



The
Handyman's
Secret Santa

Christmas in Alpine Valley

KALIHART

THE HANDYMAN'S SECRET SANTA

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CHRISTMAS IN ALPINE VALLEY BOOK 6

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ADDISON

I APPROACH the mailbox for the third time today. I'm not expecting much more than junk mail. I only moved home to Alpine Valley three months ago. Just long enough for bill collectors to find me, but not long enough to hope for an onslaught of Christmas cards this year.

I don't care about the mail.

Only Milo.

Good grief. I'm so pathetic. I've tried—and failed—three times this morning to run into the incredibly hot handyman. My landlord, Wilma—the sweetest little old lady you ever could meet—hired Milo to look after the four-plex. He's around almost every day, fixing up this or that in even the bitterest cold. It's the highlight of my day when I catch him walking past my window or get to have a brief but personal conversation with him.

As I pretend to look into the empty mailbox with surprise, I secretly scan the area for any sign of him. His toolbox sits at the side of the house, on top of a pile of snow near a loose gutter drain. The man doesn't abandon his tools for long. He *has* to be close.

This crush is just that. A crush. Milo is too old for me.

Not that it matters since I'm still healing from a horribly toxic relationship. It might be years before I'm ready to get

involved with a man again. But it's fun to fantasize about fooling around with Milo. On top of those muscles for days, he's kind to a fault. Kindness that makes every woman he talks to—including Wilma who's pushing eighty—feel like he's flirting with them.

“Anything good in there?” Brooklyn, one of my four-plex neighbors and coworkers, asks as she approaches the mailbox.

“No bills. So that's a win, right?”

“Absolutely.” She pulls open her box and reaches inside for an envelope, her cheerful expression dropping. Before I can ask what it is, the crunch of snowy steps alerts my overeager instincts.

I turn, hoping to see Milo.

Only, it's Meg.

She owns the local bakery and is also our boss. It's rare that she's out and about during the day and not at the shop. I try not to let my disappointment show. Where *is* Milo? Though I'm now selfishly hoping he stays hidden until the crowd thins. Pretending his eyes sparkle only for me is a little hard when we aren't alone.

I shiver into my worn-out sweater. I've lingered too long out here this morning, hoping for a look. Or a word. Something I can cling to when I crawl into bed and pretend to rest for my upcoming nightshift.

Meg doesn't say anything as she reaches for her mailbox. It looks like she's holding her breath, though I can't imagine why.

“I guess I missed the memo about the block party,” Piper, Wilma's granddaughter, calls as she approaches us. The four of us make up the four-plex tenants. Piper also works for Meg, but she's rarely at the bakery more than one or two days a week. She can do most of her marketing job from home.

A tinge of jealousy hits me, imagining how much time she gets to watch Milo from her window. *Or from inside her apartment.*

It's stupid. This jealousy. I don't *own* the rights to crush on Milo. But I make a mental note to break something small just so he can come fix it anyway. I'd die before I admit I know how to fix most things around the house—courtesy of my dad. But I have a cute red sweater I want to try out...

"I guess this is as good a time to tell you all as any," Meg says, sounding glum. She waits until she has everyone's attention. "I really wanted to give you all Christmas bonuses this year, but—"

Piper drapes an arm around Meg's shoulder. "We don't need bonuses, Meg."

I nod in agreement with everyone, though I bet I'm not the only one that feels the lie. I was really counting on that bonus to help out with rent this month. And a few presents. This is the first Christmas I've been home in three years. I wanted it to be special for my mom and little sister. Mom's been struggling with my sister's medical bills and made us agree to a strict no-presents rule this year. A rule I very much wanted to break. But I'm still up to my eyeballs in debt thanks to my ex-boyfriend. I also know money is tight all around for everyone.

"You *deserve* them, though," Meg continues. "You've all been a godsend this season."

"You can pay us in cupcakes," Brooklyn suggests, her optimistic tone serious. Meg's cupcakes *are* to die for. They're damn near better than sex. Though, I'd bet sex with Milo can't be compared to the most decadent dessert.

"Of course I'll do that," Meg promises.

Piper reaches around her for her mailbox, tilting her head to peer inside. Her box is stuffed with red envelopes. "Odd." We watch as she pulls out the bundle. "These aren't all for me." She hands them out, one by one. There's no stamp or address. Just handwritten names in fancy calligraphy.

We look at each other before tearing them open.

"Ah, Wilma gave us Christmas cards," Brooklyn says. "That was sweet—"

I don't know if she finishes her thought or not, because I'm too sucked into the note inside from our landlord. *You girls are a blessing. The best tenants I could ask for. I want to do something nice for you in the spirit of Christmas. A free month of rent. All I ask is one tiny favor.* I look up from the card and meet the surprised eyes of the other women.

"Free rent and all we have to do is draw a secret Santa from a bucket?" Meg says this with an incredulous laugh. I can feel the relief in her voice. It's the same relief I suspect we're all feeling right now.

"I heard about this," Piper says. "Grandma ran it last year. It was a big hit."

"Do we get to pick?" My question is silly, doubly so cause my glance toward the toolbox almost gives me away. But if we *could* pick, I'd pick Milo in a heartbeat. Then my secret crush wouldn't be so secret anymore.

"It's random," Piper chimes in.

"Are you sure about that?" Brooklyn asks. "I heard a rumor about your grandma playing matchmaker last year. Five of the women who participated are now engaged or married to the men whose names they drew."

"That's probably a coincidence," I add, dismissing this whole true love notion that's circling the group. Even if I drew Milo's name—and that's a huge if—I'm not going to *marry* him. With all the stress my mother and little sister already have going with Shelby's scoliosis diagnosis and upcoming surgery ... I just can't. It'd scandalize them if I even *dated* Milo. Probably make Dad roll over in his grave too. He's almost twenty years older than me. And love? Yeah. That concept feels like a big fucking lie after the horrible relationship I escaped only months ago.

"Guess we'll know by Christmas, won't we?" Meg adds, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. She's definitely the hopeless romantic of our mismatched group. I'm not going to spoil her optimistic mood with what reality has taught me. *Love is nothing more than a fairytale. It's not real.*

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ADDISON

IT'S dark outside by the time I make my way to the community center so I can draw my Secret Santa name. I'd like to say I went back inside my apartment and took a nap before my shift at the bakery tonight, but I couldn't rest. Milo was hanging Christmas lights outside of the four-plex, so I found a good spot to read a book by the window.

Or *not* read.

Details.

“Addison, hey!” Piper waves to me from behind the table next to her grandma, Wilma. She's practically glowing. But that's Piper. She's the peppy, optimistic one of the group. “Guess who's in training?” Some days it's a little annoying how cheerful she can be. But tonight, her glowing expression is a welcome sight. Maybe she can rig this drawing. Make sure I get Milo's name...

“I'm retiring after this season,” Wilma explains, holding a clipboard out to me. “Piper's going to take over.”

“Retiring?” The word causes a twist in my stomach. Wilma has been the absolute best landlord I've ever had. She was a godsend when I moved back to Alpine Valley on a desperate, unplanned whim. I didn't have money for a deposit or the first month's rent. But she welcomed me anyway.

“I’m not moving away,” she says. “Or selling the four-plex.”

“Oh, good.” I’m not even going to analyze this coincidental mind reading. “How does this whole thing work, anyway?”

“You draw a number from this bucket,” Piper explains, holding one adorned in holiday ribbons up to me.

“A number?”

“Yeah. There’re gift bags on the back table with numbers. You won’t know your name until you dig into that.”

Clipboard in one hand, I use the other to draw a chip. The number seventeen is etched into the wood. I show it to Piper and Wilma.

“Oh, seventeen. A good number indeed,” Wilma says, taking the chip from me. She nods toward the clipboard with a dozen questions. Seems like overkill to me. But maybe if I take my time filling it out, I can convince Piper to rig this drawing for me. What’s the harm if one of my new friends knows about my crush? It might be fun to giggle with her over wine about Milo’s muscles.

It’s not like anything will ever actually happen between us. It’s all a fantasy.

