

ZENA'S

Zing

BABES IN
TOYLAND

BRYNN HALE

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LAST CHAPTER PRESS LLC



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ZENA'S ZING INFO

Zena

Good job. Nice home. Growing bank account. I've got it all.

All except a man as my friend Zeek points out on the regular.

So Zeek decides to get me an early Christmas gift...a singing elf telegram with a present that makes me turn every shade of red when I open it.

But I've got bigger problems than a lively, rainbow meat stick...I've got plumbing problems.

When Harry, the comical elf, comes to my rescue, I reconsider my "I've got it all" stance.

Harry is honest, hard-working, and I can't get that silly elf and his ridiculously catchy song out of my head.

Maybe I need something more...I might just need a good plumbing.

Zena's Zing is the first in the Babes in Toyland series of heartwarming, humorous, instalove stories. No cheating. No cliffhangers. Always a happily ever after.

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ONE WEEK AGO...

ZEEK

I feel the eyes of my husband creeping over my shoulder. I already know what he's going to say, but I wait for him to scoff and make the comment anyway.

“Do you seriously need another one of those, babe?”

Exactly what I thought.

I roll my eyes and tip my head up to see him. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Honestly, you've already got one in every shape, size, and color they come in.”

“But not rainbow,” I say, flashing him a cheeky grin. “Don't you think this one suits me?”

Geoffrey mumbles against his coffee cup, “You do have a very colorful personality.” But then he kisses the top of my head to let me know he still loves me and my vibrant disposition, then sips the steaming cup of coffee. “But seriously, Zeek, I don't think you need any more of those. I don't think our bedside tables can fit anymore, either.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “It's not for me, honey. It's for Zena. I thought this would be the perfect gift to add a little...” I consider my words carefully, “Zip and zing to her holiday.”

Geoffrey plants his hand on his hip and cocks his head. “I know you guys have been best friends since elementary school, but are you sure *this* is what you want to get her for Christmas? A battery-operated boyfriend? Really? Don’t you think she probably has one of those already?”

“The girl doesn’t.” I shake my head while entering in my credit card information. “We’ve talked about it. All that girl does is work. Her bedside table is toy Sahara...and possibly her lady parts, too, with how little action she’s been getting.”

Geoffrey frowns, his mustache lengthening along the sides of his mouth. “That’s not right. She’s gorgeous, that smile lights up a room.” And that’s why I love my Geoffrey, he sees the best in everyone.

“I guess that’s not what the hetero dudes want these days.” I finish the expiration date and three-digit code and hit the Enter key with a swirling one finger flourish. “Not to bash on my own XY fellas, but the bar is kinda low on the hetero side.”

He takes another sip of his coffee. “She doesn’t have a *single* silicone cucumber?”

He’s as incredulous as I was, but I also know my bestie and she doesn’t lie. Ever. It’s one of the things that bonded us in third grade. When you’re lined up by first name alphabetically, and your father has decided everyone will call you Zeek instead of your name Erick, you bond to the one at the back of the alphabet.

Zena. She was there for me and now I’m going to be here for her.

Geoffrey stretches his calves, his muscular dancer legs fully in view in his short shorts. “You sure she wasn’t just lying to you because she was embarrassed you asked? You have a way of embarrassing people, you know.”

Who meeee? Okay, maybe.

“No, I don’t!” I have to at least try to pretend to be offended. “Next to you, honey, Zena is my best friend. We tell

each other everything. When we got talking about how she doesn't have a man in her life, the topic of toys, or her lack thereof, came up. She wasn't embarrassed, she just works too much and doesn't take proper care of herself and her needs."

Geoffrey tsks a few times before downing the rest of his coffee. "That's a sin."

"And that's why I decided this would be the perfect gift to get her for Christmas. She's going to be over the moon with this thing once she gives it a chance, and I know exactly how I'm going to send it."

"What? What do you mean? Aren't you just going to order it delivered to her house?"

"Oh, it's getting delivered." I look back at him, concern riddling his face when he catches a glimpse of the wild gleam in my eyes.

"Oh shit. With that look," he covers his ears and walks away chanting, "I don't want to know! I do *not* want to know!"

I open the site my coworker suggested as a joke for our boss.

"Zena...it's time for your own personal pickle."

