



Rachel

PIPER COOK

RACHEL

Cranberry Corner

By Piper Cook

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[RACHEL](#)

[THE PERFECT GIFT](#)

[TEMPTING FATE](#)

[MISTLETOE KISSES](#)

[LUCKY 22](#)

[CHARADES](#)

[COFFEE & OTHER HOT STUFF](#)

[BITTERSWEET](#)

[DO YOU BELIEVE](#)

[SHOW ME YOURS](#)

[CHRISTMAS MIRACLE](#)

[MORE BY PIPER COOK](#)

[PARKER](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

RACHEL

Grumpy Guy Hopeful Romantic Short and Steamy Small Town Holiday Rom Com

She's a romantic at heart. He doesn't believe in love at first sight. When they're given the chance of a lifetime, will they trust in the magic of Christmas?

Rachel

I believe in serendipity, soulmates, and forever after.

But I'm not holding my breath for a holiday miracle.

Though, there *is* a man I keep bumping into around town, and when he shows up at the holiday party, we meet under the mistletoe.

I know nothing about him other than he's a great kisser.

Is the universe telling me something or am I misreading the signs?

Grant

I usually steer clear of social entanglements, especially around the holidays.

But I get roped into participating in a gift exchange, so now I'm on the hunt for the perfect Dirty Santa present.

When I bump into the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, not only does she steal my breath, but also the gift I planned to buy.

I don't believe in love at first sight, but could she be the greatest Christmas gift of all?

Warning: When this growly bear steps out of his comfort cocoon, he's smitten beneath the mistletoe. If you love Christmas miracles, cinnamon roll heroes, curvy women, and sticky sweet steamy romance, then you'll love Rachel and Grant.

If you're a hopeful romantic at heart and love steamy, short, holiday love stories, Cranberry Corner is the place for you. Guaranteed HEA with no cliffhangers.

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THE PERFECT GIFT

CHAPTER 1

Rachel

How can I pick the perfect holiday present if I don't know who I'm shopping for? The only guideline for the Dirty Santa singles mixer is a spending limit. I need something clever, functional, and fun but nothing too stuffy. Nothing that implies I've overthought the whole thing or given it no thought at all. It needs to be perfect. Something someone wants but doesn't know they need until it's in their eager hands. That's the magic of Dirty Santa.

But there's no magic in a singles mixer.

Why did I let Ginger talk me into this? We've been besties from the first year we started teaching together. She knows I dislike matchmaking, dating apps, and blind dates. Getting thrown into a room full of single strangers isn't how serendipity works. Falling in love should be magical, not forced. There's nothing romantic about ticking boxes and sizing up the competition.

I wander the store aisles, hoping the perfect gift will jump into my hands. Handwarmer? *Too practical*. Plaid scarf? *Too common*. Battery-powered candles? *Too plain*. I frown as I run my fingers along the shelves hoping something will catch my eye.

Something does catch my attention, but it isn't anything money can buy. A gentleman at the far end of the aisle stoops to pick up items from the floor. He gathers the packages in his muscular arms, then, one by one returns each item to its appropriate spot on the shelf. His thick, dark hair falls over his face, making it difficult to see his features. But nothing can hide the brawny build he sports.

His jeans bulge around his meaty thighs, highlighting his athletic build. A long-sleeved waffle knit shirt skims his upper

body, emphasizing his hulking chest and toned arms. He extends his arm, placing items back on the shelf, and the tiniest sliver of his tattooed wrist peeks from beneath his sleeve. I'm instantly curious about what's up that sleeve besides layers of muscle.

The man glances sideways, catching me mid-ogle. He tips his head, acknowledging me with a friendly grin. A spark of electricity buzzes through my bones, jolting the rhythm of my heart. I'm caught in his stare for a moment too long. I blink the dryness from my eyes and dip my head. I curl my lips inward, holding back an embarrassed smirk.

Sweet Santa.

I quickly round the corner before the blush of awkwardness overwhelms me. I escape to aisle five and peruse bath salts, lip balms, and scented lotions. Nothing says, "*hopefully, you bathe,*" like generic bath product gifts.

I walk the aisle and ditch the scent of lavender for kitchenware. A microwave breakfast muffin maker is promising, but it's easy enough to make a bacon, egg, and cheese muffin without fancy gadgets. I pass on a DIY sushi kit and a make-your-own hot sauce kit. *Too much hassle.*

A muffled voice from the central aisle captures my attention. I can't quite make out the exchange of words, but the man's voice melts over me, dark and delicious. There's a tinge of gravel and grit with a mix of sultry and charming.

The store must be spritzing holiday happiness in the air because a giddy tickle trips up my spine, causing me to shiver. I mosey further down the aisle and spy the perfect Dirty Santa gift.

"Next aisle. Top shelf," a chipper woman's voice sings out.

"Thank you," the man's deep voice echoes closer, and a surge of adrenaline skitters through my veins.

I near the end of the aisle and reach for the item I spied on the shelf. The last one. How lucky am I? I lift on tiptoe, extending my arm to reach the high shelf, and the item shoved just out of fingertip range.

A hulking mass nears my body, hovering over me with heat and the scent of cinnamon and spice. I falter, catching a lower shelf with my other hand. A large hand spans my lower back as a man extends himself over me, easily reaching the item just out of my reach.

My body flashes hot, trapped between the shelf and his body, but my fight or flight reaction never comes. I linger, breathing in his scent, basking in his heat. My heart pitter-patters as a hollow breath stalls in my throat.

“Boozy Infusion Kit.” He reads the box, then glances back to the high shelf. Dark lashes frame his rich chocolate eyes. I could easily lose myself in them. “Looks like this is the last one.”

“Thank you for grabbing it for me.” I reach for the box, then hesitate. “Were you looking for the same thing?”

“Yeah, but that’s okay. I’ll find something else.” He offers me the box. “You take it.”

“Oh, I couldn’t.” I withdraw my hand. The man’s so ridiculously handsome my knees wobble. “You should have it.”

He taps the box in his palm, and a sneaky grin curls along his lip. His eyes crinkle as the grin widens. Something’s percolating behind those twinkling orbs. Nervous flutters tickle my insides.

“How about you take the kit and give me something else instead?”

“Like?” I prompt, arching an eyebrow.

“Let me take you out for a date.” He dips his chin sheepishly.

He oozes a playful, boyish charm that reads “*safe*,” yet I err on the side of caution. He’s a stranger, after all. This is how women get abducted or worse.

“I don’t think so. You keep the kit.” I brush off the exchange with a nervous laugh, keeping things light.

“Coffee? Phone number?”

He's insistent and cute, making it a challenge to say no, even though it's for the best. The only thing more dangerous than adorable puppies and cuddly babies is a sexy lumberjack of a man asking for my digits.

I shake my head, unrelenting.

"Fair enough. Can't blame a man for trying." He offers the box again, this time not taking no for an answer when I shake my head. "I insist. It's the least I can do."

His fingertips brush against mine as he places the box in my hand. A tingling sensation wafts up my arm like champagne bubbles bursting as they float to the top of a glass. I break into a nervous sweat, suddenly too hot in my own skin.

The man backtracks the few steps to the endcap, then leaves the aisle. I peek around the corner, inspecting his backside and the way the denim hugs his ass before he disappears down another aisle.

"Damn."

Grant

I'm not digging this whole Santa shopping assignment as it is. Running into the dark-haired woman only makes matters worse. I can't shake her radiant smile or how her eyes lit up before she let me down easy. She wanted to say yes. Her eyes said it all.

Though, she's likely done me a favor by declining further interaction. I'm not prepared for social entanglements or settling down. Getting caught up with a woman before Christmas is asking for trouble. I don't need a loopy-eyed lovestruck woman with her eye on a ring by Valentine's Day. *No sir. I don't need that at all.*

I'm a man with a plan, and a woman draped on my arm isn't on my wish list. One day, eventually, but not right now. I'll stay clear of the Christmas romance trap and all its trimmings, even if I'm dying to see her smile again.

I pull a shopping list from my back pocket and opt for my second choice, a breakfast sandwich maker. Who doesn't need one of those? I choose the shortest checkout lane and wait my turn. The cashier rings up my purchase, but when I reach into my back pocket, my wallet's gone.

"Uh, I had it. I know I put it in my pocket this morning." I pat down my back pockets, then my front pockets. "It's probably in my jacket in the car."

"Looking for this?" The raven-haired woman's eyes more than twinkle. They crinkle at the corners and brighten her entire face. "You dropped it. Good thing I found it, huh? Guess we're even now."

I chuckle and shake my head. Well, I'll be damned. She's smiling, laughing, and saving my ass.

"You're a lifesaver." I reach for the wallet. She slips it into my palm, and I fold my thumb over the top of hers. She's magnetic, drawing me in to want more than I should. "Or a pickpocket," I tease before redirecting my comments to the patient clerk. "Ma'am, I think this beautiful woman's stalking me."

The clerk smirks and hovers a finger over the red flashing light button. "Should I call security?"

I pretend to size up the gorgeous woman who's pilfered the booze kit I intended to purchase and now threatens to steal a piece of my soul. Her long dark locks puddle over her shoulders, pooling at the swell of her sweated breast. Her body dips and curves, teasing an ache from my lonely bones.