Then again, I have no idea how they decide who goes into the Secret Santa pot. Milo might not even be in there. Maybe it’s the older people in town who need some cheering up. Or the grumpy, grinch-like ones. Considering he was hanging Christmas lights outside our building all afternoon, I don’t think he fits that category.

“Do you really need to know if I’ve been arrested?” I ask, circling *no*.

“Can’t be too careful,” Wilma says.

I shrug, continuing to answer the questions that feel more like a background check on paper. Until I see the arrow at the bottom and turn it over. The questions shift from clinical to

holiday-themed. “What’s my favorite Christmas cookie? Do we get cookies?”

“Piper, you got this one?” Wilma asks.

Piper leans over the table, pointing at the top question. “We’ll use the answers next year. To help us—or I guess help *me*—better plan the event. To give us more ideas and things like that.” I look up at her, confused as hell. She might as well be speaking Greek. “I know it seems silly, but go ahead and fill it out. There’s nothing top secret in there, promise!”

Considering half the questions revolve around holiday food, my stomach rumbles. Reminding me I skipped dinner. One of the perks of working the night shift at the bakery is that I’m privy to old and broken goods before they get tossed. I’ve been living on those sugary scraps a little too much says the tight waistband of my joggers. But it’s a budget-friendly option at the moment.

“There.” I hand over the clipboard.

Piper gives my survey a quick scan before handing over a green and white striped gift bag. The glittery number seventeen dangles from its handle. Before I can dig in, Piper’s hand covers mine. “I recommend waiting until you’re alone.”

“Why?”

“Rule number one,” Wilma chimes in. “You can’t tell anyone whose name you drew. Including us.”

“But don’t you need to know since—” My question is interrupted by a slamming door. All three of us turn our heads to find a tall, dark-haired man in a snow-dusted jacket strutting into the room.

“Sorry about that, ladies.”

He’s attractive with his chiseled jaw, dazzling dark eyes, and devilish grin. But he’s no Milo.

“Can we help you?” Piper asks, her usual cheeriness zipped up behind pursed lips. *Odd*. The tension in the room is thick enough to cut with a knife. I have no idea who this stranger is. But, then again, I haven’t even visited Alpine

Valley for a few years, so half the people in town are still strangers to me.

“I believe you can,” the man says, his sights set on Piper.

I take this awkward moment as my cue to slip out the door. Piper’s not alone. She has Wilma if she needs backup. That woman might be old and sweet, but I’d never be stupid enough to get on her bad side. “I’ll see you later,” I say to Piper with a wave. But she’s not paying any attention to me.

Wilma catches my gaze. “Be sure to read all the rules, dear. They’re important.”

I hurry through two blocks of slushy snow to the bakery and slip through the back door in the alley. The darker it gets, the less I like being out and about alone. Even in a town as small and cozy as Alpine Valley. Years in the city have taught me to watch my back everywhere I go. But I sold my car to buy a bus ticket home, so walking is my only option now.

Though it’s near closing, the bakery is still buzzing with activity. Last minute customers up front. Meg zipping around like her shoes have rocket boosters on them. The high school girl, Tara, cleaning up the mess in the back. In an hour, I’ll have the place all to myself.

I shrug out of my coat and see a note taped to the office door with my name on it. A message from Meg, my boss. *Can you please check the leak under the sink? XOXO.* I’ll deal with it later tonight. But I have something more important to do first. I can’t wait a minute longer to see whose name I drew.

I slip into the office, close the door, and lean against it to hold it closed.

Digging into the gift bag, I sift through a folded piece of paper—the instruction sheet—a candy cane, some holiday chocolates—yum!—a cute reindeer ornament I’ll be hanging on the tree later, and one small notecard decorated in green glitter.

I close my eyes as I pull the notecard from the bag. *Please be Milo. Please be Milo. Please be Milo.*

When I open my eyes, I'm shocked to see my wish has come true.

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MILO

I'M HALFWAY through my morning cup of coffee when my phone pings with a request from Wilma.

Worn outlet in Apartment One.

Addison's apartment.

I lift my gaze from my phone to her front door, studying the Christmas wreath hanging from it. The cab of my truck suddenly feels warm, despite the busted heater. The mere thought of Addison's radiant smile causes my entire body to heat.

I remember the day Addy moved in, almost three months ago.

She looked like a beaten dog desperately in need of a hug. I'd bet my house it was some shitbag ex did that to her. It took all of my restraint not to gather her into my arms instead of helping move in furniture that Wilma acquired from who knows where. At least I made her smile before I set down the last box of mismatched plates and pots. That afternoon, it felt like a victory.

Which is why I've been replaying that moment every night since. The shy upward glance through long, dark lashes. The way the left corner of her mouth curved upward a fraction of a second before the right. It has me searching for every and any

excuse to be in Addison's orbit. *Shit*. I'm acting like some love sick sap.

I know nothing can happen between us. I'm too goddamn old for her. In a town this small, the two of us would set off a damn scandal alarm. Every fucking person would have an opinion on it. They'd decide Addy was the reason I divorced my wife. Never mind that the divorce was final six months before Addison moved to town. Or that my ex-wife had a revolving door of men coming over while I was working. I still cringe when I think about all her lies. How blind I was to them. I mean, how the hell did I think she liked football? It was just the men she enjoyed in the house. Men she would later sleep with while I was earning money to pay the mortgage.

All that aside, I'm too set in my ways for Addy. Too rooted in place. Too stubborn to compromise most things in my life now. But damn, I wish it weren't the case. Because I'd fucking love a chance to show her just how good things could be with me.

I debate whether to knock on her door now or wait until this afternoon after she's had some sleep.

She only got back an hour ago from her night shift at the bakery. Two hours after her normal quitting time. Do I sound like a fucking stalker? I might be. But only because I hate that Addy walks home in the middle of the night. Alpine Valley is small, but it's not free of assholes. It's the reason I've watched her from the shadows, trekking home in the dark with her shoulders hunched. To make sure no one fucks with her.

I've thought about offering her a ride, but I don't trust myself not to make a move. I can't think straight when I'm too close to her.

I haven't been this hung up on a woman ... ever.

Catching movement in the front window of her apartment, I decide to go now while she's still up. Maybe spending a few minutes with her this morning while I switch out an outlet will get her out of my system for the day.

Yeah, fucking right.

I knock on her front door and nearly swear out loud when she answers. Addy's wearing the world's shortest pajama shorts decorated in little cartoon candy canes. I force my gaze up to hers. "Hey, Milo." Her smile makes my insides ache with want. The urge to kick this door closed behind me and shove her up against it is unusually strong today.

"Need an outlet changed?"

"Yeah. If you don't mind."

"I don't mind." My gaze rakes up and down her of its own accord. I've fantasized more than I'd care to admit about the deliciously curvy body she hides beneath her clothes. I'd love to lick every inch of it. "But I don't want to keep you from sleeping."

"I'm not tired yet." She turns, failing to hide a small yawn that escapes. Fuck me, it's cute as hell. "Come on in. It's the one in the living room. By the Christmas tree."

I step inside, kicking off my snow-covered boots. "Didn't I already replace that one?"

Addy's eyes go wide for half a second. "Um, not that one. You replaced the one by the TV. Remember?"

"Right." I could've sworn it was the outlet near where the Christmas tree sits now. There was a floor lamp there. But sure enough, the outlet by the TV is a stark white. The other is yellowed with a plug hanging limply from its top plug. As if on cue, the twinkling lights on the tree flicker off and back on. "Guess I had it mixed up."

"Can I fix you a cup of coffee?" she offers as I set my tool bag on the floor.

"You don't have any made, Addy. Don't worry about it."

"Really, it's no bother."

Because her kitchen opens to her living room, she stays in my peripherals as I get to work on the live outlet. Yes, I should probably shut the breaker off. Even if I've done this same thing hundreds of times with the wires still live, I haven't had

Addy as a nearby distraction. I could fucking electrocute myself. But this way is quicker.