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ZENA

The clock on the wall haunts me, its white face and oversized black numbers emphasizing how slowly time is ticking by. I excuse myself from my desk and head to the bathroom. I check my teeth in the mirror, running my fingers through my curly, black hair.

When I head back to the tiny square room with glass walls I call my office, my brother, Sam, pokes his head in. “Ritchey and I are gonna head to the pub down the street for wings and beer. You wanna come out with us tonight?”

Working at my family’s law firm has been both a blessing and a curse. I’m the youngest partner at the firm. My two older brothers have both worked here for a combined decade. Our father is retiring in a few years, and it’s up to us to carry on the Thomas name.

I love being a lawyer and working in family law, but the number of divorces I see is exactly why I’ve never been married. I’ve seen firsthand how ruthless and unloving people can be once they separate. It’s even worse when children are involved. As much as I like trying to smooth out the process for people—amicably dividing what they’ve combined accumulated and making sure the kids are going to be as happy as they can be when two adults are acting like children—the thought of ever going through that myself terrifies me to my core.

Plus, my last relationship didn't exactly end in hugs and roses.

Well, I did get the thorns.

"Nah, I've got too much to do," I say, organizing the stacks of folders on my desk. "Thanks, though."

Leaning against the doorframe, he raises a brow at me, a look I'm all too familiar with. "You know I love you, right?"

Okay, nothing good ever started with that. It's like the precursor to an intervention, I've heard it around the boardroom when someone is about to get a smackdown.

"But?" I ask with a huff.

"But I worry about you. You never get out and have fun now that you work here at the firm. What happened to my baby sis who was the life of the party in college?"

I laugh so hard I snort. "What are you talking about? I was always in bed by eight and never went to any of the frat parties."

Sam laughs and rolls his eyes. "You're right, you've never been any fun."

"Hey! I resent that. I'm fun. I'm just..."

"Busy?"

"Exactly."

He walks over and kisses the top of my head. "Don't work so hard that you end up succumbing to karoshi."

"Karoshi?"

"Yeah. It's what the Japanese say when someone dies at their desk. It's literally death by overworking."

I roll my eyes. He's got our mother's flare for drama, one of the reasons Dad and her called it quits long ago.

"I'm not going to die from working too much," I say with a groan.

“If you say so.” He heads out of my office, shutting the door behind him to leave me there, alone, surrounded by the oversized furniture, shelves full of law books, and piles upon piles of papers and folders.

Once I know that he’s really gone, I look around and let out the sigh I held in. This is my comfort-zone for sure. And my comfort-zone keeps getting smaller and smaller.

Death by overworking...that’s ridiculous. But a quick search of Google proves me wrong.

My cell phone buzzes in my hand, and I toss it into the air with surprise. The display says a name that’s wholly unsurprising. It’s a Thursday evening after all and it’s tradition.

And I’d miss the attention if he didn’t do it. But this man is definitely off limits.

“Hey, Zeek,” I say, bouncing back in my rocking leather desk chair. “What’s up?”

“Ugh. I can hear that old man desk chair of yours squeaking.”

I quickly stop. *Ratted out by furniture.* “Yes, I’m at work. Surprise...”

“Not much of a surprise, Ze. That’s where you live.”

“Oh my God, not you, too! My brother was just in my office hounding me about how I work too much. I thought maybe your call would be a breath of fresh air.”

“Girl, do you even know me?” We both laugh. “Listen, are you going to be home tonight?”

“Late,” I say, rolling a ballpoint pen back and forth on my desk. “I have a lot of work I need to get done, so I was planning on having a quiet night with a glass of pinot grigio and my laptop. Why, were you wanting to come over?”

“What? Oh, no. No!” He sounds almost like my offer is offensive.

Didn't need company anyway.

He continues, "Nothing like that. Just wanted to make sure you'd be home."

I pause and pull the phone back, contemplating which way to go on this one. If there's something I know about Zeek Jackson, it's that he doesn't just call to see if I'll be home. I can see him grinning through the phone, and for a moment I debate whether I dare ask.

"Okay, you got me. What the hell are you planning?" We've never lied to each other before. And he knows that I'm not a fan of fibs.

It's the cousin of lying.