"Count it. It's all there." She winks. An innocent womanly giggle lingers between us. "Except for the finders fee. You wouldn't believe the going rate these days."

"That right?" I chuckle and pull a bill out of my wallet for the cashier. "I think I'm safe, but call security if she follows me." I wink at the cashier, who rolls her eyes with a smothered smile.

But what I wouldn't give if she did follow me out. If she'd give me a chance at a coffee date. I can't shake the

overwhelming desire to reach out and touch her, to learn her curves and scars and what makes her laugh and cry. Who is she, and what is she looking for? Or is she looking for anything at all?

“I wouldn’t dream of following you.” Her eyes sparkle and shine, glistening in the harsh glow of the overhead fluorescents. She winks with a snicker. “Wouldn’t want to give away my secret spy skills.”

I glance at the hand clutching the booze kit. No ring. *There’s hope.* But I didn’t come here looking for hope. I came here in search of the perfect gift. The one I researched. The one I gave up so quickly because *she* wanted it. My search for the perfect gift shouldn’t have led me so far astray, but now that it has, I wonder if there’s more to this than a chance encounter.

“I’m Grant.” I step aside from the checkout, giving her room to pay for her purchases.

“Nice to meet you, Grant.” She eyes me with a side glance, avoiding my direct stare. Her cheeks pinken as she swipes her credit card. “I’m Rachel.”

Is she intentionally coy, not interested, or nervously shy? Though she must get hit on all the time. I’ve gone overboard with the attention. Her hesitancy gives me the out I need to keep to my plans free and easy through the holiday. I should take her cue and leave before things get ridiculously awkward. I’ve never thrown myself at the feet of a woman. I’m sure as hell not going to at cashier booth number three.

“Nice to meet you, Rachel. Maybe we’ll bump into each other again sometime.”

She nods, smiling but obviously uncomfortable as she eyes our surroundings.

I make a quick exit and trudge through the cold to my truck. I start the engine and idle while the cab warms, replaying the most unusual and fantastic shopping run I’ve ever experienced.

An older gentleman sporting a ball cap and cane saunters by the cab door. He tips his hat and waves as I wait for him to cross the car lane and disappear between two cars in the next aisle. I pull out cautiously, then cross the lane to the nearest exit.

The older gentleman pops back in front of me on the outer lane. He tips his hat and waves again as he crosses behind a little red car with its backing lights on. The car's back bumper edges out slowly, then stops as the man passes. I inch forward cautiously. Once the man's cleared the vehicle, it begins backing again, stopping short as I pass by its bumper.

When I catch sight of the driver, my heart races. I don't believe in fate, but if the universe is trying to tell me something, I'm ready to listen. Hopefully, she is, too.

TEMPTING FATE

CHAPTER 2

Rachel

“It was so bizarre, Ginger. Mr. Jack popped up out of nowhere. If it weren’t for him, I might have plowed into Grant’s truck.” I still can’t believe the run-in I had with Grant yesterday. Or how gorgeous he is and so persistent.

“But you didn’t. Was Grant mad? Did he honk?” She waggles her eyebrows. “Or did he rip off his shirt, flash his toned abs and flex his muscles.” She doubles over in laughter, and I’m only slightly annoyed. A peek at his six-pack would’ve been pure pleasure.

“No. It was nothing like that.” I can still picture it. He leaned out the window with the cutest, loopy smile that lit me up like a Christmas tree. “He said it was fate, and I *had* to have coffee with him.”

“Oh, my god, Rachel.” Ginger slips the red ribbon over the hook in the doorway. The mistletoe ball gleams with glittery red berries and battery-powered twinkling lights. She steps off the ladder and moves it to the next door. “So, did you get his number? When are you going out? Tell me.”

I watch the swaying ball, momentarily ignoring her impatience. What would it be like to get swept away in a stranger’s kiss, Grant’s kiss, right here in this spot? Which could never happen because Grant doesn’t strike me as a man who attends singles events. He’s a man who makes things happen, not wait for something to happen.

Not like me. I’m patient. When the right one comes along, I’ll know it. Won’t I?

“Of course, I didn’t get his number. He’s a stranger.” I follow behind her, carrying two more mistletoe balls. “One doesn’t pick men up in the middle of a department store.”

Ginger arches her eyebrow. She tilts her head, giving me the “*you must be kidding*” look. “There are no rules when it comes to meeting your soulmate, Rachel.”

“Who said anything about soulmates? He’s a man I ran into, that’s all.” I’m on the defensive, flushing hot as my heartbeat gets ahead of itself.

“Are you blind, woman? You’re always talking about serendipity and happenstance, and if things are meant to be, they’ll be.” She plucks a mistletoe ball from my hand. “You ran into him how many times at the store? Three? If that isn’t the stars aligning and the heavens opening to say he’s the one, I don’t know what is.”

I toss the remaining ball in my hand gently. My palms begin to sweat, and a heavy ache fills my chest. *What if it was a sign? What if fate pushed us together, and I didn’t see it for what it was?*

“I did agree to coffee if we ran into each other again.” I dangle that bit of omitted information out there for her to bite. I’m not a complete idiot. If I run into him again, I’ll know there’s more to it than dumb luck. *If I run into him again.*

“You should go back to that store every day at the same time until you find him again. Only this time, ask *him* out.” Ginger glances briefly over her shoulder, catching my eye. “Live a little.”

“I couldn’t do that. It’d be cheating the stars, cheating fate. I can’t make something happen that isn’t supposed to be.” *How can love be magical if I force it to happen?*

“Suit yourself. But I think you’re missing out.”

“Look who’s talking. Killian’s been trying to set you up with his friend from work for how long now? Have you gone out with him yet?”

My only chance at steering the conversation away from my encounter is to turn the attention to her. She’s been avoiding Killian like the plague. Honestly, his insistence on setting her up is a bit over the top, but he means well.

“Whoa. Do you know how awkward it is that my brother’s trying to set me up with someone?” She huffs as she descends the ladder. “I don’t want the next man I potentially have sex with to be someone handpicked by Killian. Just, eww.”

She scrunches her nose, causing her freckles to congregate into one gigantic blob. I snicker. Ginger and I are one and the same. We’d rather be at home in our jammies, eating ice cream and watching sappy rom-coms than weed through the dwindling number of eligible bachelors for a potential date. Instead, we’re preparing for the most cringetastic event of the season. The annual holiday singles mixer. It’s packed full of silly games, spiked punch, mistletoe, and prospective heartbreak.

Fa la la. It’s beginning to feel a lot like...my worst nightmare.

Grant

“I don’t know about this, Connor. I’m having second thoughts.” Seconds and thirds and fourths. I’m not interested in meeting more women. Though I’m very interested in meeting Rachel again.

Something about her shy laugh, glittering eyes, and the way she didn’t flinch when I reached across her for the bar kit. The kinetic energy sparking between our bodies was enough to cause an explosion if someone lit a match.

“You can’t bail on me now.” Connor glances up, freezing me with his stare. “I’m not going alone. You said you’d go. Besides, it’s for a good cause.”

Connor peels the sticker off the back of a holiday bow. He sticks it on the Dirty Santa gift he had no business wrapping without supervision. At least I had the foresight to buy a gift bag and tissue paper. Easy peasy.

“What? To give your dick a hope and a prayer it’ll see some action in this decade?” I snort.

He flings the leftover tube of wrapping paper at my head. “Very funny. I haven’t seen you out with a woman in ages.”

He inspects the wrapped package with a frown. “It ain’t pretty, but it’ll do.”

“Story of my life.” I muse, but there’s some truth there.

I’m a loner. Have been most of my life. My family didn’t have much growing up. I spent most of my childhood packing boxes to pick up and move in the middle of the night. Mom did her best to provide for us, but her hard work and meager earnings were no match for rent, utilities, food, and clothes. We lived in more houses than I can count on both hands by the time I was ten.

Living that way affects people differently. It turned me into a list maker and planner. If I plan ahead, the future’s certain. If I wing it, who knows how things could crumble? It’s the same with my heart. There’s no room for misadventures and making mistakes.

At least, that’s what I thought until yesterday. But I didn’t plan on meeting a woman who utterly stole my breath. Finding Rachel again is the highest priority on my list. I’ll do whatever I can to seek her out. That’ll take more than hard data and lists. It’s going to take a freaking miracle.

MISTLETOE KISSES

CHAPTER 3

Rachel

The community center hums and buzzes with chattering singles. Ginger's the perfect host, greeting guests with a smile and game ticket as they enter. She joins me at the appetizer table once incoming guests slow to a trickle.

"We need more punch and those swirly things." She uses tongs to rotate appetizers to another tray, freeing up space for more food.

"I'll get the appetizers. You get the punch." I grab the empty platter from her hand, eager to escape the crowd. "Divide and conquer."

We dip into the kitchen, leaving the dull roar of the crowd and music behind momentarily.

"Looks like a good turnout." I pull a container of pinwheel sandwiches from the commercial refrigerator and transfer them to the party tray. "I bet Mayor Stanton asks you to host again next year."

"Oh, dear. I hope not." Ginger groans as she pours a concoction of fruit juices and gin into a large pitcher. "Parker was so good at this. She needs to run the show, not me."

"Parker's too busy playing footsies with your brother," I tease, eliciting another groan and eye roll from Ginger.