“Do you have any plans for Christmas?” Addy asks as she fidgets with her coffee pot.

“Christmas?”

“Yeah. The holiday that’s coming up in a few days.” Turning my head over my shoulder, I meet her twinkling gaze. Fuck, those blue eyes are hazardous to my health. “You have family in town, right?”

“Nana. She’s in the nursing home.” I leave out the part about her having dementia that’s only gotten worse this past year. No need to dampen Addy’s morning. Half the time I show up at the home, Nana yells at me. Curses me out for not having a clean-shaven face or a dirt smudge on my shirt. Those are the days she remembers who I am. She’s always been a bit cranky, but it’s been hard watching her decline. “I’ll probably swing by and see her Christmas morning.”

“You don’t have anywhere to go for Christmas Eve?”

My pulse quickens, wondering where she’s going with this. Addy’s always been friendly. Hell, unless I’m completely dense, I’m pretty sure she’s flirted with me from time to time. But this feels more personal. “What about you? What are your plans?”

“My mom always cooks a big Christmas Eve dinner.”

I screw in the new outlet face plate, feeling antsy to get out of this apartment. I’m too drawn to her today. It’s not safe to be here. “That sounds nice.”

“This is the first time I’ll be home for it in three years.”

It’s her glum tone that keeps me from rushing to the door. “Three years?”

“My ex ... it’s a long story.” She reaches for the faucet, reminding me of the coffee she’s making. Maybe I can stop her before she starts and get the hell out of here. “I can’t change the past—*ah!*”

I'm in the kitchen in half a second, pulling her back from the sink as I search for whatever caused her to scream. "What happened?"

"Spider!"

"What?"

"There was a *huge* spider! I think it crawled down the drain."

I turn the water on full blast to wash the fucker away. "See?" I say to Addy, resisting the urge to laugh at her. She looks so fucking cute right now. And those shorts are riding a little higher ... "No spider. Not anymore." I open the cupboard under the sink to prove he didn't crawl out of the pipes and freeze.

"What?" she whimpers.

Water drips from the pipe rapidly. "Looks like I'm going to be here a while. You have a leak."

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ADDISON

HOLY JINGLE BELLS, my plan is working.

Last night while I was at the bakery, I tried to come up with ways to spend time with Milo. Having him come over to switch out an outlet or a bathroom vanity bulb are quick jobs. They don't give me near enough time to get to know the man. Which is required per the Secret Santa bylaws.

"I'm so sorry, Milo," I tell him, hoping he can't detect the lie in my tone. "I'm sure you had better things to do today than fix a leaky sink pipe." I got the idea while I was tightening the compression bolts beneath the bakery sink last night. Except I knew I had to do better than loosen mine. I had to switch them out with rusty ones. *Thank you, Dad for keeping literally everything.*

"This is why I'm here." He pulls my cleaning supplies out and sets them on the floor. "Got any old towels?"

"Yep. Be right back." I slip into my bathroom, unable to contain my giddy smile any longer. I've never been so thankful in all my life that my dad wanted me to be a boy. He was stuck with two girls, and I as the oldest, got nominated to be the son he never had. I know how to fix leaky sink pipes, change my own oil, and how to operate most power tools.

But around Milo, I pretend I'm pretty clueless. Otherwise, I'd never get him to myself.

When I return to the kitchen, Milo is sitting on the floor, his back toward the sink. He's shed his heavy flannel shirt and his sculpted muscles are stretching his white t-shirt to the limits. He leans back under the cupboard, the hem of his shirt rising. Revealing mouthwatering abs above the waistline of his jeans. I'm so distracted, I nearly forget what's happening.

"The towels?"

My cheeks flare with heat. "Got them."

Milo reaches out his hand for one. I use the rest to mop up the water around him with my bare feet. The water is pooled on either side of his hips. A quick peek inside the cupboard reveals a slightly bigger mess than I anticipated. *Oops.*

"These compression bolts are rusty as hell," Milo grunts.

"This place is old, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is. But I swear I checked these before you moved in."

I'm glad he can't see the flush in my cheeks. Surely he'd figure out my angle then.

After mopping up the water on his left side, I drop a towel near his right hip and reach a foot across his legs to step on it. If I crouched down, I'd be straddling the man. A shiver of delight zips through my body at the naughty thought. I force myself to focus on the Secret Santa list. The getting-to-know-him requirement in order to figure out the perfect, personal gift. "You're from here originally, aren't you? Like you grew up in Alpine Valley?"

"Yep." The word comes out as another grunt. I can't tell if he's struggling down there or irritated with me.

"Need any help?"

"Nope. I got it, Addy."

Every time he calls me Addy, I get a tiny thrill. Not even my friends call me that. "Are you sure? I have extra hands." From personal experience, I know he'd benefit from one extra hand. But pride might be keeping him from admitting it. Or maybe I've been misreading all the signals. He's never made a

move. But I swear he's wanted to. I can't be imagining the heat in his gaze *every* time. "*Two* hands in fact."

He chuckles at my little joke. "Can't chance that spider getting loose."

"Oh, right." There never *was* a spider. But I'm not about to admit that. I reach for one soaked-through towel and drop it in the sink.

"I'll need to run to the hardware—" Hot breath tickles my inner thigh. Milo's hot breath. I glance down to see the top of his head at pussy level. "Fucking Christ," he mutters.

Before I can say something witty or clever, my heel slips on the slick floor. I bang my knee against the cabinet knob as my feet lose their grip and I go flying backwards. My arms flail in the air, grasping for anything to keep me from falling.

I squeeze my eyes shut and tuck my head, hoping the impact to the floor won't crack open my skull.

But it doesn't come.

Two strong arms grab me midair. I fall forward, my face colliding with Milo's shoulder. My knees fold around his hips as his woody scent intoxicates my senses. Our bodies mold together as one on the kitchen floor. When I bravely open my eyes, I'm straddling his lap. If I moved my hips forward another inch ...

"You okay?" Milo asks, his voice a gruff whisper that causes my nipples to harden instantly.

"Yeah." I pull my head back and dare to look him in the eyes. My hands linger on his broad shoulders, mesmerized by the heat through his damp cotton shirt. How many nights have I dreamt of exactly this? Of being in his strong arms? I've never felt so safe and secure in all my life. Not with anyone. "I'm okay, Milo."

Our eyes are locked.

I keep waiting for him to loosen his grip on me, desperately savoring every millisecond he doesn't. I don't want this moment to end. I want to disappear into it.

“Addy, you can’t look at me like that,” Milo growls in warning. Gone is the cheerful nice-to-everyone guy and in his place is a feral hunter. A man possessed with liquid heat in his dark eyes.

“Like what?” I whisper, daring to slide my hands up his neck until my fingers are buried in his hair. There’s a possibility I *did* hit my head. That I’m lying on my kitchen floor unconscious. That this is all a dream. Maybe that’s why I feel so brave as I lean closer, my gaze dropping to his lips without apology.

“Addy, we shouldn’t—”

“But I want to.”

The second those words slip past my lips, his mouth presses to mine. He pulls me tight against him, my breasts mashing against his hard chest. Our lips move in a hungry, animalistic rhythm as his hand slides up the back of my neck and tangles in my hair. He angles my head to the side, giving his tongue better access to my mouth. I invite him in for a passionate tango.

My hips arch forward, brushing against something harder than a pipe in his jeans.

“Addy,” he groans.

“Please?” I whisper, hating how desperate I sound. Ever since my horrible breakup, I’ve questioned everything. Not just my judgment, but *me*. My body. My desirability. My inner sex goddess. It’s as though all of those pieces of me had gone into hibernation, threatening to never awaken.

Until Milo.

“Addy, we—”

A knock at my front door kills the moment instantly. It might as well be someone dumping ice water on the two of us.

Milo’s widened eyes is all the hint I need to get off his lap.

Another knock.

“I have to answer it,” I tell him, desperately searching for a sweatshirt or something to pull over my t-shirt so my hard nipples don’t give us away. I grab the first thing I see—Milo’s flannel shirt—and put it on to answer the door.

