way for the last few years, I don't see what she is seeing at this moment. For a while now, I've become so desensitized by all that I have. It's refreshing to be around someone who doesn't have expectations about who I am because of my name or my money.

Mere turns around and smacks me in the arm lightly. "Can you believe this?"

"It really is something." I nod and follow her over to the two cushioned chairs that face one another.

"My sisters are never going to believe this," she says, holding up her phone and taking a selfie.

As I sit down my phone pings an alert from inside my front pocket. I pull it out and see a text message from Anna with only one word, "*shit*." There's a link, and I press it, knowing already what I'm going to see. Just as she predicted but failed to stop, my unsmiling face is staring out from the cover.

*M*ERRY

There's something familiar about Oscar that I just can't put my finger on. I don't know if it's because every guy in a suit looks the same to me or what, but it's clear from his grim expression that he isn't happy about whatever it is he sees on his phone. I can practically see the steam coming out of his ears as he drops his phone down on the table between us.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He looks up at me with a look that I'm sure would have anyone shaking in their snow boots, but for some reason, he reminds me of an angry bear that just needs a hug.

"Nothing you need to worry about."

I shrug and glance out the small window next to me and watch as the Denver winter backdrop starts to move. This flight is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I'm not going to let Oscar, the grouch across from me, ruin any of it.

We are in the air in no time, and the flight attendant comes over to us and offers us each an espresso and a chocolate chip cookie. Oscar takes a sip of his coffee and completely ignores his cookie.

“Are you going to eat that?” I ask, around the cookie that I practically jammed into my mouth. It was too warm and gooey not to eat it all at once.

Oscar pushes his plate a few inches toward me and watches with interest as I waste no time eating his.

“I skipped breakfast,” I say, but that’s a lie. This is a full-on second breakfast for me. And if he had more, I would have eaten those. “What?”

“You’ve got,” he points to his face to gesture that I have something on mine.

I use the back of my hand to wipe at the corner of my mouth. “Did I get it?”

“No.” He shakes his head and reaches over to me, and uses his thumb to rub across the bottom part of my lip. “Got it.”

I watch as he licks the melted chocolate off his thumb like it’s the most natural thing to happen between two people who have just met. Never mind the fact that my imagination explodes with so many scenarios in my mind at what he can do with that tongue. I need to get my head back on track.

“We have some hours to kill before we get there.” I pull off my hat and run my fingers through my hair. “Come on, lay it on me. What’s bothering you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe we could be of use to one another.”

Oscar’s left eyebrow lifts suggestively at me. “How so?”

“Not that way, you perv,” I roll my eyes, but I don’t miss the flutter of something in my stomach when the corner of his mouth ticks up slightly.

“You sure?” He smirks. “I’m pretty sure there’s a bedroom in the back.”

I glance over my shoulder to the closed door behind me and then back at him.

As tempting as it might be to shock my sisters with a story about having sex in a private plane with a stranger, I’m not looking for any complications on this trip. My life is already complicated enough since Holly is upset that I won’t be home for Christmas since I’m going to Amy’s wedding. Not that she’d ever admit it out loud to Ivy or me for not staying in Denver. But there’s also the fact that I’m about to run into my ex at a wedding with his new girlfriend while I’m flying solo.

“There’s something else I need from you,” I say.

Oscar plays the strong silent type well and continues to stare at me without saying a word.

“I need a date,” I continue. There’s no reason to beat around the bush with this guy. “My ex is on the other end of this flight, and I need someone by my side that is going to make him think twice about letting me go.”

Oscar’s eyes narrow on me, and the silence that settles between us is nearly unbearable. His dark eyes are unreadable, and the closely shaven beard he’s got puts Chad’s patchy facial hair to shame.

“And you think that I’m that man?” he finally asks.

I’m not one to fan the flame of some hot guy’s ego, but I’m wondering if Oscar really doesn’t know how good looking he is. “Do I need to hold a mirror up for you to see what the world sees?”

The smirk returns, and instead of flutters in my belly, the flutters have relocated to a lower place on my body. This

should be a warning that what I'm proposing to him is incredibly dangerous, but I'm a desperate woman. I need a point in the win column for once, and if that win comes from a loss for Chad, then I will do anything to make it happen.

"If we do this, we're going to do it right," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"No one can know the truth,"

"I'm mean, I have to tell Amy," I start to say, but his head shake stops me.

"No one can know."

The curiosity of why this stranger is actually playing along in my crazy scheme is killing me, but I don't want him to change his mind. He obviously has his reasons, and I have mine. I'm just more vocal about it than him.

"That means we have to share a room," I say. It's not a question but a statement.

"Is that a problem for you?" he asks.

"No." I shake my head. "What are the terms of PDA?"

"Naturally, I'll let you take the lead on what you feel comfortable with."

"And what do you feel comfortable with?"

Oscar smiles and leans on the table between us. "I wouldn't worry about me."

Every single cell in my body is screaming at me to abort this crazy plan. How am I going to not get lost in those dark eyes when he keeps looking at me like that? But do I listen? Nope.

"Are you in love with me?" I ask.

This question actually takes him by surprise, and he sits back in his seat. “No.”

“Good,” I nod and hold out my hand to lock down this business arrangement. “Let’s keep it that way, and we won’t have a problem.”

O SCAR

By the time the plane lands, we are shuttled into the town car waiting for us in the hangar. Our plan for a fake relationship at this wedding is in full swing, and we are both ready to play our parts.

Merry's laid out her reason for wanting to enter into this fake relationship with me, but I haven't told her my reasons. Not that she asked, but I wouldn't have told her either way. I can't take the chance that she will turn into all the other women around me when they find out who I am and what I'm worth. If having her on my arm will keep away any single women at this wedding from trying to hit on me, then all this nonsense will be worth it—especially dealing with Katherine.

Nathan's younger sister has made it very clear from nearly the moment we met that she was interested in something more between us. But she is nothing more to me than my best friend's younger sister. I've endured multiple attempts by her to persuade me otherwise, but I've never changed my mind, and I won't start this weekend.

“This is where Amy and Nathan are getting married?” Merry asks, staring out the window as we pull to a stop in front of the Black Forrest Lodge.

It's a four-story Tudor-style ski lodge with greenery hanging on each balcony with red ribbons attached and twinkle lights hanging in all the surrounding pine trees.