"What? Nothing," he stretches the word, and his guilt is plain to hear. "Why do you think I'm planning something?"

"You're asking me if I'm going to be home tonight, but you weren't planning on coming over. Seems a little suspish, don't ya think?"

"No!" he practically chokes on the word, coughing into my ear through the phone. "No, not suspish. It was just a question."

"Okay, weirdo. Here's the deal, we've been friends for two decades—that's a long time. Zeek, I know when you're up to something."

"Geez, you know a person for twenty years and you assume you always know what they're up to," he says with a chuckle. "Whatever, I was just asking because I already knew what you'd be doing: nothing."

"Are you calling me boring?" I ask in mock defense.

"What? No! Did I call you boring? I'm just saying your brother might have a point when he's hounding you about working too much, Ze."

"Whatever," I say, rolling my eyes. "Hey, I should get going. I'm going to have to get some work done tonight, but

you could always stop by a bit later for a glass of wine and some gossip. I mean yours, of course. You know I never have anything to gossip about.”

My honesty about my life stings and I close my eyes.

Zeek’s voice softens, “Zena, gossip is overrated.”

“I know.” But I really don’t. I’ve never been the focus of gossip. I’m the straight arrow, not the one breaking the arrow.

“You’ll make your mark on the world in a different way. I believe in you.”

My eyes bite with salty tears. “Thanks, Zeek.”

“Okay, you get home so you can relax, and I’ll talk to you later, babe.”

He hangs up and I pull my phone from my ear, staring at it with narrow eyes. Despite his many excellent qualities, Zeek is an atrocious liar. He’s up to something, and it’s probably useless to think about what. It could be anything. Literally, anything.

I look at the calendar. *Crap. Christmas.* It’s snuck up on me again. I’ve done all my shopping online, like many people, just need to wrap the gifts. Ugh. Not my favorite task, but I do love seeing all the packages under the tree.

But, with that piece of information in my head, who knows what the hell Zeek’s got in the works.

Knowing him, he’s probably going to show up at my place with far too much wine for a Thursday night. Or maybe he’s going to pull a stunt like last year and send a blind date to my house with only a thirty-minute warning to get ready. Zeek’s intentions are good, trying to get me back into the dating scene, but to say that was hella awkward would be an understatement.

The guy was clearly uncomfortable. We had nothing in common. He was definitely more Zeek’s type than mine—boisterous and unafraid to speak his mind. It was glaringly obvious neither of us wanted a second date. I ended up letting

him take the pizza leftovers and wishing him well. I hope whatever Zeek's planned this year is better.

Either way, I guess I'll find out tonight.

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HARRY

My eyes gloss over the email, mortified by every word. I don't know why I'm surprised by the request. Nothing should surprise me anymore when it comes to this job.

I took the position as a singing gift deliverer to help supplement my income for the winter. Pride be damned, I need some way to pay the bills when my plumbing business gets too slow. People are spending on gifts, not fixing things around the house, but come spring, they come out of the woodwork.

It helps being a handy at lots of things, but still plumbing is my main gig. Winter brings about the burst pipe here and there, but most people hire plumbing companies that qualify for insurance for those jobs, and being that exterior repairs and renovations are my additional specialties, that doesn't leave a whole lot of work for me in the colder months.

I glance over at the perfectly wrapped box sitting beside me, my stomach roiling with acid at the thought of some poor soul having to open it while I sing "Colossal Saint Dick"—a parody of "Little Saint Nick" by The Beach Boys—and endure the embarrassment sure to come.

For the receiver, my pride has been sufficiently demolished over the years.

I'm hoping the name "Dick" has some significance to the recipient, and nothing to do with the contents of the package.

Doubt I'm that fortunate. It's not the first time I've gotten a weird request when it comes to my performance job, though.

Just last week, I had a lady get me to sing a song about how she was leaving her fiancé of seven years to the tune of "Jingle Bells." Including a line of, "*Went through hell, went through hell, and I'm leaving today. Haven't had fun, and you're not the one, plus you're a very bad lay.*" I had to stand there, crooning, while the guy awkwardly unwrapped a box containing the engagement ring he'd given her. Maybe the fact they were together seven years and still not married had something to do with it. I don't know. I don't stick around to find out the details.

It's get in.

Get it done.

And get out.