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MILO

WHAT THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED?

I *kissed* Addy.

No. It wasn't just a kiss. I devoured that pretty mouth. If we'd been alone for just two more minutes, those tits would've been in my mouth. Five minutes, and I'd probably have taken her on the slippery kitchen floor. I can't fucking think straight around this woman when we're *not* touching. But now?

"Meg, hey," I hear Addy at the front door.

"Hey, is Milo here?"

Fuck.

"Um, yeah. He's fixing my sink pipe."

"He is?" It's the surprise in Meg's tone that causes me to sit up straighter. "I thought you—"

"Did you need him for something?" Addy asks.

I get to my feet, using the sink counter to hide everything below the belt. There's not a platonic thought in the world that can save me from this raging hardon right now. "Hey Meg," I say with a wave over the breakfast bar. Trying like hell to ignore Addy in my flannel shirt. She looks too damn sexy in it. Which is all the more problematic now that we have company. Does Meg notice? "Something broken?"

“My furnace.”

“Shit, that’s not good.”

“No.” Meg lets out a heavy sigh. If she’s suspicious of Addy and me, she’s not letting on. “It’s been off and on the past few days. But I ran home to grab my phone, and now it won’t come back on at all. I’d hate for my pipes to freeze—”

“Say no more. I’ll head right over.”

“Oh good! I have to head back to the bakery, but I’ll leave the door unlocked for you.”

The second Addy’s able to close the door, she leans against it and lets out a sigh. On one hand, it feels like we’re horny teenagers who nearly got caught by one of our moms in a hot and heavy make-out session. On the other hand, I feel like a dirty secret. I’m not sure how I feel about that.

“That was close.” Addy’s wicked smile tempts me to pick up right where we left off. But I can’t ignore a broken furnace in these temps. A busted pipe could cause a lot of damage. Maybe this is for the best.

I abandon the kitchen for my tool bag near the Christmas tree, trying like hell to keep my eyes averted. My flannel covers her shorts completely, making it all too easy to pretend she’s wearing nothing beneath my shirt at all. “I need to check on her furnace.”

“Will you come back?” Her words come out with a yawn she can’t hide.

“Yes, Addy. I’ll be back to finish the job.” I gesture to the kitchen so there’s no confusion about the meaning. As much as I’d love to finish what we started on the kitchen floor, it’s better we don’t go there. Better for her reputation *and* mine. “Can I have my shirt back, please?”

I feel like an ass when her expression falls. “Oh. Yeah, of course.”

I focus on putting my boots back on to avoid seeing her slip out of my shirt. Though the image will haunt me in my

dirtiest fantasies. And when that shirt falls in my lusty dreams, there'll be nothing underneath it.

“Milo?”

“Yes?”

“I'm ... sorry.”

My head snaps to her at those words. “For what, Addy?”

She stares at the floor, softly kicking at the carpet with her bare feet. The red and green striped nail polish on her toes catching my attention for the second time this morning. “For ... whatever happened in the kitchen.”

Her tone nearly guts me. It reminds me of the meek, broken woman who moved into Apartment One three months ago. Fuck, did I bring this out of her? “Addy, you didn't do anything wrong.” When she refuses to look up at me, I do something very stupid. I reach for her hand and squeeze her fingers against my palm. The simple touch sends jolts of electricity to inconvenient places.

“I don't need your pity, Milo.”

“Pity?” I tug her in front of me until her back is against the front door. Pressing a hand against it on either side of her face, I pin her with my firm gaze. “Pity is the *last* thing I feel for you, Addy.” Undeniable heat sizzles between us. My lips ache for hers. The need to touch her, to mold her body against mine, to claim her, is overwhelming. I'm flirting with dangerous waters. It takes all my restraint to keep my hands off her right now. “I *crave* you, Addy.”

“Then why—”

“We can't do this. You know why.” I drop my hands to her forearms and spin us until I can get out the door and into the cold air I so desperately need. But even the icy chill isn't enough to calm me. Because I'm in trouble when it comes to this curvy beauty. Big fucking trouble.

ADDISON

MY SHIFT at the bakery seems to drag, despite the heavy workload. With the holidays right around the corner, we have more orders to fill than normal. Which means I'm prepping more dough for cookies, breads, and pastries than ever.

But every time I look at the clock, it's as though only five minutes have passed. It doesn't matter how many times I listen to Mariah Carey sing *Santa Tell Me*. It feels as though time has switched to slow motion. I'm antsy to go home. Desperate for a single glimpse of the handyman, if only to reassure myself that our make out session in the kitchen really happened.

I'm pathetic.

Milo did come back to switch out the compression bolts earlier, but I didn't hear him in my apartment. I only know he did because when I woke up, the rusty bolts were long gone and my kitchen mess was cleaned up.

His kiss still burns my lips.

We can't do this. You know why.

Gah! I hate that he's right. My mom would probably have a heart attack if I brought Milo home for Christmas. Though I find the gray hairs near his temples and the salt and pepper thing going on in his stubble sexy, I don't think she would see it that way. I'm twenty-seven. It took some internet stalking, but I found a few birthday wishes on his social media from

this previous summer. He's forty-four. A seventeen-year age gap.

Seventeen. Like the number on my Secret Santa gift bag.

"I'm doomed," I mutter. Now that I've successfully scared Milo away, it's going to be almost impossible to fulfill my Secret Santa obligations. I don't know him well enough to pick out a personalized gift. And if I start asking too many people questions, I'm sure it'll start rumors about us.

At least right now, Milo doesn't seem to hate me. But if false rumors start flying around this small town, he might.

Would Wilma let me re-draw? Or should I just find another way to come up with the rent money I already spent on last-minute Christmas shopping for my family? Because, as it stands, I'm totally failing this Secret Santa assignment. If I break even one more thing in my apartment, I'm sure Milo will catch on. Meg almost blew my cover earlier.

When three-thirty a.m. finally comes, I turn off the Christmas music and slip into my coat.

It's chillier tonight than it's been. The wind goes straight through my layers and right to my bones. Hopefully it's too cold for any bad guys to be lurking in dark alley corners. I quickly lock up the bakery and hurry down the alley.

Headlights nearly blind me when I reach the main road.

My heart pounds in my chest as I hurry away from the truck set on stealing my ability to see. Is this how I disappear, never to be heard from again? As if this Christmas can't get any worse ...

"Addy." The deep, familiar voice stops me in my tracks. *Milo?* "Let me give you a ride. It's freezing."

This isn't the first or second time I've questioned if I really did hit my head on my kitchen floor. Maybe I'm in a hospital bed, enjoying a blissful coma, and this is my dream reality. "Why are you awake?" I call through the open passenger window.

"Please, get in."

I watch snowflakes drop through the open window and relent. “Why are you awake?” I ask again once I’m inside the truck cab.

“It’s too cold for you to be walking.”

My heart swells at his concern. It’s one thing to fantasize about doing the nasty with the hot older handyman. It’s quite another to discover he actually cares about me. Or am I simply tired and reading into this? Maybe he’s always up this early. “I had to sell my car to pay for the bus ticket home,” I tell him, my teeth chattering. “Is your heater broken?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Oh.” I glance at the space between us, yearning to slide closer and steal his warmth. A simple, shared glance says we both know what’ll happen if I do. Freezing in the cab of his truck is still better than walking in the wind, and I wisely huddle into my corner of the bench seat.

“I should get a new truck,” he admits. “But I’m partial to this one.”

“Special memory or something?”

“It was my dad’s.”

“Was.” I don’t mean to say the word aloud, but it slips softly past my lips anyway. “I lost my dad, too.”

“It’s the only thing of his I have left,” he admits, pulling along the curb of my apartment all too soon. He cuts the headlights, but not the engine. “You shouldn’t be walking this late at night,” he says, his tone firm.

“I know.” I want to invite him inside. I bet my exhaustion would take a hike if Milo climbed into bed with me. Which is why I force myself to push the door open and hop out into the cold so I don’t make a total fool out of myself. I don’t need two rejections in one day, thank you very much. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Addy?”