"Nathan's family owns this place and quite a few more up and down the east coast," I explain.

"Is that how you know him?" she glances over her shoulder at me.

"No, we went to boarding school together." I don't explain that I was the son of the groundskeeper while it was actually Nathan who was attending the school.

"Hmm," Merry says and turns back to the window.

I want to know what she means by that noise, but there's no time to ask her. One of the valets standing at the podium runs over to the town car and opens her door.

"Welcome to the Black Forrest Lodge," he says, offering her his hand with an overly friendly smile that disappears the moment he notices me.

Merry gets out, and I follow after her. Considering we are trying to play this new pretend role of boyfriend and girlfriend with one another, it should be awkward. But without thinking twice, we both reach for one another like it's the most natural thing in the world. Her soft hand fits in mine like a glove.

"Ready to do this?" She asks.

I glance over at her and lean close. "It's already begun."

A squeal behind us makes us both turn to see Katherine pushing out the Lodge doors and running towards me.

"Nathan said you were coming, but I told him I'd believe it when I see it," she says, throwing her arms around my neck.

Merry tries to pull her hand from mine in an attempt to allow me to give Katherine a proper hug, but I don't let go of her. The number one reason I'm playing pretend this weekend is right in front of me, and I don't want her to think anything has changed since the last time she threw herself at me, and I turned her down.

MERRY

I'm not prepared for the surge of jealousy that strikes me when I watch as Katherine tries to practically climb Oscar like he's a mountain, not a man. I thought I was past most of my ill feelings for her at this point, but I think I was being too optimistic. Why else would I want to grab Katherine by the back of her head and yank her off him?

"I missed seeing you at the vineyard over Thanksgiving," Katherine says in that whiney flirty way some women think is charming. "It's not the same when you aren't there."

"He was busy with me." The words are out of my mouth before I even realize I've said them.

Both Katherine and Oscar swing their gazes over at me with two very different expressions on their faces. Oscar looks surprisingly amused by my admission, while Katherine's nose crinkles up like she's just smelled something rotten.

"Really?" She looks from me to Oscar. The once genuine smile on her face a moment ago is replaced with one that is completely forced. Her eyelids blink rapidly like she's inwardly hoping that she's dreaming and that what I've just said is entirely untrue. If only she knew. "When did this happen?"

“Well,” Oscar says, wrapping his arm over my shoulder and pulling me into his side. “It happened kind of suddenly.”

The meltdown brewing behind Katherine’s calm demeanor is interrupted by her brother and my best friend walking out of the lodge to greet us. Amy and Nathan look excited to see us, but I don’t miss the quizzical glance shared between them when they see how Oscar is holding onto me.

“*What’s going on?*” Amy mouths to me when no one is looking.

There’s no way I can answer her truthfully without breaking one of the rules Oscar and I agreed to, so I just shrug my shoulders and smile. If I play it off like it’s no big deal, Amy might chalk this up to just another crazy antic from her best friend. To be honest, this doesn’t even make the top-ten crazy things I’ve done, and Amy was a witness to most of it. I’m not worried.

A cold blast of winter wind kicks up, and we all move into the lobby of the lodge with a group of other people standing around as if they’ve only just arrived as well.

I can’t stop myself from looking around for Chad. It’s not like I want to see him. It’s more like I’d like a moment to mentally prepare myself for the first run we will have since our break up before I can put on my fake smile for everyone.

Raised voices from the front desk draw our small group’s attention. And that’s when I see my ex standing at the counter arguing with someone from management in the lodge.

“Is that him?” Oscar whispers to me. “You’re ex.”

“How’d you guess?”

“Just a feeling.”

I turn to ask him what that means when I notice a unique sight heading our way.

An older woman, who looks well into her eighties, is wearing a bright green jogging suit and powerwalking through the Lodge lobby. She can't be more than a breath above five feet, and her silvery-white hair is curled and sprayed so much that it doesn't move on top of her head.

I stare awestruck at her. She's what I dream of being like when I'm her age, looking hot and not giving a shit about what anyone thinks of her.

"I want to be her someday," I whisper to Oscar.

He glances distractedly at me from Nathan and Amy as they present the wedding plans for the next couple of days.

"Who?" he asks.

I go to point out the woman to him, but she's already gone. "Never mind."

"We know that you all gave up a lot to be here," Nathan says. "Amy and I want you to know how much we couldn't have imagined celebrating our wedding without any of you."

Katherine drags Chad over to the group and hangs on his arm like he's singlehandedly the only reason she is currently standing upright.

Memories of our time together flash in my mind like it's being projected on a screen in front of me. We were happy for the most part, at least, I thought we were. But despite my efforts to try and be the person that Chad wanted me to be—more serious, someone who could plan things further in the future than seventy-two hours—the real me slipped through.

As much as I'd love to blame Katherine entirely for the break up of our relationship, she was just the final straw that broke the camel's back. Chad wanted me to be Miss Right, but I could only be Miss Right Now. I don't think I'll ever meet someone that I could see myself planning a future with.

Despite my efforts to pretend like I don't see him, Chad tries to make eye contact with me. It's like my non-reaction to seeing him can only be explained in his head by the fact that I must not have noticed him standing there and not that I'm over us.

This sudden understanding of what I feel, or instead what I don't feel for him, takes a weight off my shoulders that I didn't know I was carrying around. This realization has me thinking about Oscar. This whole ruse was built around the fact that I cared what Chad thought about me. But if that isn't a factor I need to worry about, I don't really need a fake boyfriend.

Oscar must feel my stare because he looks over at me and gives me a reassuring half-smile that makes the blood in my veins heat up. My brain is yelling at me to tell him the truth, but other parts of my body are keeping my lips locked up tight.

O SCAR

“Did I miss something since the last time we spoke?” Nathan asks me. “I mean, according to a certain magazine, that shall not be named. You are a bachelor. The most eligible one at that.”

He’s fishing for some explanation about Merry and me. There’s no doubt in my mind that Merry is getting the same line of questioning from Amy. She’s sitting with the other two bridesmaids, and she looks like she doesn’t want to be here anymore than I do.