Always.

I don't need to be wrapped up in some drama. I have enough of my own.

I put on the ridiculous elf costume the singing telegram company provides and make my way to the recipient's house. I'm impressed when I pull up in front of the address. As I hop out, I see that the two-story home, with its cedar roof and dark stone columns and skirting, is definitely an impressive home.

Lots of upkeep. Hope the homeowners handy.

But this house probably belongs to someone well off, and that makes me even more nervous about all this. *They probably have the money to sue me.*

I swallow down my hesitation and grab the present off the passenger seat of my work truck, tucking it under my arm as I make my way onto the covered porch and ring the bell. My heart lurches when the door opens and a young woman, with big, dark eyes and a curly bundle of dark hair tied back in a ponytail, smiles. The smile is huge and welcoming.

Little does she know.

But the screwdriver being bounced in her hand has me all the more intrigued.

“Uh... Hello,” she says with a smirk. “I’m guessing Zeek sent you?”

I shake from the trance that she’s put me into. “Huh? Oh, right. I have a delivery from Mr.,” I check the receipt, “Erick...Erick Jackson.” This woman’s presence has me all kinds of confused. She’s a heady mix of charming, curvy, and cute.

She rolls her eyes. “Figures. Yeah, that’s Zeek. Wait, did you say ‘delivery’?”

I hand her the present, proceeding to clear my throat and start to belt out what’s been asked—and paid for—of me. She keeps glancing from me to the present, then back to me. It’s not until I’m about halfway through the song that I motion to the box with my head, and she clues in to open it. The paper flies, she’s childlike in the way she opens a gift and I chuckle while singing. But the way her cheeks glow tomato red tells me that what’s in the box is exactly what I was afraid of.

By the time the carol is over, the color has drained from her face, and she’s more horrified than embarrassed.

“Take it you didn’t get what you asked for?” I say, trying to lighten the mood. “I’m sorry I had to put you through that, Ms.—”

“Zena. You can call me Zena.”

I smile but she lets out an exhausted sigh, clutching the box tightly to her chest when my eyes pan over it.

She avoids my eye contact. “My friend Zeek and I are old friends. He probably thought this would be funny. He seems to get a kick out of forcing me into embarrassing situations.”

“Oh, come on. I just stood here and sung the second most fucked up Christmas carol I’ve ever been paid to sing. If anyone here should be embarrassed, it’s definitely me.”

She lowers the box and tips it towards me, revealing the rainbow-colored plastic penis inside. “At least you didn’t just have this monster delivered to you by a caroling elf.”

“Colorful.” I try to stifle my laugh but fail miserably. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t laugh. It’s just that... Well, that’s one hell of a Christmas gift.” But my amusement is not shared, and I immediately change my tone. I straighten my back, which as an elf, I look quite ridiculous doing, and I ask, “You want me to take it away for you?”

She stills and her twinkling gaze meets mine. “You’d do that for me?” Her words and eyes are soft and cautious. She lights a fire in my belly that radiates down to my groin. It warms me to the core despite the chilly night air whistling on my backside.

I’d probably do anything for her if she asked like that.

“Yeah, if you want me to.”

She shakes her head. “No, I’ve got bigger problems... Wait, did you say that was the *second* worst carol you’ve ever sung? Do I even want to know the first?”

“Two words: ‘Divorce Bells’.”

Zena snorts. “Yeah, that’s terrible.” She goes to hold her hand out, then blushes again when she realizes she’s still holding the screwdriver. “I didn’t get your name.”

“It’s Harry, Harry Smith. Were you fixing something, or do you have ninja moves with a screwdriver?” I point to her hand.

She rolls her eyes and almost drops the implement, almost juggling it. “Yeah, actually, and I should probably get back to that. The faucet on my kitchen sink won’t stop running. I was trying to fix it.”

“You know a lot about plumbing?”

“Not a damn thing,” she admits, chuckling. “But I’m doing my best.”

She doesn't have a boyfriend or husband to help her with these things? I find that high improbable.

“Mind if I take a look?”

“Um. I don't know?” She cocks her head. “Do you have plumbing experience? Or are you just some weirdo trying to get inside my house?”

It's not the only thing I'd like to get inside of.