My pulse quickens, wondering if I gave up hope too soon. No one is awake yet. It’s even too early for Meg to be out of

bed. I can be quiet if I try really, really hard ... No one has to know. “Yeah?”

“Lock your door.”

Disappointment that he will not be joining me hits me square in the chest. At least I can blame the cold for my reddened cheeks. “Oh, okay. I will.” I hurry to the front door, aware of Milo watching me. I look over my shoulder as I open my door, catching him staring. His gaze feels protective and ... dare I say, possessive? A tiny thrill runs through me at the thought.

Maybe this isn't over yet.

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MILO

I'M FUCKING FREEZING as I wait in the cab of my dad's old truck for Addy to get off work. The past three nights, she's allowed me to give her a ride and not complained once about the heater not working. I've spent every spare minute tinkering with it, but it's pointless. Unless I'm willing to put in a new heating system—the truck isn't worth that much even if I could find the right one—I should get a new truck.

“You're spoiling me,” Addy says as she opens the door and climbs in.

Dad is probably raising hell from above. He taught me better than to let a woman open her own car door. But I don't want Addy getting the wrong idea. Or at least that's the bullshit excuse I've been clinging to.

“Having a functional heater would be spoiling you.”

“I don't have to deal with the wind.” Her appreciative smile borders on flirtatious. “But I wouldn't turn down some body heat.”

“Addy,” I say in warning, even as she scoots across the cab. Her thigh brushes against mine, causing my dick to twitch to life. I had hoped the frigid cold would be enough to keep the fucker at bay. Apparently not.

“Milo,” she says, her tone mocking mine.

“We can’t—”

“No, we *shouldn’t*.” Her hand slides onto my thigh, her thumb dangerously close to discovering exactly the effect she’s having on me. “There’s a difference.”

“Addy, we talked about this.”

“Did we?” Her body turns until one leg is folded across the seat, her shin pressed against me. Every night that I’ve driven her back to her apartment, we’ve been slowly getting to know each other. But that’s not it. The flirting has heightened. The teasing. The inappropriate jokes about prongs getting wedged into outlets that actually make her laugh. The sexual tension between us is strong enough to make me need a cold shower afterward. Which is saying something, considering how fucking miserable this truck cab is without heat.

“Addy—”

“I love that you call me that,” she says, lifting to her knees. Because I’ve been too slow, my truck is still parked in the alley behind the bakery. We’re cloaked in darkness as she straddles my lap. “No one else does.”

“Really?” Fuck the tiny thrill I feel at that. My hands slide around her back, pulling her closer. “Good.”

Her chilled fingers comb through my hair as our breaths mingle. I’ve thought about kissing her since the first day I saw her. But since that heated make out session on her kitchen floor, I haven’t been able to think about anything else.

“No one has to know, Milo.”

Part of me hates that we’re best kept as a secret. Another part of me feels a wicked thrill for the same reason.

I claim her lips without holding back. I take all I’ve been wanting for days, and she gives back in earnest. Our tongues swirl together. Her fingers comb through my hair greedily. As if she’s as desperate to possess me as I am to claim her. She grinds her hips against me and moans.

“I’d hate for you to have a frozen pipe,” she teases, grinding against my erection harder.

“There’s nothing frozen down there, sweetheart.” My hands move down her back and slip under her coat. Cupping her perfect ass. She reaches between our bodies, her fingers fidgeting with the button of my jeans. I’m so fucking lost in this lusty daze that I nearly let her free my cock before the reality hits.

I shackle her wrist, stopping her.

Her eyes snap to mine.

“Not here, Addy.” No damn way I’m fucking her for the first time in a dark alley in some beat up truck without a functional heater. She deserves so much better than that.

“Will you come in tonight, then?”

I *should* say no. I should stop giving her rides in the middle of the night if I don’t want to make it harder to resist her. I should probably buy her a fucking car to keep distance between us. But tonight, I just don’t want to say no.

So I don’t.

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ADDISON

I CAN'T BELIEVE Milo said yes.

My fingers tremble as I flip the deadbolt behind him. I watch him kick off his boots, still not convinced this isn't a dream.

Tonight while I was working, I made a bold decision to make an actual move on Milo when he picked me up. I've spent the past three nights playing it safe. Getting to know him a little better in hopes to fulfill my Secret Santa duties. And the more I've gotten to know—about his living in Arizona for the past decade, his shitty ex-wife, his love of football, how when he was little he was always holding a wrench in his hand wanting to be just like his dad—the harder I seem to be falling for the man.

It's not just his body I want anymore.

When the perfect gift sprang to mind in the middle of a Martina McBride Christmas marathon a few hours ago, I decided to push my luck with the physical stuff. We've been flirting more and more each night. The sexual tension almost unbearable between us. If I didn't make my move tonight, I was going to tackle him out in the open one day soon. I'd have a hard time explaining why I'm humping the handyman in a snowbank in the front yard to Wilma or any of my neighbors.

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask, fighting a yawn as I shrug out of my coat. On top of being run ragged these past few days at the bakery, my sleep has been extra choppy lately. I’ve been having nightmares about my ex showing up and ruining Christmas. He was particularly shitty around the holidays. But I’m not about to admit that to Milo right now and spoil the mood.

“I think we should get you to bed, Addy.”

“Good plan.” My attempt to be sexy is interrupted by a not-so-sexy yawn. Dammit. This is *not* the time to be tired. I reach for Milo’s hand. Though I’m mildly afraid he’ll tug it away, I’m more afraid he’ll disappear if I don’t hold on.

He interlocks his fingers with mine, following me to the bedroom. I stop in the doorway, feeling suddenly shy. His warm body envelopes me in a cloud of heat from behind. His hot breath tickles my neck, causing my nipples to harden. “Why don’t you get comfortable?” he says in a low, sexy voice against my ear. “I’ll be right back.”

“Will you?” I cringe at the desperation that leaks from my lips. But if Milo hears it, he doesn’t say so.

He cups my cheek, turning my face until our lips meet. Unlike the hot and heavy kisses we’ve shared, this one is deeper. More sensual. It feels like a promise of a future I can’t even begin to understand. I’m drawn to this older man. I’m ridiculously attracted to him. But a future? That doesn’t seem possible ... or probable.

I push away the uninvited, vulnerable thought, blaming it on fatigue.

“I’ll just be a minute. Then I’m getting in that bed with you, Addy.”

Milo kisses my neck, his stubble tickling my sensitive skin. My entire body responds, a wave of heat rushing through me.

I feel a chill the moment he steps away. An absence I don’t like.

I toy with the idea of a shower, certain there's flour in my hair and under my fingernails. But I'm too damn tired to do much more than change out of my bakery clothes and into a loose, comfy tank top and a pair of candy cane striped panties I hope Milo will appreciate. Even if I fall asleep now, I'm hoping my skimpy attire will encourage hot mid-morning sex.

I'm under the covers before I hear Milo coming down the hall. Sleep is tugging at me like quicksand. Dammit, I wanted to have sex! But as his warm body slides behind mine, I decide that cuddles aren't so bad. I love the way my body molds into his with such ease. As if we were made for one another.

"Did you know the baseboard in your bathroom is coming loose?"

"Oh yeah," I murmur as he snuggles in closer. "Been meaning to borrow an air compressor."

"You know how to use an air compressor?" I'm too tired to confess the truth to him tonight. Too afraid he'll be mad I lied about my handy skills and leave me to correct him. Tomorrow, over coffee and hopefully after some hot-as-hell sex, I'll tell him the truth. With any luck, he'll find the whole thing funny. I can be sexy with a nail gun.

I wriggle my butt against him in a half-hearted attempt to distract him, but I yawn so hard my eyes water. His arm wraps around my waist as he tugs me tighter against him. "Sleep, Addy. I'm not going anywhere."

For the first time in years, I feel safe. Relaxed. *Loved.*

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MILO

I WAKE TO ADDY MOANING. She tosses in her sleep. I sense her fear as if it's my own. I'd bet my truck that her asshole ex is the cause of this. She hasn't said much about him these past few days, but it's been enough to connect the dots. She deserves so much better. "Addy," I say in a calm, low voice. "Addy, wake up."