It’s been a long day of traveling, and the best man and maid of honor can’t skip the evening Welcome Cocktails event to kick off this wedding weekend. But a part of me wishes I should have taken Merry up on her offer to order room service and watch Christmas movies in the room. But then again, if we didn’t come out tonight, I’d have missed seeing her wear the Christmas cat dress she’s got on now. The memory from earlier plays back in my mind.

“Alright, meow,” Merry peeks her head out of the bathroom door. “Are you ready?”

I look up from my phone. “Just waiting on you.”

I've been dressed and ready to head down to the evening event for twenty minutes, but Merry has been taking her time getting ready.

"You can't rush purr-fection."

"At this point, I'd take mediocre if it gets us out the door quicker."

"Aww, look at us. Are we having our first lover's quarrel?" She smiles like this is a moment she doesn't want to miss.

"Can we go?"

"Come on, grumpy. I'm trying to build up the excitement for my dress reveal."

"Does it involve felines?"

Her smile falters, and she steps out of the bathroom. "How did you know?"

"Your use of cat puns helped me crack the code."

"Well?" she asks, spinning around in place so I can see her dress in all its glory. "What do you think?"

The top half of the dress is tight and black with a matching ribbon tied around the waist, but the bottom half is green and printed with cats wearing Santa hats. This dress is sure to set her apart from all the other guests tonight, but I'm starting to see more and more that's just who Merry is. It's best just to lean in and embrace it.

"It's paw-fect," I say.

Her face lights up at my attempt at a cat pun for her. "If you were my real boyfriend, I'd kiss you right on the mouth for that."

“Hello?” Nathan holds his hand in front of my face. “Are you even listening to me?”

I’m snapped out of the memory and find myself face to face with my best friend.

“What did you say?” I ask.

Nathan smiles and shakes his head. “I was asking you how it is that you and Mere happened, but from the way you were just looking at her, I think I already got my answer.”

I’m about to open my mouth and explain that I’m not looking at her in any certain way, but just as quickly, I remember that I need to play this role. I’ve already seen a few women circling us like sharks as we stand here as if they smell my bachelorhood like chum in the water.

“What can I say?” I shrug. “When you know it’s right, why hold back?”

Nathan studies me like he’s not sure if he should believe what I’m saying or not, but thankfully we get interrupted when some other guests walk up and start talking with him.

“So, you’re the new guy?” A voice asks behind me.

I turn and see Merry’s ex swaying slightly as he stands with a drink in his hand. The angry look he’s shooting my way looks far less intimidating in his inebriated state.

“I don’t think it’s any of your concern who I am,” I tell him.

He takes an unsteady step toward me, but I don’t move. This guy is the least of my concerns, but if he thinks I’m going to let him mess around with Merry’s head, he’s got another thing coming.

“She’s nothing but a good fuck,” he practically spits out. “There’s no long-term relationship with someone like her.”

My body moves quicker than my brain, and I grab him by the lapels of his jacket, lifting him onto his toes.

“I don’t ever want to hear you talking about her like that ever again,” I say in a harsh whisper. “You got that?”

Nathan appears next to me and pushes his way between us. I let go of this jackass’s lapels and step back. Turning around, I find all eyes in the room looking in my direction. I’m not sure what came over me. I usually can keep my poker face in place when I’m dealing with someone trying to get a reaction out of me. But there was something about the way that he spoke about Merry that had me wanting to punch his lights out.

MERRY

I can barely keep my eyes open. There’s something about traveling in any direction outside of my time zone that messes with my internal clock, and the heavy-handed pour of alcohol in this cocktail is not helping me to keep my eyes open either. I’ve played my part of maid of honor for the evening, but I’m ready to call it a night.

“You need to keep those eyes open, dear,” a sweet elderly voice says next to me, making me jump.

I look to my right and find the older woman I saw earlier in the lobby sitting next to me. She’s changed out of her bright green tracksuit and replaced it with a black one that’s bejeweled around the cuffs and collar.

“You don’t want to miss what’s right in front of you,” she continues.

I turn to follow her gaze and see a tipsy Chad walking in the direction of where Oscar is standing with Nathan.

“This can’t be good,” I mumble, but the woman hears me and chuckles.

“It’s tough when the past and the present collide,” she continues and takes a bite of the frosted sugar cookie shaped like a Christmas tree.

This afternoon I thought she was just another guest at the lodge, but seeing as she’s here at the welcome event, I’m starting to wonder if this is Nathan’s grandmother. She doesn’t look sick like Amy had said on the phone. I mean, hell, she was powerwalking the last time I saw her.

It’s only at this moment that I realize what she’s said to me.

“How did you—” I start to ask but stop when Oscar’s angry voice carries across the room to us.

“You got that?” He yells.

I push up from my seat. Everyone at the party has stopped what they are doing to watch the spectacle unfold. Oscar turns around, his eyes wide and searching until they land on me.

“I’ve got to go,” I turn to say to the woman, but she’s no longer sitting next to me. The only sign that I didn’t make her up was sitting in the form of a half-eaten frosted sugar cookie on the table.

I don’t have time to try and figure out if my jetlag is making me see things or not. Instead, I walk around the table and over to Oscar, looping my arm in his.

“Let’s go.”

He doesn't argue and leads us both out of the banquet room. It isn't until we reach the elevator in the lobby that I glance back over my shoulder. A part of me is worried that Chad will follow, but from what I can see, Katherine is chewing him out.

"That was amazing," I whisper, but it's unnecessary since no one is around to hear us.

"You aren't mad?" he asks.

"Mad?" I scoff. "I wouldn't have cared if you hit him, but that might have ruined the night for Amy and Nathan."

"You continue to surprise me, Merry," Oscar says. "Every time I think you're going to zig, you zag."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment—I think."

Oscar's eyes twinkle with amusement. "You should."

The elevator doors open, and he gestures for me to go in first. His hand rests on my lower back as he leads me in. My body heats up again from his touch. We don't have an audience at the moment, so I'm not sure why he's still playing the boyfriend role, but I'm not in any hurry to stop him.

"If you really want this to be believable," I say to him as the doors close. "You really should be calling me Mere."

O SCAR

The following morning, I wake up to the sounds of Merry's, I mean, Mere's, snoring. She's asleep in the bed while I'm on the sofa, with my tall frame hanging off both ends. My chivalrous nature is the reason my back is going to be killing me all day. Too often, I forget that I'm not that young kid in college who could sleep anywhere and run a marathon the next day if I wanted to.