"I'd rather gouge my eyes out than picture Killian playing footsies." She snickers. "Though it's quite amusing watching him fawn over Parker like she's a goddess. Wouldn't it be nice to have someone worship the ground we walk on one day?"

I glance up from the appetizer tray and find her staring wistfully into space. Yeah, I'd love for someone to fuss over me like they only have eyes for me. I want to be the best part

of someone's day, be the love of their life. I want to swoon with love tingling in my fingers and toes. I want the rush of new love to last a lifetime with the one person who gets me, understands my ticks, and who will love me despite them all.

A gravelly voice filters through the hubbub outside the kitchen. It's rich and sultry, gritty and delicious, causing my bones to weaken. I freeze as a wash of heat floods my body.

"Did you hear that?" I barely whisper.

"Hear what?" Ginger stirs the punch mixture. She glances in my direction, then follows my gaze to the door. Her eyes widen, and she immediately wipes her hands on a towel as she scurries to the door. "Did something happen? Something break? I'm so wrapped up in my head—"

"It's Grant. I heard his voice. Ginger, I think Grant's here." I'm mortified and elated and nervous and, *oh my goodness*, overwhelmed.

I scramble after Ginger, who beats me to the kitchen door. We peek out the round glass hole and scan the crowd.

"Which one is he?" she stage whispers, jostling me with her arm. "Point him out."

I quickly assess the crowd. I filter out blonds, redheads, and *bingo*. He's as handsome as yesterday with his hair flopped to one side, chiseled chin, and, *lord have mercy*, a long-sleeved thermal waffle shirt that emphasizes every ripple and bulge of his upper body.

"Over there, by the redhead. There. He just took a sip of punch."

"Ooh la la," she clucks. "Looks like Grant has a friend." Ginger retreats as I stand mesmerized with my heart knocking about, rattling my rib cage. "Well, don't just stand there." Ginger nudges my backside with her hip. She nods toward the kitchen counter. "Grab that appetizer tray and get your butt out there."

She swings the door open, loudly announcing that more drinks are on the way. Grant shifts his gaze toward the commotion Ginger makes and catches my eye over her

shoulder. I hold his gaze for a brief, flickering moment, then retreat behind the swinging door.

My heart pounds as I gasp for breath. This is it, do or die time. I might keel over and die an inglorious death in the middle of the community center's sterile kitchen.

This is no time to be a coward. It's a Christmas party. Nothing more, nothing less.

I scramble toward the counter and grab the tray of mini sandwiches. My hands shake, causing the tray to tremble. I close my eyes and pull in a deep cleansing breath, counting to the beat of six and releasing. It doesn't quell the butterflies in my stomach or the knot in my throat, but it'll have to do.

I march to the kitchen door, bumping the right side open with my hip. I scan the food and drink table, and Grant's gone. My eyes flit around the room as I blink back the buzzing excitement roaring to life in the pit of my stomach. The door swings shut behind me, and Ginger swoops in, grabbing the tray of goodies from my hands.

Grant magically appears from behind her, scaring me witless. He points upward and utters only a word.

"Mistletoe."

Grant

I hesitate for a mere second. Long enough to read the reaction in the flicker of Rachel's smile but not long enough for her to change her mind.

Her lashes flutter closed as I lean in to capture a taste of her, a nibble, an offering of hope. Her lips are everything I imagined, soft, supple, tentative, yet eager. The kiss is soft, sweet, and full of promise, leaving nothing to be desired except more.

I disengage from the kiss and admire the rosy flush creeping up her cheeks. Her lips curl into a sexy, satisfied smile. My heart lurches. Everything's right with the world,

even though she was never part of my original plan. The only thing that matters now is that she's here. We're here, together.

"I've been dying to do that from the moment I first saw you." I brush my hand along her arm.

"Me, too." She dips her head and tucks a strand of long dark hair behind her ear as she eyes the room cautiously. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I'm single. It's a mixer." Her hesitation rubs off on me, and I'm suddenly aware she might be uncomfortable expressing affection in a room of strangers. I scan the room. The only eyes on us are Connor and the redhead who gave me an encouraging heads-up about the mistletoe. "You're single? Here to mingle?"

Her eyes widen in surprise or realization. "Yes, yes, of course, I'm single." She flashes a ringless hand. I'd love to kiss each wiggling fingertip and keep kissing her until I reach her cute little toes.

"Can I get you a drink, or are you working?"

Rachel glances over my shoulder toward the redhead. Her boss?

"Oh no, nothing like that. I'm helping out my friend." She nods in the direction of the food table, where the redhead keeps a watchful eye on us. "That's my friend, Ginger. She's tonight's hostess. I'm here for cake and Dirty Santa gifts."

Her laugh titters through me, nudging all my senses to remember every detail.

"Ah, I see. You already picked the best one. It's number one on the top ten gift list for singles." I tap my finger to my temple and grin. "Great minds think alike. Must be a sign."

"I guess. There's a list for everything." Her forehead wrinkles as she smooths her fingers over the hair tucked behind her ear. *A nervous tell?*

"Honestly, it's the first thing that looked interesting. Who wants bath salts when you can mix boozy infusions like a mad scientist?" She snickers, then hesitates. Her eyebrow darts up

as she taps her fingertips to her lips. “You were shopping for that all along. I took your gift, didn’t I?”

“It’s okay.” I lean in, whispering as if sharing a secret. “It’s *Dirty Santa*. I can steal it back.”

LUCKY 22

CHAPTER 4

Rachel

Prickly heat wafts up my neck, staining my cheeks with its warmth. The way he says “*dirty*” sounds so utterly filthy. My pulse quickens, tickling and rippling through my veins, and humming at my core. Damp heat slicks my panties. I’m a tipsy puddle of woozy goodness. Though I deserve coal in my stocking for all the naughty thoughts swirling around my brain.

“I...I should see if Ginger needs me for anything.” Nervous anticipation threatens to wreck my sanity. Maybe Ginger’s right. My stars have aligned. Perhaps the universe is finally on my side. I glance at the mistletoe ball overhead. Or maybe it’s timing and luck. “I enjoyed the...” I point overhead and smile.

He winks, causing my already warm cheeks to heat dangerously close to delirium level. A need for movement, a diversion, anything, swallows me whole. I lift my hand to retuck the hair already neatly tucked behind my ear, but he beats me to it.

His fingers brush along my cheek, feeding the achy need in the pit of my stomach. My cheeks burn hot. His finger slips over the shell of my ear, and I gulp back a steamy breath.

“Meet me back here later?” His rich voice seeps into my veins, etching itself into my DNA. A shiver ripples through me, slow and meticulous, sneakily weaving through my bloodstream straight to my heart.

I bite my lower lip as a smile begins to part my lips. My cheeks lift and tighten so much they hurt from the joy leaping in my heart. I nod. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

I retreat, already feeling a sting of regret prickling in my chest. Is it kismet if I plan to meet him under the mistletoe? Once was a lucky accident. We both happened to be there. But planning to meet Grant isn't happenstance. What if it throws a wrench in how things are meant to be?

My heart pounds in my chest to the point I can barely think straight. I need something to do with my hands to keep me busy. I make a hasty retreat to Ginger's side.

"Looks like someone found a single to mingle with." Ginger snickers as she straightens a pile of napkins. She waggles her eyebrows as she strains her neck to get a good look at the man who I'd love to kiss senseless. "Did he ask you out? Did *you* ask *him* out?"

"Shhh..." My eyes widen. "He'll hear you."

"Good." She giggles, clearly having fun tormenting me. "Someone needs to make the first move. Or second or third. How many times have you two bumped into each other anyway?"

It doesn't matter how many times. I felt a spark, yes. But I need more than a chance encounter and a mistletoe kiss at a singles event. This is a safe place to meet people, not a "head over heels, love at first sight" kind of party.

There's no story in meeting someone at a singles event. When my children ask how their father and I met, our story should be magical. Something they "ooh" and "ahh" over. I want to captivate them and have them hanging on the edge of their seat in anticipation as I recall our first kiss, holding hands, and the fantastical way he proposed.

"It doesn't matter. Now give me something to do so I'm not standing here like a fool." Impatience builds inside me, making me antsy and restless. I fiddle with a platter of cookies, avoiding eye contact with Ginger. She means well, but she's overthinking my situation. I know what I'm doing. I'll recognize the signs when the time is right.

"Okay, I won't mention it again." She drops the subject and checks the time on her phone. Her eyes dart around the

room as her teeth worry over her bottom lip. “I need to get the games started. Will you grab more cookies from the kitchen?”

A smidgeon of guilt unravels in the pit of my stomach. Ginger’s as nervous as I am tonight, but for different reasons. Ginger would never have signed up to host tonight’s party if it weren’t for Killian pushing her into it.

“Sure thing.” I muster a cheery smile of encouragement, grateful she’s no longer focused on my love life or lack thereof. “Anything else?”

“Actually, yes.” She taps her lower lip and brightens. “Would you mind grabbing a few extra bottles of wine and refilling the ice bucket?”

“On it.”

“Thanks.” Ginger takes a sweeping glance at the crowd. She turns her hostess smile on and takes a deep breath, then shoves a game ticket from her pocket into my hand. “Time to work my magic.”