Her eyes pop open and she meets my gaze.

Instantly, she clings to me.

I hold her tight, feeling the moisture of her tears on my bare shoulder. I'd love to get my hands on the man who made her feel this way. "You're okay, Addy. I got you." I kiss her forehead, and her breathing finally steadies.

"God, I'm sorry," she mumbles into my shoulder. "It was just a bad dream."

"Don't," I say firmly. "Don't downplay whatever that was. Not with me, Addy."

She leans her head back, her eyes locking with mine. She cups my cheek. "Is this a dream?"

"No, sweetheart. It's not."

"Just in case." She pulls my mouth to hers. In a tangle of arms and legs, her body slides beneath mine. She wraps her legs around my waist, pressing those wet panties against my

boxers. Two flimsy layers of fabric separating destiny. Though I have no fucking clue how any of this works between us, I know it has to.

It's *meant* to.

I slide my hand up her hip, memorizing the silky softness of her skin. A tit pops out of her oversized tank top, and I dive mouth-first for her nipple. She grinds harder against my throbbing cock, threatening to undo me before I get to have my way pleasuring her. It takes every ounce of effort to unwrap her legs and slide down her body.

On the way down between her legs, I push up her shirt. Her tits fill my hands like they were made for them.

"God, I love how rough your hands are," she moans, arching into my touch.

I kiss a trail along her inner thigh, teasing her soaked panties with the gentle pressure of my lips. She rocks her hips into my face, intoxicating me with her heavenly scent. I need to taste her worse than I need my next breath.

"I'm going to replace all your bad dreams with good ones, Addy." I peel away her panties. "That's a promise."

She moans my name as I drag my tongue through her wet folds, savoring the flavor of her. Committing it to memory. She gyrates in rhythm with my mouth, spreading her legs wider to grant me full access. I take my time exploring her pussy. Tasting her. Learning which spots and sensations cause her to whimper in need. I could spend days exploring her every pleasure point.

"Milo," she groans, fisting a hand in my hair. "Milo, I'm close."

Addy rocks her hips harder and faster against my eager mouth. I meet her demands, chuckling as she shoves my head against her pussy. I can't breathe, but I don't fucking care. The only thing that matters is making her come as hard as I can. I want her to fucking fly.

"Milo, my neighbors," she cries, her voice vibrating as she tries to swallow her growing moans. She grabs a pillow and

presses it to her face, crying into it as she comes apart. Her pussy convulses hard, and I lap up every last drop of her climax.

When she finally pulls the pillow away, I climb up her body and claim her mouth. I want her to taste herself on my tongue.

“That is the only time you’ll hide your face from me when you come,” I growl against her ear. I realize I sound like a possessive asshole in this moment, but I can’t seem to help it. The way she bites down on her bottom lip, her eyes sparkling, tells me she doesn’t seem to mind this demand. “I don’t want to be denied the pleasure of watching you come apart, Addy. Never again.”

She reaches between our bodies, cupping my cock and squeezing. “How about we start that right now?”

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ADDISON

MY FINGERTIPS tingle from the earth-shattering orgasm, courtesy of Milo's magic tongue. As he moves into position above me, I'm not sure I can handle another explosive burst of euphoria so quickly after the first. But if this kills me ... well, Merry Christmas to me. It's one helluva way to go.

"I have a condom in my wallet." His heated gaze locks with mine as his body stills, his length pressed against my belly. Wetness trickles along my inner thighs, desperate to feel him inside my walls.

"Sleep with all the tenants?" My pathetic attempt to keep these words light and teasing falls flat. Milo doesn't crack a smile. A frown deepens. It's borderline scary, but all animalistic and sexy.

"I *never* do this, Addy. You're the first person since ..." He doesn't have to say the words for me to hear them. *Since the divorce*. "This isn't some fling. So, get that fucking idea out of your head. Because once I'm inside you, there's no going back."

My body trembles with anticipation of him making good on that promise. I comb my fingers through his salt and pepper stubble and make my decision. "Not a fling. I'm good with that."

“You better mean that.” A hint of pain lingers in his dark eyes. I practically feel the hurt he’s experienced at the hands of someone unfaithful and deceiving. She’s a fucking idiot. But her loss is my gain. I know it’ll scandalize my mom—at first. But once she gets to know Milo, she’ll come around.

His cock twitches against my stomach. I’m dying to have him inside me, but this is important. “I want you to come with me to Christmas Eve dinner. With my family.”

“Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent.” I reach between us, fisting his cock and stroking. He’s so fucking big I nearly whimper. Yeah, I might die of a pleasure overload tonight. “I’m on the pill. Leave the condom in your wallet.” I give his dick a good squeeze. “Or better yet, toss it. You won’t be needing it with me.”

Milo growls as his mouth captures mine. His body wraps around mine possessively, and I surrender completely to him. I spread my legs wider, arching my hips to meet him at last. He pushes into my channel, filling me inch by glorious inch. His strokes are slow and methodical. The wicked gleam in his eyes and the slow way he drags his lips down my neck promise he’s not in a hurry even with the first rays of sunlight poking through the blinds.

Our bodies move as one. As if they’ve always known one another. Sex has never in my entire life felt this good. This *right*.

The sheets tangle around us as Milo’s teeth scrape my nipple. My fingernails threaten to wreck his back as he reaches a hand between us, fingering my swollen bud. “You’re so goddamn *wet*.”

“Do you have any idea how long I’ve been thinking about this?” My laugh turns into a long moan. “I’ve wanted you since the first day I moved in. I just didn’t think…”

Milo wraps both arms around me, burying his face in my neck. His hot breath tickles my ear. “Whoever hurt you is a fucking coward. He was too afraid to treat you the way you

deserve. I'm going to show you how good it can be, sweetheart. I'm going to show you how a real man treats a woman every second of every day."

I grip him tighter, wishing I could get closer than skin on skin. I think I'm in love. "If I'm suffering from a concussion, please don't tell me."

"A concussion?"

"When I fell in the kitchen. Maybe you only caught me in a dream."

Milo locks his gaze with mine. "This is no dream, Addy. This is as real as it gets." Our easy strokes grow hungrier. Our hips thrust harder, slamming together with purpose. I arch myself against him, rubbing my clit against him.

"That's it, Addy," he growls in approval. "Come for me."

His command unexpectedly causes my body to shatter from the inside out. A tidal wave of pleasure ripples through every cell as I come apart. My fingertips tingle once again as I dig my nails into his muscular shoulders.

Milo pounds into me with speeds that defy gravity.

Finally, he stills above me. We're tangled in each other as he empties his cock into my depths. I lock my legs around his hips, desperate to receive every last drop of him.

"You're mine, Addy."

My heart swells to three times its size. I don't need a damn thing for Christmas. Santa brought me the best gift of all. "I like how that sounds, Milo. I like it a lot."

ADDISON

PULLING into my mom's driveway, my pulse quickens. Christmas Eve is tomorrow, and I'm not sure how she's going to react when I tell her I'm bringing Milo. She and Dad were high school sweethearts. The same age.

I'm afraid she's going to think I'm on the rebound and making a completely reckless decision with the older handyman.

Mom was there to help pick up the pieces after my ex. If she'd had the money for the bus ticket, I know she would've sent it. But money's been tight all around. Especially with my little sister and her medical bills racking up. No fifteen-year-old kid should have to deal with a back surgery from scoliosis. But my mom having to foot the bill and forfeit Christmas presents is super shitty.

"Addison, what are you doing here?" Mom asks, her tone pleasantly surprised.

"Thought I'd stop by and see if you wanted to go last minute Christmas shopping with me."

Mom's easy smile slips away as she stretches her neck around the doorway to the living room. Shelby's in there, watching a Christmas movie. Or sleeping to one, anyway. I can't wait to see her face tomorrow when she opens her presents. "You remember what I said this year."