I sit up and rub my hands over my face. Nothing short of a triple espresso will pull me out of this sleepy morning haze. I'm usually a morning person, but I had a lot on my mind last night.

As much as he deserved it—and much more—Mere's ex really struck a nerve in me that I wasn't expecting. I'd never let someone talk about a woman like that in front of me, but it was different when I heard him talking about her. The possessiveness, the urge to protect her, came over me, and I nearly laid him out in front of all the other guests. It doesn't help that Katherine's attention hasn't been deterred even though she has her own date, and I'm in a relationship with Mere—at least as far as she knows.

Before we fell asleep last night, Mere explained her history with Katherine and how she was a factor in their breakup. Based on Katherine's history of self-serving behavior, I'm not surprised that she'd pull a stunt like this. Her plan was to kill two birds with one stone—hurt Mere and try to make me jealous.

It didn't work with me, but I can't help but wonder if Katherine's shot across the bow wasn't more of a direct hit for Mere. Then again, maybe I don't want to know. I'm not sure the feelings that are growing inside me are still the platonic fake relationship ones I keep telling myself that they are.

There's a soft knock at the door, but the noise doesn't do much to the logs that Mere is sawing in her sleep.

I walk over to the door to answer it. Without thinking, I swing it open, forgetting for a moment that certain people here can't know that I slept on the couch last night. Katherine's perfectly painted face lights up when she sees it's me.

“Oh good,” Katherine sighs. “I didn't want Merry answering.”

I swing the door back towards me so that my body blocks any view of the room behind me.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper.

“I needed to talk to you.”

“Now isn't a good time.”

Katherine looks me up and down, her eyes lingering just a bit on my bare chest and abs. I'm not one to shy away from showing off the body I've worked so hard to build, but she isn't the one I want looking at me this way. It's only when Mere pops into my mind that I realize the snoring from earlier has stopped.

“I’m really sorry that Chad came after you like that last night.” She reaches out for me, but I pull back so her hand drops between us. “He can be so protective of me. He thinks you are here to win me over.”

“Gross,” I hear Mere say somewhere in the room behind me, but it’s so soft that I’m pretty sure Katherine doesn’t hear her.

“I’m only here for the wedding, Katherine. Nothing more.”

Not taking no for an answer, she takes a step toward me. But Mere’s voice stops her in her tracks.

“Babe?” Mere calls out. “Who is it?”

I glance over my shoulder and see that all signs that I slept on the couch last night are gone—replaced with Mere, wearing only my t-shirt with her bare legs propped up on the edge of the coffee table.

“If it’s room service,” she continues. “I hope they brought more whipped cream.”

The suggestive tone in her voice and the sight of her bare legs are like a shot of adrenaline to my bloodstream, and my dick twitches to attention. I release the door, allowing it to drift open so Katherine can see her too.

“It’s not room service,” I say.

“Shame.” Mere smiles sweetly, but I see the vindication flash in her expression when she and Katherine lock eyes. “I’m so hungry.”

Fuck.

Katherine growls in frustration and turns on her heels to leave.

“Wait, don’t go,” Mere whispers purposefully so Katherine can’t hear her.

I can’t hold back the bark of laughter that comes out of me. “I don’t think she heard you, babe.”

MERRY

Why does it feel so right to hear Oscar call me babe? Not to mention the jealousy I felt when I woke up and heard Katherine talking with him at the door. For a moment, I wondered if what I felt was residual anger over what happened with Chad, but the thought of her trying to get close to Oscar lit a fire in me that I’d never felt before.

I was up and out of bed, grabbing all the bedding off the couch and tossing it behind the wall that partially divides the bed and the living area of the suite. Just as I was about to announce my presence, I noticed Oscar’s shirt folded on the coffee table. I yanked off my shirt and pulled his on. The woodsy scent of his body wash made my lady bits tingle with excitement. His scent is my new favorite smell, and I hope it lingers on my skin for the rest of the day.

After Katherine storms off, Oscar closes the door behind her with a devilish smile on his face.

“You are incredible,” he says, walking over and sitting down next to me.

“Is there something I need to know about you two?” I ask. The words slip out of my mouth before I can turn on my internal filter. I don’t have any right to ask him to explain himself to me, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to know.

“Are you jealous?” he asks, looking amused and resting his arm on the back of the couch behind me.

“Please,” I scoff, but I’m desperately trying to sound nonchalant. “I’m just trying to understand. She’s a beautiful blonde bombshell, and every guy that looks at her falls in love.”

“I didn’t.” His response is so quick and without hesitation that there’s no doubt in my mind that he is telling me the truth.

My heart starts to thump in my chest much faster than before, and I have to remind myself to breathe. Oscar’s gaze darkens as it dips down to my lips. The lines that we laid about this fake relationship are starting to blur, and I want more than anything to kiss him.

“You don’t like blondes?” I whisper.

He shakes his head, and his fingers start to play with the ends of my dark chestnut hair. “I’ve always been partial to brunettes.”

My body is like a teapot on the stove, slowly heating up until I reach my boiling point and I can’t hold it in. I lean forward and press my lips against his. He doesn’t hesitate, cupping the back of my head with one hand and wrapping his arm around me with the other. I’m pulled onto his lap, straddling his firm thighs and thick cock, our kiss never breaking.

“Mmm,” he releases a groan deep in his chest as I press my hips down against him.

Fuck, this feels amazing.

I move my hips in a circle, allowing the friction out our bodies to begin the slow burn of pleasure to build up between us. Oscar’s hands move down, exploring the soft bare skin of

my body. There's hardly any fabric between the two of us, so that every incredible sensation can be felt.

"Make me come," I whisper against his lips, feeling safe in the boldness of telling him what I want him to do to me.

Oscar doesn't disappoint. He takes my request and moves his hand between us. The pads of his fingertips move over the silk fabric of my panties.

"You like that?" he asks.

I can only nod my agreement. Words are getting lost in the haze of my brain. He pushes aside the fabric and presses one finger and then two into the wet folds of my pussy.

I moan in pleasure, tossing my head back as he works in and out of me.

How is it possible I'm already so close?

I've never gotten to this point so quickly with any other man before. Oscar presses down on that magic spot deep inside me, and I ride his hand faster and faster.