I scold myself for the crude thought, clearing my throat. I pull a card from the pocket of my elf pants and hand it to her. “Harry Smith: If I can't fix it, it can't be fixed.”

She looks over the card a minute before offering a slight nod of approval. “Looks legit. Alright then, Harry Smith.” She opens the door wider. “Be my guest.”

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ZENA

He stamps his feet on the porch a few times, knocking most of the dirt off his...*elf booties*...before coming inside. When he takes his red and green insulated jacket off, I see that Mr. Harry Smith is far more buff than any holiday character I've ever seen.

His arms, solid and muscular, look like they could scoop me up and throw me over his shoulder despite my thick legs and curvy bottom. He takes off his green elf cap and reveals copper colored hair that's a shade darker than the spatter of stubble on his chin. When he looks at me and smiles, tiny crinkles form at the corners of green and gold speckled eyes.

On the porch he was charming. Inside he's positively a holiday treat.

He takes his shoes off and in amusing snowmen-covered socks heads into the kitchen like he belongs here.

I bought the home for the gourmet kitchen. It's decked out. Every bell and whistle.

Not that I have time to cook.

He lays on his back and shimmies until he can poke his head into the cabinet.

Fiddling with the pipes a bit before peeking out at me, he says, "Do you have a wrench?"

I feel flustered by the question, but I don't know why. Maybe it's the way he looks so damn hot on his back in the middle of my kitchen, or maybe it's the way his eyes sparkle when he looks up at me. Either way, this man is doing something to me, something I'm not used to feeling, and it's making me nervous.

I chuckle. "A wrench? Sure. Let me just grab my toolbox."

"Toolbox?"

I set the present with the rainbow love-maker in it and the screwdriver onto the kitchen counter and grab the toolbox from the bottom of the pantry, bringing it over to him. "There's probably one in here."

"Probably? You don't even know what's in your own box?" He coughs away the word. "I mean... toolbox."

My face burns as he opens it and starts rummaging around, retrieving a wrench. But he doesn't say anything about my lack of knowledge.

"I'm not very handy, but my dad thought it'd be good for me to have some basic tools around the house, just in case. He bought me this as a housewarming present when I bought the place."

His brows furrow as he cocks his head to the side, the puzzled look on his face emphasizing his handsome features. "Wait, was this the first house you ever bought?"

I nod. "Yeah, why?"

He smiles and shrugs, going back to meddling with things under the sink. "It's a really nice house to be your first. You must have a good job."

"I guess. I'm a lawyer."

I love the way he grins when he looks up at me again. "Lawyer, hey? Should I call you the next time I get into a car accident?"

I chuckle at his bad joke. “No, but you can call me if you’re ever going through a divorce.”

His face drops and I wonder if I’ve said something to offend him. “Sadly, there’s no divorce on the horizon for me,” he says, holding up his left hand to show me there’s no ring on his finger. “Don’t have a girlfriend, so it’ll be a long time before I’m even married.”

No girlfriend? How can a guy this patently sexy, easygoing, and handy be single?

He can hold a tune and a wrench.

“Oh, I see. No time for dating?” I ask.

“Not really. My renovations and repairs business keeps me busy all spring and summer, and then in the winter I take on odd jobs to make ends meet, so my schedule is all over the place. It’s not always ideal, but I do what I have to. I usually take a month off in the winter to travel as well.”

A surge of jealousy courses through me. “Traveling? That sounds fun. What sort of places have you seen?”

“I go somewhere different every year, so quite a few now. Germany, France, Thailand, Mexico, Hawaii, Bermudas, Costa Rica. I want to see India next.”

“Wow, very cool. Wish I had time to travel. Or... do anything, really. I’m married to my work at the moment.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” he says. He stands up, setting the toolbox on the counter and putting the wrench and screwdriver away. “There you go, all fixed.”

“Really?” I walk over and test out the taps. They work perfectly, possibly even better than before.

Whatever Harry’s done he’s totally nailed it. The man has magic hands, a thought that makes me clench with need as he watches me.

I reach for my purse. “What do I owe you?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it. Consider not slamming the door in my face while I sang that terrible song payment enough.”

We both laugh, but soon we’re quiet and there’s a thick tension between us. I haven’t taken the next step with many men. And never with a man who showed up in an elf costume, but I’m considering something that I might regret.