I pocket the ticket. When I turn toward the kitchen, I catch a glimpse of Grant from the corner of my eye. His dark eyes pierce through me, causing my stomach to flip flop. I break eye contact and push the kitchen door open, ever aware of the mistletoe above my head.

What will be, will be. My heart’s in fate’s hands now.

Grant

Rachel scampers off toward the kitchen, and I can’t take my eyes off her backside and the sway of her hips. The fluid movement of her walk with her hips rocking back and forth has me spellbound. When she turns and her eyes meet mine, no one else in the room matters. I only have eyes for her.

She passes under the mistletoe and disappears behind the swinging metal doors. My mouth craves the softness of her lips on mine. My mind and body wage war with one another. One speaking the sound of reason. The other playing to the heart and the lonely ache swallowing me whole.

I've seen the ill-fated damage relationships can cause. My father ruined my mother's life with his domineering, abusive ways. She made one wrong choice by following her heart. By the time his true colors bled to the surface, she was in the thick of it, with children to feed and clothe. When, *if*, it's time to settle down, it'll be with someone I've vetted, who won't leave me heartbroken like my father did my mother. I'm not ready to risk the security of my life by giving away a piece of my heart.

Or am I? How do I know when it's the right time? How can anyone know?

A bump against my shoulder pulls me from the inner turmoil roiling in my gut. Ginger slips past me and presses a ticket into my palm.

"I got one at the door when I arrived." I pull a ticket from my pants pocket to show her.

"Trust me. You'll want this one." She plucks the original ticket from my hand with a wink, then walks away. She weaves through the crowd and takes a spot center stage. "May I have everyone's attention?"

The hum of the crowd lessens as she begins with introductions and pleasantries. I catch a glimpse of Connor on the fringe of the group, rapt, hanging on her every word. He eyes her studiously as if he's memorizing her every syllable. When she asks for a volunteer, Connor doesn't raise his hand or hesitate like the rest of the crowd. He forges through the sea of singles and doesn't stop until he's on the stage by Ginger's side.

I shake my head in disbelief. Connor isn't as cautious with women as I am, but he's not usually one to call attention to himself. Something's in the air tonight. The city must be pumping pheromones in through the heating ducts.

Ginger demonstrates the first game using Connor as a guinea pig. He pulls a card from a stack, then proceeds to act out the word in silence for tonight's guests. Several people yell out their guesses until Connor points in the direction of the correct answer.

“Great job.” Ginger pats Connor on the shoulder and quickly yanks her hand away as if burned by fire. They exchange tentative glances before she continues. “We’ll split into pairs. The first pair to guess all their words correctly win a holiday gift card to Fudgeballs, compliments of Sebastian Jenkins.”

The kitchen door swings open with a whoosh. Rachel emerges, pushing a small cart laden with wine bottles, ice, and a platter for the food table. I study her movements as burning need prickles up my spine. She glances over her shoulder, sweeping the room with inquisitive eyes. She finds me in the crowd, and an overwhelming need plants itself in my gut, sprouting optimistic seeds of hope and desire.

Her lips spread into a closed smile as her lashes flutter closed, a silent expression that’s both endearing and angelic in its shy simplicity. If there were an ounce of evil or aggression wedged in her soul, I’d see it, wouldn’t I? Had my father been as guileless in my mother’s eyes when she fell in love?

“Everyone’s ticket has a number. When I call your number, raise your hand to find your match for our first icebreaker game.” Ginger calls out numbers, and the crowd dissipates as singles mingle with their assigned cohort. “Twenty-two. Who’s holding tickets with twenty-two? Everyone, check your ticket.”

Rachel dips her hand into her pocket and pulls out a ticket. She glances around the room as she raises her hand. My gut suddenly seizes as I search for the lucky bastard holding ticket twenty-two. No one steps to the forefront to claim their spot, so I do without checking the ticket Ginger shoved into my hand earlier.

I grab a stack of cards from the table near Ginger. A knowing grin flashes across her lips. She winks, and her freckled nose crinkles. She played us. I pull the ticket from my pocket. It’s marked with the number thirty-eight. I hesitate a fraction of a second, but Ginger nods toward Rachel, and I don’t question.

“Thanks.” I close the distance to Rachel until I’m breathing her air and soaking in the heat she radiates. “Looks like we’re a match.”

Rachel’s eyes roll upward as she points to the ceiling. Her smile brightens. “But no mistletoe.”

CHARADES

CHAPTER 5

Rachel

Bumping into one another at the store, a near miss in the parking lot, showing up at the same party, kissing under the mistletoe, and now matching game tickets. I can't argue with the odds of it all happening. One or two things can be explained, but all this? It's fate, kismet, magic, everything I've dreamed of.

"Is no mistletoe a good thing or a bad thing?" Grant's brows wrinkle.

"It's a good thing." I beam as Christmas magic sprinkles through me like powdered sugar over fresh gingerbread. Sweet, soft, and cozy. I warm to the idea that this is meant to be. But how do I explain it to Grant without getting ahead of myself? It's not like I can say, "the spirit of Christmas has spoken. We're meant to be together, picket fence, babies, grandkids, retirement funds..."

Geez. That's crazy even to me.

"I mean," I pause, hoping I won't sound like a lunatic. "I like the idea of not planning, allowing things to unfold naturally, without forcing things to happen a certain way."

"Ah, I see." Grant's eyebrows pinch together as he studies me. "Is that why you wouldn't give me your number or grab coffee?"

"Mmhmm..." I roll my lips inward and hold my breath. I'm not a weirdo. I'm just unsure of when to say yes rather than no. What if I say yes to the wrong person and the right one, the one I'm meant to be with, sails past me?

"So, you'd take me up on that coffee now?" He arches an eyebrow and a sweet grin forms at the corner of his mouth. It's a soft, sexy smile that tickles me clear to my toes.

I nod as Ginger calls out, “Go.” A flurry of chatter begins, and I spin, aware of the singles surrounding our fairytale bubble.

“Focus.” Grant glides his fingertips over my arm, and a swirl of goosebumps pops to the surface. “We’ve got this. Let’s show them who’s boss. Okay?”

His eyes glisten and crinkle at the corners, and I’m rapt with attention as he pulls the first card from the top of the deck. He circles his fingers and mimics placing an object on a surface. He leans over, eyes sharp on the imaginary thing in front of him. He curls his right hand into a fist and makes a “V” with his left hand, then quickly springs his right hand forward toward the “V.”

I bounce on my toes, adrenaline racing through me. “Shoot. Shooting.”

He taps his nose, then motions for me to keep going. He reshoots again and again.

“Shooting, shooting...pool! Shooting pool.”

He quickly hands me the next card. I scan it, then space my feet and bend my knees into a squat.

“Squats, sitting, weight lifting,” he sputters.

I raise my arms, bend my elbows slightly, then twist my fisted hands. An unintentional growl forms in my throat, but I clear it quickly, so it doesn’t give away the word.

“You’re riding a bike, motorcycle...”

“Yes.” I beam, giddy with adrenaline and excitement. We click, and it feels so natural.

Grant pulls another card from the stack. He taps his fingers to his ears and jostles them.

“Earbuds, iPod, listening to music...”

He shakes his head, then makes a circle with his fingers. He stares directly into my eyes, and I swear he can see right through me and read all my secrets with a glance. My palms sweat, and my heart races, slamming against my chest. I watch

in slo-mo mode as he reaches for me with his circled fingers, then places two fingers on my chest, settling directly above my beating heart.

My breath hitches, and a knot creeps up my esophagus. My lips, fingers, and toes numb as all the blood in my body rushes urgently to my needy parts. He taps his fingers to the beat of my heart, then rests two fingers on his chest, mimicking the rhythm.

My brain ceases to function as I lose myself in his eyes. He steps closer. My cheeks heat as my lips tremble. I sway, losing myself completely to the moment.

“Heartbeat,” I whisper, swallowing the knot in my throat. He nods as he leans closer. The thick apple of his neck bobs as he swallows. His hot breath swirls around me as dampness steams low at my core. “Hearts. Beating. Lovers.”

My voice trails off as his lips silence my slow ramble. My eyes flicker closed, and the darkness explodes with vivid color as the silken tip of his tongue skims across mine.

Grant

The kiss is sweet and slow as I quiet the noisy surroundings from my mind. For one single moment, Rachel gets the unadulterated moment she craves. No mistletoe, no near miss in a parking lot, no hamming it up for the cashier. Just a single, solitary kiss that throws me off balance.

It's as magical as anything's ever been. I've never experienced something so natural, pure, and spontaneous. It's unlike anything I deserve or dare to want. I don't have a five-year plan. I have a lifetime plan. One that doesn't involve impulsive decisions. But Rachel defies everything I've assumed to know about attraction. She's as hesitant about planning as I am about flying by the seat of my pants. Can opposites attract and find a lasting bond, a connection so fierce nothing can break it?

Rachel hums into the kiss. The vibration tickles against my lips, branding the spot as hers. I savor the moment, etching the

kiss on my heart, in my gut, and across my brain. I want so much more than a shared kiss or brief encounter.

“How about we get out of here and get that coffee,” I murmur as I savor the last remnant of her lips.

“I can’t. I want to, but I can’t.” Her lashes flutter open as she rests her palm against my chest. I’m deflated, but asking was a risk worth taking. “I promised Ginger I’d help her out tonight. I can’t leave without making sure she’s fine without me.”