“Mom, I got that covered. Don’t you two worry.” Thanks to Wilma’s generosity with the rent, I was able to spoil both my mom and sister this year. It pained me to think of my sister not getting anything from Santa. Stupid medical bills.

“That’s not fair, Addison. Not to you.”

My entire body tingles with excitement as the words leave my lips without permission. “I already got what I wanted for Christmas.”

“You did?”

I stare at the empty coffee pot, wishing I’d brought a bag of peppermint coffee with me. This conversation might be easier over a steaming cup. *Just get it out, Addy.* It’s Milo’s voice in my head, and it gives me the courage I need. “I want to bring someone to dinner tomorrow night.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. He’s ... special to me, Mom.”

She studies me for several uncomfortable seconds. I brace myself for the lecture to follow. “Do I know him?”

“Maybe. It’s a small town.” She’s met Milo on a couple of occasions when she’s stopped over, but the exchanges have been brief. “It’s Milo Rush.”

Mom stares at me from across the kitchen island. Just stares. God, it’s uncomfortable.

“Your handyman?”

“Yes.” I’ve spent all morning since he left preparing to defend the age difference or his divorce. The words are on the tip of my tongue, ready to go to battle for the man I love. My entire body tingles again as the realization hits me. Yes, I’m *in love* with Milo. Totally and completely.

“I’ve always liked Milo,” Mom says, her chipper tone catching me off guard.

“Wait, what?”

“He’s a good man, Addison. A little older than you, sure.” Mom shrugs. “But he’s one of the good ones. I’d be honored

to have him over for the holidays.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Mom moves around the counter and wraps me in a hug that emits every ounce of love she feels. “But if he hurts you, you’re not the only one who knows how to use your father’s power tools.”

“Mom.”

“I’m particularly skilled with the miter saw.”

“Mom.”

“What? I’m just saying ...I ’ve watched a lot of Dateline lately.”

“Dually noted.”

“Now what’s this about Christmas shopping?”

Though I can’t tell Mom that I’m Milo’s Secret Santa, I can admit I’m buying him a gift now that our relationship—if that’s what it is?—is out in the open. “I need to get something for Milo. Something special. Want to run into town with me?”

“Actually,” Mom says, “I think you might find what you’re looking for in the garage.”

“Dad’s tools?”

Mom grabs my hand and tugs me off the kitchen stool. “I have an idea.”

MILO

MY MORNING BREEZES by with one simple task after another. I hardly notice the chill in the air. I'm practically sweating in my flannel with all the memories of last night to keep my blood pumping. Fuck, I knew being inside Addy would be amazing. But I wasn't prepared for how changed I would feel. How certain I am that I was always meant to find *her*.

I finish shoveling the narrow walk that goes around the four-plex and catch Meg hurrying to her door.

"Milo, hey!" She waves a friendly greeting. "Thank you so much for fixing my furnace."

"It's working well then?"

"Like a dream. I was worried it needed to be replaced. Didn't want Wilma stuck with that bill right before Christmas."

"No, it doesn't need to be replaced. It just needed some TLC." I've learned that the temperamental furnace for Apartment Two needs a gentle touch and some soothing words to keep running. But as long as she's taken care of properly, she'll last a couple more years. Maybe a few more. "Anything else you need done?"

"Nothing important. Got a loose outlet in my bedroom, but Addison promised to come take a look at it."

My eyebrows draw in confusion at the word Meg surely misspoke. “What would Addy know about changing out an outlet?”

“She’s not trying to take your job or anything,” Meg says with an easy laugh. “But she’s pretty handy herself. Didn’t she tell you?”

“Um, no.” I rub the back of my neck, digging in my fingers hard. “She didn’t.”

“Addison’s a lifesaver, really. I normally only ask her to do things at the bakery. She fixed a leaky pipe under the sink last week. Saved me hundreds on hiring a plumber. If I didn’t want to lose her at the bakery, I’d suggest you two go into business together. You’d make a power team!” I think she’s joking, but I can’t really tell because my mind is racing.

Why would Addy pretend to be clueless? How many outlets have I replaced in the past three months? I’ve changed burned out lightbulbs for her bathroom vanity, her stove, and her fridge. Fixed loose cabinet knobs and crooked cupboard doors. Was she laughing at me this whole fucking time?

And the leaky pipe under her kitchen sink ... did she switch out the compression bolts? It seems farfetched, but I *know* they weren’t rusty. I remember checking them before she moved in. No way they gathered years’ worth of rust in three months.

My chest clenches as the memories of my ex-wife entertaining all my buddies for Sunday football come flooding back. She used to wear the jersey for my favorite team and cheer when they scored a touchdown. But in between excitement of first downs and field goals, she was laying the groundwork for her revolving door of men. Pretending not to understand the basics just so one of them could explain it to her.

I hate that Addy’s deception reminds me of the worst time in my fucking life.

“Is everything okay?” Meg asks, concern in her kind eyes.

“Yep. All good.” I force the smile to keep her from feeling an ounce of guilt. She had no idea Addy was pulling one over on me, and I’m not going to drag her into this mess. This is my fucking fault. I should’ve known better. I should’ve realized she was playing me for a fool.

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ADDISON

THE MINUTES TICK down with agonizing slowness tonight. Though I've been swamped, preparing the last of the Christmas orders, these last five minutes are mocking me. I decide that Meg won't mind if I clock out early since all my work is done—including fixing a wonky kitchen drawer and changing out the oven lightbulb that burned out.

But when I slip into the alley, there are no headlights. No truck. No Milo.

I haven't heard from him today, but he warned me before we parted ways this morning that he'd be busy. I tried not to think anything of it, which wasn't too hard since all I *could* think about was the way he bent me over the kitchen sink this morning while the coffee was brewing. My core tingles in memory.

But where is Milo now?

I slip off my glove to pull out my phone. But the call goes straight to voicemail. *What the hell?* “Milo, this is Addy. Not sure what's going on but hope everything's okay.” I start walking briskly, the chill in the air freezing my exposed fingers as I finish my message. “I'm going to leave the door unlocked.” The chilly wind bites and I nearly fumble the phone. “Come over, okay?”

I practically run the few blocks home, already missing the cold cab of his old beater truck. Did I do something to upset him? I quickly shake away the thought that's a product of a toxic relationship. One where I was constantly blaming myself for everything that was going wrong. I'm not that girl anymore. I'm a new woman.

Milo helped me see that. I've been dying to tell him all day, too. I might even be brave enough to tell him I love him. Because if that man doesn't run far, far away after that confession, I'm pretty sure he's a keeper. Just like my mom said.

I turn onto my sidewalk, scanning the neighborhood for any signs of Milo's truck. But the streets are deserted.

Inside, I change into pajamas and brush the flour out of my hair. I've just finished brushing my teeth when I hear the deadbolt engage. *Odd. Pretty sure I left that unlocked.* My heart beats in double time. *Milo!*

I rush down the hall, ready to tackle that man to the floor. Only, he's not there. As I reach the door, discovering that the deadbolt is now locked, I hear the roar of a truck driving down the street.

“Okay, Milo. What the actual fuck?”

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MILO

I SLEPT like total dogshit last night, tossing and turning every few minutes. No amount of coffee seems capable of waking my ass up either. Good thing it's Christmas Eve. A day off. I'd electrocute myself for sure if I had to switch out an outlet.

Except, Addy can cover for me.

The bitterness I feel hasn't subsided. So I decide to visit Nana a day early. Might as well get yelled at on a shitty day.

"You look like you get hit by a bus," Nana says as I enter her room and set a bouquet of red roses on a table. "A bus that hit reverse just so it could run over you a second time. What the hell, Milo?"

I snap my attention to her, shocked that she got my name right on the first try today. With her dementia worsening, half the time she doesn't recognize me. The other half, she calls me every name *but* my own. "Nana?"

"I'm with it. For now. So, sit your ass down before I snap out of it."

"Still spunky as ever, I see."

"Who is she?"

I nearly miss the chair. It's only my grip on the arm that saves me from falling on my ass. "Who?"