“At least let me fix you a drink. I have rum and eggnog, hot chocolate? Tis the season.” I grab two mugs from the cupboard, but when I go to set them down, I knock the box off and send the rainbow mate flying. It springs from the giftbox and thuds like a mass of clay onto the floor, turning itself on, and begins to buzz across the hardwood inside the plastic packaging like it’s running away from me.

Even fake penises are running away.

Horrified, I run over and snatch the vibrating hunk of plastic off the floor to turn it off. But the switch has turned around and I can’t get my finger through the little “Try me!” hole. Which is ironic in itself.

I pound the packaging against the granite countertop and the gift finally either breaks or dies of a humiliating death like I will.

I can only imagine how red my face is when I turn back around. My glasses sit half-cocked on my nose, and I straighten them so that I don’t look like a completely out of control person. Harry looks like he’s trying to keep from bursting out laughing, his lips are clenched together, and his chest is rocking with chuckles that he’s just not letting out.

When he finally has composure, he walks to me and I shove the rubber rainbow into the sink, out of site. “Now *that* was entertaining.”

I roll my eyes. “Right. I’m gonna kill Zeek,” I mumble.

“No killing at Christmas is what my grandma always said.”

“I think that’s a good motto. I’ll try to remember it.”

He steps closer and his gaze bounces from my lips to my eyes. “Thanks for the offer, but I should really get going. I have one more carol to get done tonight.”

Great, this fake piece of meat has scared off the real thing. Or it was my beating it against the granite. He’s probably thinking that’s what I do to the real thing!

“Thanks again for fixing my faucet, and for, well...” I look down at the phallic rainbow object, there’s no being thankful for that. “Thanks for the faucet.”

“No problem,” he says, flashing me that handsome grin one more time. “I hope you enjoy your night and your...gift.” He winks. “Have a good one.”

I can hear the insinuation in his voice about how I might be enjoying my evening, but that’s the last thing on my mind. Searching Google for “how to make a death look accidental” comes to the top of my to-dos list.

I walk him to the door, waving goodbye as he jumps in his truck and drives off.

And the gift starts vibrating again in the other room, bouncing around the farmhouse style sink.

Zeek, you and I are gonna talk.

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HARRY

The image of her holding that thing, her cheeks flush with embarrassment, is burned into my mind. My groin aches as I drive to the next client's house. Thankfully, this one is a simple carol for a grandma. I get it over with and then get back into my car, trying to shake the image of Zena from my mind.

What if she's using her new toy right now?

She obviously lives by herself, in a big house, with no one around to hear her when she...

Stop it! Stop picturing this woman you hardly know using a gift she never should've opened in front of you in the first place. You kind of insisted she open it. You took her down a path of hedonism.

I look at the dashboard and see it's only a little past seven. I'm on the opposite side of town from my house and my stomach is growling. Since I'm within two minutes of my favorite Chinese restaurant and it would be a mistake not to stop for food. Plus, by the state of her kitchen, she hadn't made any dinner. I'm still not all that far from her house.

Fuck it.

Zena's the first woman whose grabbed my attention in a very long time. Months...maybe a couple years. Albeit it was for how she beat a rainbow piece of rubber to death, but still, she was funny, sweet, and how her cheeks dimple when she's embarrassed is infinitely adorable. And she's fuckin' brilliant.

A lawyer? That takes school and memorization. Two things I never really loved. Hand me a tool and I'm in my element. I guess we both probably have our own strengths.

I go grab food—two orders of Dinner for One—and drive back to Zena's house. Maybe she's already eaten, or maybe she's been too busy doing other things, but I can't pass up the opportunity to see her again. She even asked me to stay! I wanted to, but duty called in the way of a version of "Silent Night" in German. One of my specialties. I can sing it in sixteen languages.

But I was a moron for not asking for her number before I left, and if bringing her late-evening Chinese food doesn't make her night, I'll know she could never be the one anyhow.

But I have to at least give it a shot.

I drive to her house despite all my self-doubts.

Would a woman that smart and successful ever go for a simple handyman who makes extra money singing lewd carols?

She could obviously benefit from having someone handy in her life, and maybe she's got more to fix than just her faucet.

Maybe her heart could use some mending too.