Disappointment turns to hope. I have a feeling Ginger’s on my side. Our side. She wouldn’t have set me up to pair with Rachel to shoo me away. It makes my heart happy that Rachel values promises and commitment. Her promise to Ginger is inconsequential in the grand scheme. But experience has taught me that people who honor the most minor promise are the ones to keep close. I worry about the ones who make light of their own word, no matter how small.

“Then we better hurry and catch up before we come in last.” I mime the word again until she guesses correctly.

“Stethoscope. Exam. Nurse.” She’s about to give up in frustration when she finally blurts out, “Doctor.”

I tap my nose and then hers as she grabs the next card from the deck. She pulls in her bottom lip as her eyes tip up to the left in thought. She’s quick on her feet, miming looping something over her ears. She squints, then slides a finger over the bridge of her nose.

“Glasses.”

She nods, motioning me to continue guessing. She holds a hand out, palm up, then scans a fingertip back and forth over her palm.

“Reading. Um, Librarian.”

“Bingo.” She smiles widely. “We’re really good at this.”

“We make a good team.” Somewhere, deep down in my heart of hearts, I know we could be better than good. We could

be great together if a little thing like planning doesn't trip us up.

"Done." Someone in the crowd calls out. A woman waves her hand as she bounces up and down.

"We win." Her male counterpart raises his hand to high-five her, but she slinks back, uninterested in celebrating the win with him.

They missed the essence of the game. Becoming part of a team that'll cheer each other on.

"Better luck next time, huh, Grant?" Rachel nudges my shoulder with hers. Her hand slinks down my arm as she tucks two cards into my hand and lingers there for a few brief seconds. "There's still Dirty Santa."

Her eyes twinkle when she grins. I glide my fingers over her cheek and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

"We'll always have Dirty Santa," I tease. But really, we'll always have this raw, unscripted moment that's pure magic.

"Congratulations. You've both won a gift card to Fudgeballs, home of the finest fudge in the state." Ginger presents the non-couple with their gift cards. They filter into the crowd in separate directions. "Let's take fifteen minutes to refresh, catch our breath, and scope out the Dirty Santa prize table."

"I'll be back in a minute, okay?" Rachel squeezes my hand reassuringly.

"Don't go too far. I have a Dirty Santa present to steal from you." I chuckle and wink. She rolls her eyes, stilling me with an overdramatic droop of her shoulders and pout. It's an unexpected peek at her playful side. I want to experience more of it.

She makes her way to Ginger. They huddle together, chattering. Ginger glances my way with a smirk playing across her lips. I've got an ally in my corner.

COFFEE & OTHER HOT STUFF

CHAPTER 6

Rachel

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Ginger winks as she wraps her arms around me. She snickers as she whispers close to my ear, “Or do *everything* I wouldn’t do.”

I hug my friend in earnest. I hate ditching her to run off and sip coffee with Grant. My heart pounds as a niggle of guilt pricks at my conscience.

“Are you sure? I can stay and help.” I pull back to get a read on her facial expression, searching for the answer to all my questions.

Am I doing the right thing? Is she really cool with me skipping out to chase the magic? Am I being foolhardy and reckless? That kiss, though. It spoke to my heart, whispered in my bones, and saturated my soul.

Ginger eyes me with a stern expression. She grips my shoulders firmly. “Of course, I’m sure.” She glances over my shoulder across the room. Her lip curls into a mischievous grin. “Go before I change my mind and run off with him myself.”

I stiffen, mortified Ginger might be interested in him, too. Friendship comes first. I won’t compete with her for a man’s attention. It’s wrong on so many levels and the surest way to ruin a friendship. Ginger’s the best friend a person could have. I trust her, value her. She’s never steered me wrong.

“I’m kidding, Rachel.” Her smile softens. Her voice soothes the nervous energy bubbling below the surface. “Grant only has eyes for you. He hasn’t looked at another woman all evening.” Her eyebrows pop high along her brow, and her saucy grin returns. “Besides, I’ve got my eye on someone else.”

Relief floods through me, washing away any ounce of doubt I harbor. “Oh, good.” I grab her for a final farewell embrace and squeeze with all my might. “Thank you, Ginger. You’re the best. We’ll catch up. I promise.”

I hurry to gather my coat with renewed giddiness through my veins. I pass the Dirty Santa table on my way to the door and pause to snatch the gift I brought from the pile. I tuck it into my jacket and meet Grant at the door.

“You scamp.” He dots my nose. “You are a thief, aren’t you?” He pats himself down, then pulls a wallet from his back pocket. “Lucky you didn’t try to get your sticky fingers on this again.”

His flirtatious chuckle floats over me, wrapping me in a delicious, satisfying cocoon.

“Prepare yourself for sticky fingers.” I play along with the frivolity and wiggle the fingers of my free hand. “You never know what I might try to steal next.”

“I can’t wait.” He leans closer. His amusement is replaced with a thick, gritty growl that curls my toes. My heart beats frantically against my chest, betraying the last reserve of restraint I have left. “I’m up for *anything*.”

Anything? It isn’t his wallet I want to lay my hands on. It’s his big, wild heart I aim to steal.

Grant

I leave my truck for Connor and buckle into Rachel’s little red hotrod. We drive past every coffee shop and diner in town, but they’re all closed for the night. Such as it is in sleepy small towns like Cranberry Corner. The four-way stop light downtown flashes red, twinkling in tandem with the Festival of Lights storefront displays.

“Looks like we’re out of options.” Will she take the glitch in our spontaneous plans as a sign to turn back? The crimson light taunts a blinking alert as if warning of trouble ahead. “We can go back to the party if you’d like.”

Rachel hesitates, curling her fingers tighter around the steering wheel. She pulls her lower lip between her teeth. A low growl rumbles low inside me, longing to taste her again.

“I know a place that serves an excellent café au lait if you don’t mind improvising the plan.”

She surprises me with her renewed vigor and courage. I couldn’t be more pleased that the snag in our impromptu plans doesn’t dissuade her from prolonging our time together. A hiccup doesn’t ruin everything, not even fate and a sprinkling of holiday magic.

Though planning everything to the letter is a bit of a buzzkill. Some risks are worth taking. Maybe Rachel and I have something valuable to learn from each other. I can show her planning a date is something to look forward to. She can help me embrace unplanned change.

“Like I said, I’m up for anything.” I reach across the center console and playfully squeeze her knee. Mostly because I want to touch her and connect with her on another level. “You lead the way. I’ll follow. Or, sit back and enjoy the ride.”

Her face brightens as the twinkling lights of the town square glitter across her cheeks. She clicks the turn signal. For the first time in a long time, I’m happy to be a passenger with someone else steering my course. I’ve forgotten what it’s like not knowing the next step. It’s freeing, exhilarating even, especially with Rachel guiding the way.

She pulls into an apartment complex a few blocks from downtown. We plod across the parking lot to a second-story walk-up unit.

“Pardon the mess. I wasn’t expecting company.” She flips a switch, and the living area illuminates with twinkling Christmas lights and flickering battery-operated candles. A fireplace flickers to life in the corner with the click of a remote. She removes her coat and takes mine. “Make yourself at home. I’ll start the coffee.”

I’m relieved she wasn’t planning to bring someone home from the party. I certainly didn’t expect her to extend an

invitation to me. But I'll take every second with her she's willing to give.

Her home is anything but messy. It's cozy with stacks of books, piles of holiday movies, and comfy throw blankets. Handmade decorations fill the ornament-laden tree. Aromas of cinnamon and cranberry waft through the air. The room whispers of romantic fantasy and hopeful dreams. It's filled with love and sparks of joy.

It should scare me how comfortable her home is. A place like this is where romantic entanglements begin and end. By the looks of things, Rachel's a nester, a dreamer, someone who relishes comfort. She's the opposite of someone I thought I'd be attracted to at this point in my life. But I'm drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I want light and warmth in my life without getting burned.

"So, what do you think?" Rachel appears in the kitchen doorway, relaxed, smiling wistfully at the sparkling Christmas tree. "Too much, not enough, or just right?"

I'd love to pull her into my arms and confess that *she's* all those things. She's perfect, more than I deserve, and I'll never get enough of her. But it's too soon, and I don't want to rush. There's nothing fanciful about coming on strong. So I turn my attention to where her eyes lead me, the tree and all its splendor.

"Looks like you got the lion's share of childhood ornaments." I finger a popsicle stick star with miniature pom-poms, glitter, and splotchy red paint. "My mom decorates the tree with every ornament we made as kids. She'd make a batch of clay dough every year, no matter where we were or how stressed the holidays got."

"That sounds fun. I bet you've got a lot of great memories." She joins me near the tree. "We didn't do much of that when I was a kid." A hint of sadness rules her voice, even though her smile never falters.

"This is quite the haul for not going the traditional homemade route." I finger another ornament dated the previous year and realize only some of the decorations could

be from her childhood. “This one’s new. Nieces and nephews?”

“Oh, no. Not yet, but maybe one day.” She wraps her arms around her waist, beaming as she hugs herself. “I make these with my kiddos.”

My heart trips over itself, stumbling to catch up. “*Kids?*” Plural. I’m not prepared for kids.