"Look at me," Oscar orders me in a no-nonsense tone.

Our eyes meet and lock, searing this moment between us. With only a few more pumps, I come undone in front of him. Crying out in pleasure as I hold on to him as my anchor, allowing my orgasm to wash over me but not pull me out into the undertow.

I fall forward against him, resting my head in the crook of his neck and trying to settle my breathing. With each deep breath, I try to remember everything about the scent of his skin.

The reality of what we just did begins to creep in, and I want so much to push it away. I want more of this bubble we

are in. I want more of him.

“What are you thinking?” he finally asks, breaking the silence that has settled around us.

“That was—” I breathe out.

“Unexpected,” he finishes.

I sit up, needing to make sure there isn't any regret in his eyes. But I'm met with a darkening look of lust from Oscar. His hands grip my hips and pulls me close against him. The feeling of his hard cock sparks another wave of pleasurable aches in my lower belly. I press my palms against his bare chest and push off him. Oscar's gaze narrows when he thinks I'm ending what we've already started, but I pull his shirt off over my head and turn for the bathroom.

“Are you coming?” I ask over my shoulder.

O SCAR

Watching Mere come undone in front of me is the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life. With the pretense of our fake relationship long gone at this point, I'm on my feet and following her into the bathroom.

The shower is already running, and I can see her nude form moving behind the cloudy glass of the door. I'm not used to feeling this untethered to my control, but that's what she does to me. From the moment we met, Mere has opened my eyes to her unique view of life. She doesn't let the binds of society dictate what she does. She lives each moment like it's her last and doesn't give a fuck what anyone thinks.

When I'm around her, I feel unburdened by the worries that tomorrow, next week, or next year will bring. I want to let loose.

I pull open the door and watch in stunned silence as the water from the showerhead washes down every curve of her body. A body I could spend my life exploring and never get tired of.

Mere runs her hands over her head, pushing her wet hair back. "I was worried you might have changed your mind."

A mischievous grin spreads across my face, and I push down at the pajama pants around my hips, letting them fall to the floor. My cock is still raging, needing relief that only Mere can give me as it bounces against my stomach.

I step into the shower, pulling Mere against me as I lean down and kiss her with the hunger of a starving man. It's been so long since a woman has consumed me so completely that I am not sure I've ever felt this way before. I bite her bottom lip, and she opens up, allowing me to deepen the kiss.

I'm so used to being in control of every aspect of my life, but Mere takes it without even asking as she pulls back to break the kiss.

“Wha—” I start to ask but stop when I watch her lower down to her knees.

The moment her hands and lips touch the sensitive tip of my cock, my vision blurs, and I need to rest my hands against the tiled wall for support. Her tongue moves up and down the thick length, making my toes curl to keep from losing myself. The hot water starts to cool, allowing my brain to focus and formulate a plan.

I reach over and shut off the water. As sexy as this scene would be in a movie, logistically, it's a nightmare, and we don't need to slip and break something before the wedding.

“Come on,” I say, urging Mere to her feet.

Leading her out of the shower, we don't go far. I want to watch her come undone again, but when I'm inside her.

“Here.” I point to the counter in front of the mirror. “I'm going to watch you scream my name while I'm inside you.”

The color in Mere's cheeks darkens, but the smile on her face tells me that she's more than ready for what we are about

to do. I run my hand down her bare back, pushing gently until she rests her elbows on the marble sink. The soft moans of pleasure that slip out of her as I run my cock up and down the folds of her pussy, make it nearly impossible not to lose myself right here, right now.

I shift my hips forward and push inside her. She's so tight I can only move an inch at a time. It's only when I'm fully rooted inside her that I cup her breasts with each hand I lift her back up, her back to my front.

“Ready?” I growl into her ear, needing to know that she's willing to hand back the control to me.

Mere nods her head as our gazes meet in the reflection of the mirror in front of us. I move slowly at first, allowing the movement of our bodies to increase the pleasurable pressure between us. Mere rests her hands over mine as my rhythm increases.

With each pump in and out of her, the urge to feel closer to her consumes me. I wrap both arms around her and pull her against me. The sounds of pleasure coming from Mere are nearly my undoing. I need only one thing from her—to hear my name on her lips when she comes.

“Say it,” I breathe, watching her inch closer to her undoing.

Mere's eyes roll back, and she screams my name as her second orgasm of the morning tears through her.

“Oscar! Oh god!”

I let myself stumble off the edge into oblivion with her into bliss. The pleasure of our shared release ripples through both of us until it slowly fades. Leaving us with only the sounds of our ragged breathing.

“That was—” I breathe out.

“Unbelievable,” she finishes.

*M*ERRY

I could have easily stayed locked in our room, living off room service and orgasms, but my duties as maid of honor pulled me away. Oscar had his own best-man responsibilities to deal with as well, leaving us very little time to interact for most of the day.

There was the final dress fitting, where Katherine threw a fit because my dress was a different shade than hers and the rest of the bridesmaids. Then there was the debacle of Amy's veil getting torn and me spending a few hours driving around town trying to find anything that would work as a substitute.

"What is that?" Katherine asks, pointing to the bag in my hand from the art store in town.

"I'm going to make Amy a hair wreath," I explain. "There's no place close enough that we can get a wedding veil in time."

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and I don't want Amy stressing over this so close to the wedding. And thanks to the years of making homemade Christmas decorations with my mom and my sisters, I know that I can pull something together that will work as a substitute and still be beautiful.

The other bridesmaids walk over to us and watch as I pull out all the pieces I need to assemble the headpiece. I picked out pieces of pine, fake frosted cranberries, holly berries, some fake snow spray, wire, and a hot glue gun.

“They match perfectly with all our dresses,” Amy’s cousin says, holding the holly berries up against the dresses hanging in the bridal suite.

“That was the plan.” I smile and quickly get to work.

Everyone else works on getting the reception goodie bags prepared while talking amongst themselves. Outside the window, I can see Oscar down below helping Nathan carry in the wedding arch that was constructed for the ceremony.

“How are you doing?” I ask Amy quietly.

She’s been taking all the mishaps we’ve been dealing with for the wedding with tremendous stride. A lesser bride would have already lost it and threatened to call off the ceremony by now.

“I’m just trying to go through my mental checklist to make sure that I’m not missing anything and leaving it to the last minute.”