I knock on the door, one bag of food in my hand. I left my own in the car—I don't expect her to invite me inside to eat with her after having just met a couple hours ago.

She opens the door, clearly surprised to see me.

"Harry! Hi! What's going on?" Her hand goes to her hip and it juts out, popping her round backside with it. "Oh, God, don't tell me Zeek sent you with another package?"

I laugh and shake my head. "Don't worry, nothing like that. I just stopped at the best Chinese place in town to pick up some food. I don't live in this neck of the woods, so I don't get to go there too often. Have you eaten?"

Zena shakes her head. “No, I’ve been too busy working.”

Of course she was busy working and not playing with her new gift. Get your mind out of the gutter, Harry.

“I got this for you, Dinner for One.” I hand her the bag. “You should take a break and have something to eat. Seriously, it’s the best.”

“Where’s it from?”

“Little City. It’s a few blocks from here.”

“Are you kidding? I love Little City.” She beams a smile that truly could bring peace to wars. She take a deep inhale of the food and a deep moan exits reminding me of things I’ve seen and can’t un-see. “Oh, my...that’s so good.”

Her enthusiasm makes me smile. If she’s this into good food, maybe she could be the one after all. They say a way to a man’s heart is food but having someone to eat it with definitely could be a close second.

“Great. Well, have a good night.” I spin on my elf heels and start walking down the porch steps.

“Wait! What about you, have you eaten?” An urgency in her voice makes my knees weak.

I turn and smile. “I have my own dinner in the car. I was gonna go home and eat.”

She smiles, tucking a loose curl behind her ear and pushing those big, black-rimmed glasses back up. “Would you...would you like to eat together?”

**ZENA**

“Mmm, you picked all the best of what they have to offer, Harry. Seriously, this is exactly what I get every time I go there.” I look across the dining table as I devour another Crab Rangoon smothered in sweet chili sauce. He’s looking down at his plate, but there’s a wide smile spreading across his face.

When he showed back up, I almost couldn’t contain myself. My heart clipped along faster and faster and now I feel a little lightheaded having him sitting with me at my woefully underused dining table.

“You’re not just saying that because you’ve got something else around here that needs fixing, are you?” When his eyes meet mine, my heart pauses. My mouth freezes, full of food, and I swallow hard as I battle the urge to tell him the truth.

The only thing that needs fixing around here is me.

Instead, I shrug. “Nope. Sadly, I don’t have any machine or plumbing that’s broken.”

That’s the truth.

“Sadly? You want more stuff to be broken?” he asks while digging into the Orange Chicken portion of our meals. A citrus explosion in every bite.

“Maybe. I mean, it’d be an excuse to get you over here again.”

Time seems to freeze as he stares at me, the gold in his eyes flickering across the table and luring me in.

Do I need an excuse to get him over here again? Do I want an excuse to get him over again?

Hell yes, I do!

Perfect. I've made him speechless with my honesty.

I want him to say something, anything, but my words seem to have caught him off guard. He's frozen, and even in his disbelief, every beautiful feature of his face—those bright eyes, that angular jaw, that long nose—remains as one of the most attractive men I've ever met.

I set my fork down, wipe my mouth with the cloth napkins I never get to use but always wanted to, and wait for him to let me down easy as he tells me how he's flattered but uninterested.

“Guess I'll have to find something around here to break, then.” He smiles and now I'm speechless. “Even a house as nice as this has to have something that needs tweaking.”

Yeah, me. I'm the thing. My love life needs serious tweaking.

I clear my throat as I take another sip of white wine, crisp and floral, a perfect accompaniment and my only contribution to the meal other than putting my foot in my mouth. “Thanks again for the food. It's delicious and really hit the spot after a long day. It was really thoughtful of you, Harry.”

“Don't mention it. I know what it's like to work late and literally forget to eat. And then feel crappy from not eating. That's not a pretty look for anyone. Not that I think you could ever look not pretty.” He pauses, taking a big gulp of wine. “You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I get it. So, what about you? You dress up like an elf and sing carols and deliver... presents.” I cringe, the residual effects from Zeek's unthoughtful humor still sit at the

surface of my psyche. “*And* you have your own repair business. What else should I know about you?”