BITTERSWEET

CHAPTER 7

Rachel

Grant's fingers fall from the ornament to his side as if singed by merely touching it. His voice wavers an octave higher. I turn to find him staring at me as if I'm the ghost of Christmas past. I'm momentarily stricken before I realize he's misunderstood. How could he know? We know nothing tangible about each other.

"Oh, no. Not literally from my body, kids." I grasp his arm and soak up the shock I must have given him. "I'm a kindergarten teacher. My students are my kids. I get so attached to them. It's second nature to call them mine."

He pulls in a deep breath and lets out a low, relieved chuckle as he shakes his head from side to side.

"You had me going there." His laugh finally reaches his eyes as he continues to process the additional information. "I thought...well, you know what I thought. I have this vision of you with a gaggle of kids swirling about your legs now that's..."

"That's what?" I smirk, enjoying his brief yet uncomfortable pause. "Any given Monday through Friday, that's exactly what my day's like."

So this is what nervous Grant looks like. Shaken but still standing. Still here. His confidence hasn't wavered one iota since our first run-in. It's nice to find he isn't immune to being rattled.

"That's kind of cute and superhero at the same time." He places his hand over mine, and I'm caught up in the fine lines crinkling around his eyes and the creases that define his smile. His eyes drift from mine to my lips, and a coil of want spins low at my core. "I can tell you love every minute of it."

“I do,” I utter so softly it wafts between us on a whisper.

Nerves rattle my brain. I can picture little ones with chubby hands grabbing our legs, eager for attention. Grant lifting our little girl into his arms to hang an ornament on the tree.

My palms begin to sweat. I’m so far down the rabbit hole I can’t see straight. Forty-eight hours ago, I was content waiting for someone to come along who could love me, who I could love. It’s silly to believe in miracles and the magic of Christmas. Getting caught up in the feeling that love at first sight is possible is even more foolish. It’s infatuation, longing...loneliness.

The coffee pot sputters the last of its hissing steam like an old car engine rolling to a dead stop. I reluctantly pull away from Grant’s arm as if coffee is more important than our connection.

“I should get that.”

Grant

For a second, I had her within heart’s reach. She’s a romantic, deep down and through and through. The opposite of me, though I want to learn so I can give her what she wants and what she needs.

What I need. What I’ve been missing without realizing it until she came along.

I lean into the kitchen door frame, watching as Rachel steams milk, then carefully pours it over the cups of hot coffee. She grabs a shaker from the overhead cabinet and sprinkles powder over each.

“My coffee art’s a bit lacking but guaranteed the flavor makes up for it.” She hands me a cup and waits for me to take a sip. “That’s nutmeg on the top.”

“Smells delicious.” She waits expectantly as I take a sip of the foamy mixture. It’s pleasantly smooth with just the right touch of spice. “Mmm...I like it.”

Her shoulders soften as she breathes a sigh of relief. She keeps her eyes on me as she lifts the cup to her lips for a sip. White froth clings to her upper lip. I'm tempted to kiss it away, but take a purposeful sip of mine to ensure we have matching foam mustaches.

"You have a little something"—she snickers, motioning toward my lip—"right there."

"So do you." I lower my coffee mug and lean in every so slightly. "May I?"

Her lashes flutter, and her cheeks lift to form perfect blush-pink orbs. She lowers her cup and lifts her chin. "I'd like that."

Her gorgeous smile lights me up from the inside out. I lean in and brush my lips across hers. I swipe my tongue across her lip, slow and feather-soft, tasting the light spice that'll forever remind me of only her.

She parts her lips and glides her tongue over my lip. We meet somewhere in the middle, tentatively tasting each other, testing the waters. She's sweet and spicy, delicate but not fragile. I seal the kiss with one gentle nibble before releasing her.

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. I'm growing fond of her nervous tell. Though it isn't my intention to cause her anxiety. I want her to feel comfortable with me, able to spill all her secrets without hesitation.

"As much as I enjoy kissing you, we don't have to take things any farther than this." My heart races, hoping she's interested in more than a physical hook-up. "We could chat if you'd like. I'd like to get to know you if that's okay. No strings attached or hidden agenda."

I cross my heart and wink, knowing I want so much more than a chat. The big picture's starting to come into focus, and it's time I took notice of what's lacking in my life. Companionship, love, and my own family.

"I'd like that." She tucks her chin shyly and retucks the strand of hair. She scoots past me to a spot on the sofa, and I eagerly follow.

I take a seat and awkwardly rearrange the pillows around me.

“I go overboard on the cozy part of decorating.” She smirks and throws a few pillows to an adjacent chair, then tucks one leg under the other as she settles into her spot.

“Your place is perfect. Everything’s exactly where it should be.” I scan the room, soaking in the ambiance. Her tiny apartment feels homey, welcoming, and warm with a feminine touch. It’s the polar opposite of my place. “My place is all hard lines and bare essentials.”

“Yeah, something wrong with soft comfort?” She teases, but her question hits closer to home than she knows.

“I moved a lot as a kid.” I don’t like talking about my younger homelife. It makes some people uncomfortable. “Once you’ve packed up to move a dozen or so times, you quit holding onto things that weigh you down.”

“Were your parents military?” She sips from her cup with her dark, hazy eyes fixed on me.

“Nothing like that.” It took courage for my mother to leave my father. I’ll never fault her for the number of times we had to pick up and move in the middle of the night. “My parents split when I was younger. Mom had a hard time making ends meet.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Grant. I didn’t mean to pry.” She sits up and places her cup on the coffee table. She lays her hand on my thigh, and my heartbeat quickens. “We can talk about something else. Anything.”

“Not at all. I don’t mind.” I want her to know about me. No secrets. I slide my hand over hers and tuck my fingers into her palm. “My dad’s not the greatest guy on the planet. We were better off without him in the picture, even with the hardships it caused.”

“That must be difficult. I see a lot of lost little ones through teaching.” A shimmery sheen glosses her eyes. “I might be the only friendly face they see any given day, so I do all I can to give them the attention they need and deserve.”

“Did you grow up the same?” It takes a unique soul to feel empathy when they haven’t had a similar shared experience. “If you don’t mind me asking, that is.”

“No, nothing like that. My parents are still together.” She shakes her head. She bites her bottom lip and tucks another strand of hair behind her ear. We’re either on the verge of a new level of emotional connection or proving the theory of opposites attract to be true. I’ll take either or both. “My parents were strict, old school. We had three rules growing up. Don’t ask questions. Plan everything. And for heaven’s sake, don’t break the rules anywhere, ever.”

I’ve got the planning part down. I’d be lost without a plan. But I’d be sunk in a second with the other two rules.

“Teachers are big planners, so I hear.”

“We are, to a degree.” She grins. “But teaching is chaos in action. We adapt to whatever gets thrown our way, whether it’s upset parents, kids having a bad day, or another mandatory test on the horizon.” She leans forward and rolls her eyes for emphasis. “Yes. Even for kindergarteners.”

I grin. At least she has a sense of humor. But it explains a little more than I gleaned from our earlier conversation. “Is that why a kiss without mistletoe is better than a kiss with mistletoe? The planning part?”

She pops a finger to her nose and then points to me as if we’re still playing charades. I grab her finger and lace my fingers with hers so we’re entwined like tree roots. She snickers.

“You’re catching on.” She rocks in her spot to what must be music or mirth playing in her head. “There’s something magical about spontaneity, sparks, and...well, love. The heart doesn’t keep time or a calendar.”

I bring her knuckles to my lips and brush them softly back and forth until the tickle is almost too much to take. She ceases the rocking motion as we lock eyes, fixated on the swirling heat between us.

“If I asked to kiss you right now, would that be considered enchanted or planned?”

She bites her lip and swallows hard. She scoots closer, her knees brushing against mine. My heart races, hopeful and sure, yet cautious, afraid of the inevitable heartache that could ensue by opening myself to someone.

“I’d call it chivalrous and charming.” Her lips soften into a relaxed smile as her eyes drift to my lips. “Definitely enchanting.”

I tug her closer, snuggling her onto my lap. My fingers glide across her cheek and weave through her thick mane, drawing her closer. Our lips touch, and an all-consuming fire engulfs me.

DO YOU BELIEVE

CHAPTER 8

Rachel

Our tongues tangle in the slowest, sweetest dance. My heart flutters as he sips at my tongue, then sprinkles hot kisses along my jaw. I lean back, opening my neck to his scorching nibbles. My entire body melts into him, absorbing every nuance that can only be described as pure magic.

He balances me atop his muscular thighs with the crux of my womanhood above his growing need. His hands skim my curves, leaving a trail of want and fire in their wake. He's cautious, yet sure, escalating the fever pitch torturous inches at a time.

My fingers sweep over his muscular chest, enjoying the solid terrain. He pulls in a deep breath, puffing his pecs against my chest. The friction spiders through my hardened nipples, shooting straight to the source of my aching desire. Damp heat pools between my legs as I rock into his stiff, lengthy member.

It's too much and not enough. I want more. More contact, skin to skin, his mouth on my body.

I slide my hands to his waist and tug at his shirt. He shivers as I glide my fingers across his stomach. His fingertips clutch me tighter, gripping my ass, grinding me against his need. I work the buckle of his jeans, releasing the leather from its metal clasp.

A growl rises in his throat, reverberating across my tongue until he pulls away, panting and gasping for air. "Are you sure about this, Rachel? Are we really doing this?"