“Is there anything else I can do to help you?”

She leans against me and rests her head on my shoulder. “You’re here. That helps more than you know.”

As I continue weaving the pine and berries together into the headpiece, my mind slips back to moments of working on decorations with my mom. Pain starts to ache in my heart, and I can feel the hot sting of tears begin to burn my eyes.

“Are you okay, Mere?” Amy asks.

I nod and blink back the tears. “I think I need to take a break for a moment.”

I don’t want an audience for whatever is about to come next. Putting down the half-made piece, I slip quietly out of the suite. The wave of grief that was building rushes over me the moment the door clicks shut. I cover my face with my hands and slide down the wall to the floor.

Being here for Amy’s wedding was a good excuse for not staying home for the holidays, but there’s no saying that I wouldn’t have left either way. I’ve never been one to deal with things head-on like my sisters. I smile or make a joke, trying to push away the feelings that come with a heavy situation—never wanting to deal with them because then I have to look ahead and face the future. In this case, a future where my mom isn’t in it.

“Mere?” Oscar’s voice penetrates my grief.

I try to catch my breath to speak, but the tears keep coming.

“Are you hurt?” He kneels down in front of me.

I shake my head no—not physically, at least. Oscar pulls me into his arms and sits down next to me on the floor. He doesn’t speak. He just holds me until I’m able to pull myself back together.

“I’m sorry about that,” I finally say, wiping at my tear-stained cheeks.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” he asks.

My instinct to push away all that I’m feeling would be so much easier, but I surprise myself and open up to him. I tell him about my mom and what happened to her over the summer. He listens quietly as I speak.

“I’m sorry,” he says when I finish. “She sounds like she was an incredible woman.”

“She was the best,” I agree. “I only hope I can be half the woman she was.”

Oscar cups my face and tilts my head up to meet his steady gaze. “You already are. You dropped everything for a friend that needed you even when you are dealing with so much. I didn’t know your mom, but I feel certain that she would be so proud of you and the woman you are.”

I could never have imagined that the man in front of me, who was supposed to be my fake boyfriend for the weekend, has changed so much in such a short amount of time. The way he looks at me. The way he makes me feel safe even when I’m feeling at my lowest is beyond anything I could imagined for myself. But all at once, I remember that this between us isn’t something that can last. We never promised each other anything more than this weekend, but for the first time in my life, I see the sparkle of a future.

The door of the suite opens, and Amy’s head pokes out, looking around for me.

“There you are,” Amy says when she sees us sitting on the floor.

I can see it in the narrowing of her eyes when she sees my puffy red eyes, her gaze swings to Oscar like he had something to do with them being there.

“It’s okay,” I assure her.

Amy’s expression softens. “If you’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Why don’t you head into the suite and freshen up,” she says to me and then points to Oscar. “I need to talk to you about some wedding stuff.”

We both push to our feet, Oscar’s hand linking with mine. I’m happy for the ruse, so I can push up on my toes and kiss him quickly.

“Thank you for listening,” I tell him.

“Anytime.”

“I’ll meet you inside,” Amy tells me.

I head back into the suite with one more look over my shoulder at Oscar. His gaze is still on me, sending a chill of excitement through me. I think I’m falling for him.

O SCAR

“What the hell do you two think you are playing at?” Amy punches me in the arm. It doesn’t hurt, but it’s as startling as her outburst.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh no.” She shakes her head at me. “Don’t try and play dumb. Mere is my best friend, and I know everything about her life. If you two were dating for real, I would have known about it.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I say, even though I know that’s a lie. Things between us have already morphed from a fake relationship to something so much more.

“You may think you know Mere, and she puts on a great face most of the time, but she’s been hurt before.” Amy points at the suite door. “When the rugs been ripped out from under you too many times, you do what you can to protect yourself from getting hurt again. That’s why she doesn’t like to get serious with anyone. She doesn’t want to imagine one future only to have it change on her.”

“I won’t hurt her.”

“Really?” Amy puts her hands on her hips. “Does she know who you really are? Billionaire playboy with a reputation for not settling down.”

The description of me stings more than I’d like to admit, even to myself. It’s true that when I first found success, I went a little wild, and I haven’t been able to shake that reputation since.

I can tell Amy that I’ve changed until I’m blue in the face, but Mere is her best friend, and she’s going to do everything she can to protect her.

“I have my reasons for keeping some things to myself,” I say, trying to hold back my anger.

“Merry is vulnerable right now, and I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“I would never hurt her.”

“Not on purpose,” she says. “I believe that much.”

“What do you want me to say?” I ask.

“I want you to be honest with her.”

My phone starts to ring, and I pull it out of my pocket. Nathan’s name flashes on the screen.

“Think about what I’ve said.” Amy reaches for the door and heads inside without another word.

The rest of the evening, I couldn’t get what Amy said out of my head. I know I should tell Mere the truth about exactly who I am. I don’t want any secrets between us, but Mere isn’t the only one with a past.

After I finally started to settle down and grow into the man I am today, I began to look for someone more serious. And I

got burned in love too. Only my heartbreak played out in tabloids, for which she sold our story to make some quick cash. It's been incredible to have someone just look at me and see the real me, not my name or what's in my bank account. But Amy's right. I need to tell her the truth. This relationship may have started out as fake, but if I hope to make it truly real, then I need to be honest with Mere.

As the countdown clock ticks closer to the wedding, I can't find a moment alone with Mere to talk for the rest of the day. She even ends up spending the night in the bridal suite making headpieces for the bridesmaids instead of in our room with me.

The following day my time is spent making multiple runs to and from the airport to pick up guests. Since it's Christmas Eve, the staff at the lodge is low, and it's all hands on deck to do our best so everything runs smoothly.

"There you are," Mere's voice says as I walk into the lodge lobby after my third trip of the day to the airport.

I have one more to make in thirty minutes before I have to race to get ready for the wedding rehearsal and the dinner afterward.

"You are a sight for sore eyes," I say leaning down and kissing her smiling face.

"I missed you," she says and then looks around to see if anyone is nearby. "I was hoping you might join me in the shower before I get ready for tonight."

My dick twitches with excitement at the memory of the last time we were in the shower together.

"I wish I could, but I have to head back out to pick up Nathan's aunt and uncle. Their flight was delayed because of the storm coming in and holiday travel." I lean close and

whisper into her ear. “You have no idea how much I’d like to join you.”