“The woman who has you tied up in knots.” Nana reaches for a cup of water and sips. She never could stand coffee. Though, if she had it her way, that water would be a mimosa or some other fruity cocktail. She reminds me, at least twice a visit, that withholding alcohol from a grown-ass woman is akin to torture.

“What makes you think—”

“Don’t play dumb with me, boy. I might only have a few more lucid minutes. Just spit it out before we’re out of time. You obviously love her.”

The word *love* practically stops my heart. Because it’s true. As upset as I am about Addy’s betrayal, I can’t deny the feelings that developed these past three months. Feelings that became impossible to deny last night while I was buried balls deep inside her, filling her with my seed. Claiming her as my own. “Addy. Her name is Addy.”

I spill out the story, omitting the most scandalous details. I have to admit, it feels pretty damn good to talk to my grandma again. She’s the only family I have left.

When I tell her about running into Meg and discovering Addy lied to me about her skills, Nana cackles loud and long. Her eyes sparkle with a light I haven’t seen in over a decade. Not since Gramps passed away.

“Reminds me of how I hooked your gramps,” she says, slapping the arm of her chair. “I gave myself a flat tire on the road to his house just so he’d stop to help me. Turned away five other people while I waited, too. But it paid off in the end. Because after he changed my tire, he asked me to a drive-in movie.” Nana’s smile turns wicked. “Didn’t see any of it, though. We were too busy—”

“I get the picture.” I push out of my chair and pace near the window. Where I catch a glimpse of someone near my truck. I squint, certain my vision is tricking me. “Addy?”

“She here?” Nana asks, her tone hopeful.

“She’s breaking into my truck.”

“Go get her. I want to meet her before I turn crazy again.”
When I don’t move, Nana yells, “Now, Milo!”

As I rush out of the nursing home, I have no idea what I’m going to say to her. How I’m going to explain letting her walk home in the bitter cold last night as I watched her from a block away. Is she going to yell at me for locking her door and *not* coming in? Or chew my ass for not returning her texts or calls yesterday? God, I was an ass.

I catch Addy sneaking away at the rear of my truck.
“Addy, I can see you.”

“Dammit!”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

I glance inside the cab of my truck and see the gift box sitting in the middle of the seat. The bold letters on a green tag spell out *From Your Secret Santa*. I snap my head to the tailgate, where Addy has stopped.

“You can hate me if you want to. Just don’t tell Wilma, okay? I’m pretty sure this means I failed the whole Secret Santa thing. It’s one of the ninety-nine bylaws.”

With slow steps, I meet her at the back of my truck. “I don’t hate you, Addy.”

“I talked to Meg.”

Though the anger has left me after my chat with Nana, the confusion still lingers. “Why did you lie to me?”

“Because I had a crush on you, Milo. Because I enjoyed your company. I didn’t think there’d ever be anything between us or that you’d ever see me that way. So, I made up the only excuse I could to spend time with you.” Her cheeks are bright red. “Happy?”

“Do you want there to be something between us?”

Addy narrows her eyes at me in a *what do you think, dummy?* expression. “I told my mom I invited you to Christmas Eve dinner.”

“And?”

“She’s making you a stocking as we speak. I’m going to feel really stupid if I show up without you. But I guess that’s on me, huh?”

I close the gap between us, cupping her arms. There’s a whole lot of layers beneath this coat that I’d love to spend the rest of the afternoon peeling away. With my teeth. “It’s on me, too. You’re not my ex. And it wasn’t fair to compare you to her. To think you could be anything like the monster she was. I know we haven’t known each other very long, but I feel a deeper connection with you than I ever have with anyone else. I—”

“Kiss her already so I can meet her!” Nana hollers out her window.

“Nana,” I explain, tugging Addy into my embrace. I cup her cheek and pull her in for the only kiss I can spare before I usher her inside. But I make it a very good, curl-her-toes kind of kiss that promises a whole lot more to come. She’s breathless and panting when we come up for air, so I drop the bomb. “I love you, Addy.”

“You do?”

“How could I not?” I reach for her hand and guide her toward the nursing home doors.

“Wait, don’t you want to see what your present is?”

“What present?” I ask, feigning confusion.

“Your—oh. *Oh.*”

“I won’t tell Wilma if you don’t.”

“Deal.”

“Oh, in all fairness,” I tell Addy as we weave through the parked cars, “I should admit I’ve always watched you walk home from work at night. To make sure you got home safely. I’ve also locked your door a few times, too. You’re pretty bad at remembering that.

Right outside the entrance to the nursing home, Addy tugs me to a stop. “Milo?”

“If you want me to stop locking your door, the answer is no—”

“I love you, too.”

I’m stunned into silence. Though I’ve felt the love from Addy, I wasn’t sure if she’d come to recognize it yet. All of this seems to be moving so fast. But now that the words are out, I know she does. It’s as if our souls always recognized each other and were waiting for us to figure it out.

I steal one more kiss that threatens to get us kicked off the premises. “When we’re done here, I’m taking you home to finish everything we ever started.”

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EPILOGUE

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ADDISON

WHEN MY NIGHT shift at the bakery ends, my husband is waiting outside the back door to pick me up. Just like he has been every night since last Christmas. Only this time, he opens the door for me, and there's heat in the cab of his new truck.

"Have a good night?" he asks, holding me hostage against the side of the truck to steal a kiss and a boob grab, like he does every night. I wonder if tonight we'll stay parked a while longer while I ride him in the driver's seat. My panties soak at the thought of him inside me.

"Busy but good. I fixed the thermostat in the oven without blowing up the bakery." He kisses me again, grabbing my ass with enthusiasm. Any fatigue I felt on my shift is quickly dissipating. "You get the living room painted?"

"I did."

After a few more sultry kisses, he finally lets me in the truck and we head home.

We drive past the four-plex that welcomed me back to Alpine Valley last year. Apartment One has a new tenant since Milo and I bought a fixer-upper. We've had a lot of fun flipping it together. And a lot more fun tearing our clothes off each other in between projects. We've broken in every room—every surface—of that house.

“You have to close your eyes,” Milo says at the front door, cupping both hands over them before I can object. His warm body presses into my back, and my legs nearly go limp. It’s been a year and we’re still in the honeymoon phase. It feels like we always will be. “I want it to be a surprise.”

Milo guides me over the threshold, holding his hand over my eyes as the door shuts behind us.

“Okay, open.”

The living room has been an empty drywall shell for weeks. But now ... I’m so shocked at the transformation that tears roll down my cheeks. The walls are a soft sea green. Framed photos hang from the walls. As does a very special gift I gave him last year.

I walk straight to it and gasp.

Last year, my mom had a brilliant idea to use one of Dad’s old wrenches in a unique gift. Two metal framed photos dangle from the wrench by tiny silver chains. I didn’t put any pictures in the frames when I gave it to him so he could choose which ones he wanted. He put in a photo of him and his dad right away. But until now, the other frame has sat empty.

Now, there’s a picture of us and a *sold* sign in front of this house.

“Milo, it’s perfect.”

My husband comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. He nuzzles my neck. “This life with you is perfect, Addy.” He helps me out of my coat, but doesn’t stop there. Layer by layer disappears until I feel the clasp of my bra slacken. “The only thing missing is some kids to fill this place up.”

I turn in his arms, excited at the words. My bra falls away, leaving me naked before him. “You mean it?”

“I’m ready to start a family with you, Addy.” He kneels down, kissing a trail on his way. His fingers tease my inner thighs as he spreads my legs apart. His hot breath tickles my pussy. “If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what I want. Last year, Santa brought me you. This year, he’s bringing me a family. It’s ... everything.”

“Good.” His tongue drags through my wet folds, making me unsteady of my feet. “Why don’t you sit on our new couch before your legs give out completely?”

“New couch?”

“You didn’t notice.” His words vibrate against my core.

“I was too distracted by the walls.” I gasp as his tongue plunges into my channel. I give up trying to stand and fall back onto the couch to enjoy this pleasure to the fullest. Best. Life. Ever.

THE END

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