I choke down a fresh breath of air, refilling my depleted lungs and clearing the heady fog swirling in my brain. I have to lean away to see him clearly. Does he not want this as much as I do? Does he have regrets?

“Only if you want to. We can stop if it’s too soon.” I could drown in his eyes, never able to sate my thirst for him. “I got carried away.”

His fingers dig into my ass, clutching me tighter, closer to him. His jaw twitches as he gulps down another breath. “I want to. More than my next breath.”

“Then we’re good.” I release my worry and pop the button on his pants.

“Wait a second, Rachel.” I sit motionless as he abruptly stops my progress with a quick hand, then brushes my hair away from my face. His voice rattles in a gruff whisper. “I need to know if we’re doing this for the right reason.”

Grant

Is it me she wants or the romantic illusion of something magical? This is real life. I can’t wrap my head around “everything happens for a reason.” Awful things happen to good people every day. There are a thousand ways to reason those things away, but none make sense.

Her neck slackens, and her shoulders slump. She stretches her fingers under my hand as she releases the leather strap. Her ribcage deflates with a long sigh. My heart beats wildly against my chest, girding me for the blow that will surely knock the wind from my sails.

“If it’s just sex you’re after, then yeah, it isn’t the right reason. Not for me, anyway.” She pulls away, scooting her ass along my thighs to break free.

“That isn’t what I meant. I’m not here for sex.” I loosen my grip on her hand and glide my hand over her thigh. “I mean, I want to, but I need to know if you’re here for me or because coincidences point to me?”

Her face falls. Her lip quivers, and she bites it to stall the involuntary tremble. I shouldn’t have been so blunt. Heck, it shouldn’t bother me so much, except it does because there’s something I neglected to tell her.

“It must sound so silly to you with all your dotted ‘i’s’ and crossed ‘t’s.’” She knots her fingers in the hem of her shirt and twists. “I don’t trust myself to get this part right, Grant.”

She blinks back tears and lifts her chin to stare at the ceiling. “I’ve been *told* what to do my entire life, but not once did someone stop to teach me *how* to do this.”

“This, as in sex?”

“*No.*” She whips her head back to look me in the eye so fast I swear I hear her neck crack. She blinks rapidly, physically mortified. “I’ve...I’ve...” she sweeps her hand low between us. “I’ve had sex before.”

I’d rather not think about her with someone else, but we’re both adults. No one should be ashamed of private consensual behavior. She tightens the grip on her shirt and chews at her lip.

“I believe in coincidences, lucky numbers, fate, and soulmates.” Her words trail off, leaving a heavy ache deep in my soul.

“Hey. I believe in *you.*” I tip her chin up, desperately needing her eyes on mine. My gut wrenches with the not knowing. “I need to tell you something.”

She nods, waiting for my admission. Will it change how she feels about me, how we came together?

“Our charades game tickets weren’t a match.” The bottom drops out of my stomach, waiting for her to jump from my lap, yell, scream, or throw me out in the cold. “When you were the only one with number twenty-two, I jumped at the chance to be your partner. I’m not perfect, but I think we’re perfect together. We complement each other. You’re the yin to my yang, or you’re the yang. I don’t know. I just know I want to be with you. You’re all I’ve thought about since we bumped into each other.”

She uncoils her fingers from her shirt and swipes her palms up my thighs. A wave of kinetic energy surges straight to my groin. She scoots forward. I take her cue and slide my hands over her hips and tug her closer.

“I’m tired of overthinking. I don’t care about the ticket. You’re what matters.” Her frown softens into a sheepish smile. “I’d rather not talk for a while if that’s okay with you.”

She wraps her arms around my neck, then brushes her lips against mine. The frenzy of a thousand fires ignites in my belly. Desire ravages my body, exposing my one true weakness. Her. Once will never be enough.

SHOW ME YOURS

CHAPTER 9

Rachel

We claw at each other's clothing, desperate to have nothing between us. Grant smooths his hands up my shirt and effortlessly unclasps my bra. He loops the straps with his fingers as he drags them overhead. I relinquish my hold on him long enough to throw them aside.

He growls as he skims my body with lust in his eyes. I grab at his shirt, clutching the fabric in my hands. There's nothing graceful about it. I tug the shirt over his head and unwittingly knock him in the jaw.

"Whoa there, slugger." He wiggles his sturdy jaw with one hand and chuckles.

"Ooh. Sorry," I squeak, then pepper kisses along the spot. "Doubt it'll leave a mark."

"I hope it does." He waggles his brows and smacks my ass. "Off with these."

I snicker. "You're so demanding." After the heavy chatter, we're able to fall into a playful rhythm. I rise from his lap and snap open the button of my jeans. His intent stare follows each metal tooth as I slowly draw the zipper downward. "Show me yours, and I'll show you mine."

Another growl erupts from his throat. He moves quickly, jumping to his feet. I squeal and fall backward, tumbling into the coffee table. He grabs for me and pulls me to his chest, mashing my bare breasts to him. I wrap my arms around his neck, relishing the friction of skin-to-skin contact.

"Bedroom?" He nuzzles my neck, then grabs my ass. "Hop up."

My insides melt. No one's ever carried me to bed to have their way with me, and I love it. I wrap my legs around his waist as he buries his head in my neck. His growly tickles send a wave of thrilling goosebumps rushing down my body. I shiver and cling to him, giggling with a happy heart.

My head's been in the clouds, daydreaming of a knight in shining armor for so long. I almost missed the real thing in front of me. It's impossible to believe in destiny or love at first sight if I'm unwilling to trust myself to know love when it ripples through me and steals my breath away.

Grant weaves through the living room and down the hall to the bedroom. We bump into walls and door frames, and the dresser before he plops me onto the bed. We'll be bruised and purple in the morning, but I don't care. Everything's perfect. Just the way it should be.

We shimmy out of our remaining clothes and toss them aside. I watch in awe as he crawls over my body, painfully slow and sinfully handsome. It's the first glimpse I get of the tattoo that caught my eye in the store. I slide my finger down his arm and circle the dove that rests above his wrist.

"It's beautiful."

"You're beautiful." He dips his head and dots kisses along my clavicle, then settles between my thighs. He's heavy and thick, and I adore his weight. It anchors me in place, to him.

He kisses, licks, and sips my entire body. I arch into him, wriggling under him, and massage my hands into his backside. My heart swells as Grant fills the empty spot in my heart that's ached for understanding, companionship, and love.

"Oh, God. That...feels...so..." I gasp as he plunges between my folds. I arch into him and hold on as he stills, nuzzled against my neck.

"Fucking fantastic."

Grant

Rachel responds to every stroke, nibble, and thrust like her body's an extension of mine. Her murmured words and satisfied sighs spur me to give her more, push her limits, and give her everything she yearns for.

My heart pounds erratically as I rock into her. I hang on by a thread as every nerve ending in my body reacts, coiling in my gut. I'm stretched taut, holding onto my release until I've thoroughly loved her body, and she can't take another stroke.

Sweat drips from my brow. It beads down my spine as she arches into me. Her fingernails dig into my flesh, prickling, and burning as she scratches the surface, marking me for what I hope amounts to forever. She groans, deep and long, and it's the sexiest sound I'll ever hear.

She spasms around me. I clench my jaw, grinding my teeth together until there's no holding back. I bury myself in her, reaching and clutching at what I can't grasp physically. I want her pleasure, her pain, but more than anything, I want her heart.

We collapse in a heap of sweat and heavy breathing. She strokes my back quietly as we both come down from the high. She's everything I didn't know my life was missing. She's the cushion I've denied myself for fear of history repeating itself. She nurtures my soul.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" Her warm breath floats across my cheek, soft and fragile. She weaves her fingers through my hair, lulling me into a cocoon of safety.

I lift my head to hold her gaze with mine. Her hair's matted with sweat around her temples. Mascara smudges bleed beneath her lashes, and a smear of lipstick stains the corner of her lip. My heart skips a loopy beat, riding a high that steals my heart away. And if this isn't the ultimate holiday magic of all, I don't know what is.

"Only with you. I'll only ever have eyes for you, Rachel."

CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

Epilogue

Rachel

We walk arm in arm down the sidewalk, window shopping in downtown Cranberry Corner. The twinkling holiday lights and festive window displays brighten the night air. We skirt around curious kids with their faces pressed against windows. Their giggles and squeals delight me, but not as much as the happiness that lilts in my heart with Grant tucked beside me.

“Want to try out that new dessert Fudgeballs and Brain Freeze collaborated on? I hear it’s the bomb.” Grant wraps his arm around me, sharing his warmth.

“Look at you being all spontaneous,” I tease.

“Hey, now. I’m a quick learner.” He pokes me in the ribs, and I giggle like the children we’ve passed.

It’s only been a week since we met under the mistletoe, but I can’t imagine a life without Grant. We’re both a bit broken and scarred from things in the past, but no matter how idyllic a person’s life appears, nothing’s ever perfect. Except for Grant. He’s the peace my hopeful soul has always craved.

I’m so confident in where our relationship will lead that I’m getting a matching dove tattoo on my wrist. When our hands intertwine, our doves will, too, forever cooing and canoodling with one another.

“Ladies first.” Grant props the door to Brainfreeze open, and I slip in under his protective arm.