The soft gasp from Mere thrills me, and I want to know what other sounds I can get her to make.

“There’s always tonight,” she promises. “I made Amy promise no more all-nighters. We all need our beauty rest for the big day tomorrow.”

At the mention of Amy, I remember that I’d planned to talk with Mere about everything. I don’t have a lot of time, but I don’t want to put it off.

“Every time I see that woman, she has on the greatest old lady tracksuits.” Mere smiles, looking past my shoulder.

I turn, but I don’t see any older woman in a tracksuit in the group of people standing around in the lobby.

“Who are you—” I start to ask when Nathan yells my name.

“My uncle just called and said their plane landed early.”

Damn it.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go.” I lean down and give Mere a quick kiss before turning and heading out of the lodge.

*M*ERE

The wedding rehearsal is the first thing about this whole weekend that has gone off without a hitch. Everyone was able to follow the instructions and understand what they needed to do for the big day tomorrow.

I hadn't planned on needing a gift for Oscar, but I thought that it wouldn't be Christmas without giving a gift for someone you care about. But when my video call with my sisters ran a bit long this afternoon, I didn't get a chance to run into town to get him anything.

Instead, I took the leftovers from the headpieces and made him an ornament. It's nothing much, but I wanted something to remember our first Christmas together.

"Is this dumb?" I ask Amy and pull out the ornament from my clutch. "I didn't have time to get Oscar anything for a gift."

Amy takes the ornament and turns it over in her hands. "This looks just like something your mom would have made. It's not dumb at all."

"I didn't really know what to get him."

“I mean, what do you get the guy who can literally buy whatever he wants?” She laughs.

I stare at her in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

Her laughter dies almost instantly. “He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

She shakes her head, but I’ve known Amy most of my life. I can read her like a book, and I can see something warring inside of her.

“What was he supposed to tell me?” I ask.

“He said he would,” she mumbles to herself. “It’s not a big deal, Mere, but Oscar hasn’t been completely honest with you.”

“Honest about what?” I ask.

The familiar feeling of uneasiness in my stomach flips as I brace myself for whatever she’s about to say.

“He should really be the one to tell you.”

“But I’m asking you,” I say, louder than I planned. A few people nearby turn to look.

“It’s better if I just show you.” She picks up her phone and types something in before handing it over to me.

It’s an article about Oscar and why he’s the most eligible bachelor in the country.

“Billionaire playboy?” I ask, looking up.

Amy shrugs. “Nathan says he’s long since left those days behind him, but that’s because he’s worried about a woman trying to use him.”

“He didn’t tell me because he thinks I’m so shallow that I’d want him only for his money?”

The idea that he would think so little of me hits like a punch to the gut. All the signs were staring me straight in the face this whole time, but I was too stupid to realize it.

When we met, he drove up in a fancy town car with a driver. And when I mentioned how Nathan’s family got us a private plane to bring us here, he made a face like he didn’t know what I was talking about. Then when we made plans for our fake relationship, he never told me why. He thought if I knew the truth, I’d be different around him.

I’m utterly embarrassed for not realizing any of it. He must have thought it was hilarious to play me like that.

I look around the dining hall for Oscar and see him standing and talking with some of Nathan’s family. Almost as if he could feel my gaze, he glances up. The smile on his face falters as he looks between Amy and me.

“I need to go,” I say, standing up and pushing my way through the other guests and out the door to the patio.

The Vermont winter wind hits me the second I walk out, but I’m too mad to care. Needing to burn off some of my fury, I pace up and down the snowy patio. I clench my fist and feel the prick of wire in the palm of my hand. I look down and see I’m still holding the ornament I made. Winding up, I toss the homemade piece out into the snow with all my strength.

“You really should be wearing a coat, dear,” a voice says behind me.

I spin around and see the older woman I’ve been seeing in the lodge all weekend. “What are you doing out here?”

She pulls at the sides of her puffy red jacket with fake fur-lined trim. “I was getting some air until you came out.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I couldn’t be in there any longer.”

“Don’t like weddings?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I mean, yes, I like weddings, but I just found out something about a guy I thought I knew.”

Even as I say the words, I know that it was stupid of me to think that after only knowing Oscar for a few days, I should know anything about him. I’d opened up to him in more ways than I had with anyone in a long time. But he didn’t think I was worthy enough to open up in the same way.

“Love, it can be a real kick in the ass sometimes,” the woman says.

“Sounds to me like you don’t think it’s worth it, and I’m inclined to agree.”

The woman smiles and shakes her head. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Loving people only ever seems to hurt me. It’s not worth putting myself out there. Why risk it?”

“The future is full of uncertainty. You can’t predict it, and you can’t run away from it. Not everyone intends to hurt the ones they love. It’s human to make mistakes. And sometimes the situation is out of their control.”

The way she’s talking, it sounds like we aren’t just talking about Oscar. My mom’s face pops into my mind. But this woman couldn’t know anything about that.

“It’s easy to run to avoid being hurt, but sometimes those moments are what make you stronger. It’s a cliché for a reason.”

“My mom used to say that,” I say.

She smiles. “She was a wise woman.”

The cold wind kicks up again, but this time, the chill penetrates and cools my anger. I rub my hands up and down my arms to try and warm up.

“It’s the season of forgiveness,” she continues. “We’d hate to see you give up on something great because of fear of yet to come.”

“We?” I ask.

She only smiles and nods back towards the doors to the party. I look through the frosted glass windows and see Oscar talking with Amy. He seems upset, and now that I have a cooler head, I can see that he and I aren’t so different. Our fears stem from two different reasons, but in the end, we both want the same thing—to be loved.

OSCAR

“But where did she go?” I ask Amy.

She’s already chewed me out for not opening up to Mere about who I was. She only let me off the hook a bit when I explained that I couldn’t tell her because of all the wedding preparations.

“She just got up and walked over there.”

I turn to where she’s pointing and see Mere walking back in from the patio.

“Merry!” I yell and push my way through the crowd to her. She’s shivering from the cold, so I pull off my suit coat and

wrap it around her. “What were you doing out there with no coat on?”

“I was just talking with—” she starts to say but stops when she looks out to the empty patio.

“We need to get you warmed up.”

Mere shakes her head. “I need to tell you something.”

“I need to tell you something too. Or rather, I did need to tell you something, but I guess now you know.”

“I don’t care about that,” she says, surprising me. “I fell in love with you before I knew the truth. I need you to know that.”

I’m stunned into silence. My heart soaring at her words.

“You had your reasons for not telling me—” she says but holds up a hand to stop me from trying to interrupt and explain. “I won’t lie that it hurt when I found out, but I can see why you did it. But I need you to know that the only thing I care about is you.”

I’ve dreamed of finding someone that would love me for me, but I would have given away every penny I have to hear those words come from Merry. It’s like my own Christmas wish come true.

“You aren’t saying anything,” she says.

I shake my head and smile from ear to ear. “I can’t tell you how much I wanted to hear you say those words. I messed up not telling you, and I will make it up to you somehow.”

“How about you tell me you love me too?” She chuckles.

“I love you, Merry Christmas Carol.”

Mere throws her head back and laughs. “That’s not my middle name.”

“It’s not?” I joke. “Seems like a real missed opportunity.”

“I think my mom thought saddling me with a name like Merry was just festive enough.”

“Well, maybe when we name our kids, we can take it to the next level.”

Her eyes widen. “You see kids in our future?”

“I see limitless possibilities in our future.” I wrap her tighter in my arms and lean down to press my lips against hers to warm her.

“I think we should take this up to the shower,” Mere whispers against my lips.

“You read my mind.”

*M*ERRY

“To us finally getting together this holiday,” Holly holds up one of the champagne flutes that Ivy just finished pouring out.

“These are supposed to be for the ball drop,” Ivy chides, but only half-heartedly.

I pick up a flute and hand it over to her before taking one for myself. “I think it’s safe to say that no one expected this Christmas to turn out the way it did, but I think it turned out for the best.”

We clink glasses, and each take a sip. The cold bubbles tickle my nose as I swallow the sweet liquid.

“Who knew that we’d all manage to find love?” Ivy asks. “Well, I guess someone knew.”

Holly and I exchange a curious glance.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“You guys are going to think I’m crazy, but I kept having these crazy dreams about this older woman who kept pushing me toward Luke.”

We all turn and glance out the kitchen door into the living room, where Ivy's Luke is laughing with Oscar and Holly's Jonas.

"That's weird," Holly says, taking another sip of champagne. "I met an older woman outside my work who did the same with Jonas and me."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I think about the woman at the lodge with all the crazy tracksuits. Despite my claims of talking with her multiple times and one last time on the lodge patio, Oscar has no memory of seeing her.

"Did she have short, silvery white hair?" I ask.

"Yes," both Ivy and Holly say at the same time.

The three of us exchange a look of disbelief, each thinking the same thing, but no one wants to say the words out loud.

"She was at the lodge—" I start to explain but stop when Oscar pops his head into the door.

"The countdown to midnight is about to start," he says.

Ivy and Holly each grab a flute for their guys and walk out. I'm not sure we can believe that the same person visited each of us before Christmas.

"You okay?" Oscar asks.

I pick up the last flute and hand it to him. "Yeah, all good."

"Okay, because I've been looking forward to kissing you all night to thank you for my gift." He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me close.

"What gift?" I ask.

Oscar's head tilts in confusion. "The one you left on the bedside table this morning for me. There was a note and

everything.”

“I don’t—” I start to say, but when Oscar holds up the ornament that I made him and threw into the snow on Christmas Eve, the words dry up on my lips.

“Ten, nine, eight,” everyone in the living room starts to chant.

“Come on, you guys!” Holly yells out.

Oscar takes my hand and leads us out of the kitchen and into the living room for the final three seconds.

“Happy New Year!” Everyone cheers and clinks their glasses with one another.

I turn to Oscar as he leans in to kiss me. “Happy New Year.”

“It’s going to be the best year,” I tell him.

“What do we have planned?”

I smile, loving that for the first time in my life, I am able to plan beyond the next few days ahead of me. “The rest of our lives.”

EPILOGUE

O SCAR

I peek into our daughter's room and see her sleeping on Merry's chest as she rocks her in the rocking chair.

"Is she asleep?" I ask.

Mere shakes her head as Noelle makes soft little sounds like she's trying to fight sleep, but it's quickly winning out.

So much has changed in the last few years since our first Christmas together, and until Noelle was born, it was my favorite Christmas. Now I have both my Christmas girls, and I couldn't be happier.

Noelle makes a little humming sigh, and that is our confirmation that she's finally given into sleep.

"She's going to be impossible to get to sleep when she's older, and she has to wait for Santa," Mere whispers.

I smile, knowing she's right, yet I still can't wait to see her little face light up on Christmas morning when she sees presents under the tree.

"I can't wait," I whisper back.

"Me too."

Mere stands up and lays Noelle gently into her crib. We stand there quietly, looking down at her peaceful little face as she dreams. I wrap my arms around Mere and pull her against me. I couldn't have dreamed I'd ever get to be this happy. I thought I was content with a life without love before Mere, but now I have more than any man should be lucky enough to have.

“Merry Christmas,” I say and lean in to kiss Mere's neck.

She sighs and tilts her head to give me more access. “I know the plan after putting her down was to wrap presents, but I have something else in mind.”

“Shower?” I ask, kissing a trail up to her ear.

“I was going to say bubble bath, but either way gets me wet.”

“Not in front of the baby,” I feign shock and turn a smiling Merry in my arms. But before she can say anything, I lean down and lift her up and onto my shoulder. She chuckles quietly as I walk us both out of our daughter's room.

“Wait,” she says, and I set her down.

She jumps up and wraps her legs around my waist as I grab her ass to hold onto her. “That's better.”

“I love you.” I chuckle.

“Now and forever.”



Thank you for reading *Merry and the Ghost of Christmas Future*. Read the rest of The Christmas Carols trilogy: [*Ivy and*](#)

the Ghost of Christmas Past by Kali Hart and *Holly and the Ghost of Christmas Present* by Kate Tilney.

ALSO BY LANA DASH

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LANA DASH is the author of short, sexy, and funny romances. When she isn't dreaming up her latest sexy couple's adventure, you can find her watching true crime documentaries, drinking Bloody Marys, and eating movie theater popcorn. Not necessarily at the same time. She loves to hear from readers!