“Welcome to Brain Freeze. I’m Sophie.” The blonde behind the counter welcomes us as we approach the counter. The bell over the door rings as another customer enters the store. Sophie waves and excuses herself momentarily. “Hot coffee’s waiting for you, Mr. Jack.” She turns her attention

back to us as he shuffles across the floor to the coffee carafe.
“What can I get started for you two?”

“We’d love to try the Winter Wonderland dessert. Is it on the menu yet?”

“It is. One or two?”

“One,” we singsong in unison.

“Could we have a smidge extra whipped cream?” I gesture with my thumb and forefinger pinched a bit apart. “I’m a whipped cream fiend, and yours is the best.”

Sophie rings us up as Grant pulls bills from his wallet.
“This one’s on me.”

We find a seat near the window. It’s overflowing with beautifully packaged presents and a scrawny yet adorable spruce. A shiny red ornament labels it *The Giving Tree*. A sprinkling of names adorn the tree picked over by generous donors. A few children from my class will receive a little something this year because of this tree. I’m grateful our community steps up to help make the holidays a cheerful time of year for those in need.

That’s the real magic of the holidays. Helping others.

Sophie works behind the counter, a picture of happiness as she builds our dessert. Mr. Jack stoops next to the corner to pick something up from the floor. He turns and slowly scuffs across the floor, stopping next to our table. He steadies himself with a hand on the seat behind Grant’s shoulder.

“Nice to see you, Mr. Jack.” If it weren’t for him, I might have run right into Grant’s truck that day at the store. “Have you two met?”

“Can’t say that we have.” Grant extends his hand. “Good to meet you, sir.”

Mr. Jack meets Grant’s hand with a shaky palm. He nods and smiles. His eyes glisten with the sparkle of a ten carat diamond. “You musta dropped this over there.” He pulls away from the handshake with a slip of paper between his fingers.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Grant turns the paper over and chuckles.

“What is it?” I lean over the table to peek at what’s got him grinning like a schoolboy.

“Our Christmas miracle.” He places the ticket flat on the table in front of me.

Holiday Mixer - Charades - 22

GINGER is next in the Cranberry Corner holiday series:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/ginger>

Would you like a taste of the Winter Wonderland dessert Rachel and Grant share at Brain Freeze? Get it and two more fudgy recipes here: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/khz9ls151n>

Read more about Sophie (Brain Freeze) and Sebastian (Fudgeballs) in **OH FUDGE**:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/oh-fudge>

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<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/parker>

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Cranberry Corner is packed full of holiday antics and love matches. Meet all the women and men of **Cranberry Corner**, beginning with Parker: <https://geni.us/CranberryCornerSeries>

Scroll for a sneak peek of **PARKER**

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PARKER

Curvy Girl Short & Steamy Small-Town Humorous Holiday Romance

She's the perfect combination of sugar and spice. He's definitely on the naughty list. Do these polar opposites have more in common than they think?

Parker

I'm a bookworm, but not your typical nerd. I'm a stickler for details. It's how my brain works.

Everything has its place. Even me.

No one would guess I'm a wild child at heart.

When he shows up at the Nerdy Bookworm with a wish list and dog-eared book in his back pocket, I'm curiously bemused.

Killian is an intolerable, know-it-all with six-pack abs and swoony tattoos.

He thinks I'm the uptight one, but he's the one in need of musing.

Killian

I don't have the best luck with women. And she definitely hates me.

I've pushed her buttons one too many times.

When I see her holiday post online, I know it's my chance to go big or go home.

Parker is a cheeky, nerdy bookworm, and I'd love to peruse her pages.

Can I pull her strings just enough for her to loosen up, or will
all my efforts unravel?

Warning: When this smooth-talking Irishman tumbles head
over heels in love with our sweet as sin nerdy bookworm, he'll
do whatever it takes to win her heart. If you love cinnamon
roll alphas, curvy women, and sticky sweet steamy romance,
then you'll love Parker & Killian.

*If you're a hopeful romantic at heart and love steamy, short,
small-town, swoony romances, then Cranberry Corner is the
place for you. Don your mittens and prepare for a bedtime
story that'll give you all the warm, toasty feels. Guaranteed
HEA with no cliffhangers.*

Prologue

Parker

“The Nerdy Bookworm is pleased to announce our annual WISH LIST is back! Stop by to browse our shelves, then fill out your own personal wish list. I’ll keep it on file, so friends, family, and Santa know what you’re interested in.”

I sit back to proofread the text. Something’s missing. Ah! I quickly add an asterisk.

* Gift wrap volunteers appreciated throughout the season.
*

That’s it. I hit send and watch my post transform onto the page and pin it to announcements. Hearts and thumbs-up emojis begin popping up almost immediately. A smile instantly forms on my lips. I love my customers. This really is the most magical time of the year.

My phone dings with a text message alert as I’m closing my laptop. I swipe and tap the text box, assuming it’s from a friend, but it’s not. I’m surprised and a little bit amused at the message from an unknown number.

“My Christmas Wish List: one crazy cute nerdy bookworm.”

Weird and kind of creepy. But definitely from a Nerdy Bookworm page follower. I quickly type in a reply.

“Nerdy bookworms are on the naughty list this year. No gifting allowed.”

Chapter 1

Parker

The anonymous text keeps me smiling throughout the morning. It'd be worrisome, but this is Cranberry Corner. Nothing sinister happens here. Living here is like living in a tiny village filled with family. Besides, I've been called cute since the day I was born. That's me. Cute, fun, friendly, Parker. Organized, nerdy, bookish, Parker. I'm everyone's friend, everyone's little sister, the girl next door.

For everything I am, there are as many descriptors of what I'm not. Topping the list; girlfriend material.

I have plenty of guy friends, but they all treat me like I'm one of them. Until someone comes sniffing around in Parker territory, that is. Then I'm the little sister they'll all fight to protect. I'm so accustomed to watching everyone else pair off that I've convinced myself the Nerdy Bookworm is all I need.

My little store is filled with everything a nerdy chick could want; the aroma of new and used books. Who needs their own love story when I can surround myself with thousands of larger-than-life romances with fairytale endings? This is real life, not some happily ever after Beauty and the Beast fantasy. I already have my own bookstore. I don't need some beast of a man to give me a library of my own.

I wouldn't mind a man giving me the high-hard one occasionally, though. Toys only get a girl so far. I've plowed through so many boxes of batteries; it's embarrassing to purchase them so frequently. I've taken to picking them up at the grocery store, hardware store, and sometimes through online shopping. My battery habit is so bad I feel like a junkie hiding an addiction.

I haul a box of used books from the stockroom to my desk buried in the corner of the store. Simone Hilton from Kindlewood kindly donated leftover books from the Warehouse District sale. The books are already sorted by

category. All that's left to do is price and place them in the used book section.

The box flaps are a little dirty but not as filthy as what I find inside. I pull out book after book of naughty, raunchy, taboo titles. The box is full of enough sinful ammo to make a prim and proper pearl-clutcher faint away.

My lips widen into a devilish grin. Dirty girl Parker's hit jackpot gold. I might need more batteries.

Killian

I've had my eye on Parker Knowles from the day I met her. Her friendly nature and girl next door good looks drew me in right away. But it's her saucy mouth I've grown to love. The problem is, I can't help returning her servings of sass with my own smart-mouth comments. I've pushed her buttons too many times for my own good. It's obvious she doesn't like my company, but I'm determined to win her over.

She hasn't seen the real me yet. The me, I hide behind know-it-all comments and useless trivia. But if Parker bothered to take a deep dive at who I am inside, she'd find I have the same insecurities as the next guy. I grew up gawky, getting pushed around and teased for my brains and less than brawny stature. It's what drove me to change myself physically.

I figured if I beefed up my physique, I wouldn't get teased so much. Maybe I'd even get the girl. No one's picked on me for a long time. No one except Parker. She rattles my cage every chance she gets, and I taunt her right back. If I could rein in my smart mouth, maybe I'd have a fighting chance to win the girl of my dreams. That's a big if, considering I've been on her naughty list since the day we met.

The social media post she sent out this morning is the perfect opportunity to show her I'm more than a mouthy male. I've got one more card up my sleeve, and it's time to play it. It's all or nothing, joker's wild, and I'm not about to mess this up.

I push through the door of the Nerdy Bookworm. It's unusually quiet, even for a bookstore. I've been in here a million times, but this time will be different than all the others. I won't take the bait when she throws her wit around. I'll bite my tongue if it comes to that. Because all I want under my tree this Christmas is Parker and her brainiac, beautiful curves.

Parker's distinctive voice purrs out among the aisles of books. I follow her low growls and murmuring voice until I catch a glimpse of her sitting at her desk behind a pile of used books. She's deeply immersed between the pages of a paperback. So engrossed, she doesn't see me staring at her, chuckling to herself. Her feet are propped up on the desk as she pulls a long licorice twist between her front teeth.

“Come to mamma.”

Continue reading **PARKER** now: <https://geni.us/CCParker-PC>

Read the **CRANBERRY CORNER** series here:

<https://geni.us/CranberryCornerSeries>

Parker and Kinsey are first introduced in **GINGERBREAD & THE GUY NEXT DOOR:**

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/gingerbread-and-the-guy-next-door>