“Honestly, there’s not much else to tell. I’ve been single a long time, so I kinda have the same story as you. I’ve just kept myself busy with work.”

“How long have you been single?”

“Too long.”

I bite my bottom lip, hoping my next question won’t be too much prying. “Can I ask why?” I lean back with my wine, swirling it and taking a couple sips.

He shrugs, downing the rest of his glass in one gulp like he needs the liquid courage. “I don’t know, got used to being alone, is my best guess. My family, what little I have, is across the country in Denver. I try to get out and see them at least a couple times a year, but it’s hard. Running my own company is a lot of work. My mother bugs me about settling down and getting married but finding someone who understands me always working is hard.”

The statement hits me hard in the chest.

“I do.”

His eyes seem to brighten at the simple words. “I like that about you, Zena. Is that why you’re single as well?”

I take a deep breath, drinking more wine. I muster up the courage to tell him the truth. “My ex-fiancé walked out on me a few years ago. Looking back, it made total sense. He was a free-spirited hippie. He wanted to work two months a year and spend the rest traveling, and I can’t handle not having the safety net of a good, steady income.”

I throw back the rest of the wine, coating the memories in the alcohol tang and setting the glass down with a thud. “I woke up one day and all his stuff was gone. He moved out while I was literally asleep in the next room. Left most of his crap, which I had to take to the dump. I was absolutely shattered. After that, I decided I was going to focus on law

school and my career. If I'm busy working, I don't really have time to get lonely."

But that's not true.

Lonely isn't about time.

Harry gets up from the table and walks over to me, taking my hands in his and pulling me up until I'm standing in front of him. Then he wraps his arms around me and squeezes, his face buried in my hair.

"I get it," he says, and it's the most calming thing anyone has said to me. "I really get it."

The feeling of him around me is every bit electrifying as it is soothing. His body radiates heat and his cologne, woody and spicy, fills me and makes my legs tremble.

Then he leans down and pecks me on the cheek.

"I've had a great night, Zena."

"I've had a great night, too" I say, my voice a lusty whisper.

"It's late. I should probably get going so you can get to bed."

"Okay." I've been trained not to show disappointment in negotiations and I'm afraid that I can't turn it off.

I don't tell him how badly I want to invite him back to bed with me. I walk him to the door.

"I'd love to see you again."

"It's kinda my busy time of year, but I'd really like that, too."

He holds out his phone and I fill in my information. And before he puts it back in his pocket, I hear my phone ding on the kitchen island as he sends me a text. I almost can't wait to see what it says.

Every second we spend together is one closer to the last and so I open the door slowly.

He turns before opening the storm door. “Have a great night, Zena.” He kisses my cheek, lingering for almost too long. I go to turn my head and go full-on lips to lips, but he’s out the door before I can.

And the next thirty seconds are a blur of me shutting the door and running to the kitchen. I check my phone.

Harry: I’d REALLY love to see you again.

My body practically levitates. I grab the obnoxious present from Zeek and a pair of heavy-duty kitchen shears so I can book it upstairs to the bathroom two stairs at a time.

Running with scissors is the least of my worries right now.

I shred the plastic covering, read the details while I’m stripping my clothes. “Waterproof...thank God. Sixteen speeds...what is this a motorboat?! Rainbow burst effects... what the hell does that mean?”

Harry’s smell is still all over my clothes, and I take in the heavenly scent one more time before dropping them in the hamper. Steam fills the room as hot water cascades from the showerhead. I step in and let the waterfall soak me from head to toe, tickling every nerve ending as my body screams for release.

I take the rainbow manmeat substitution from its package and slip it between my thighs, gasping as its thick tip spreads me. My lips quiver as the toy slides inside. I clench, on edge as I slide it farther and farther inside. My arm trembles with the weight of it, but I pump it into myself over and over, ignoring the way my muscles burn.

I turn on the vibrations, but accidentally skip level one and go to a five and for a moment I think I’m going to faint.

Sweet lord of all fake plastic.

My thighs clench and my knees buckle, but I grab the curtain rod and keep myself upright, hoping the rod doesn’t break away from the wall.

All of my lady bits squeeze and caress the hardness, driving it deeper until it strokes my special spot inside with every push. I pant like I'm running a 5K race as I grow closer to orgasm, my lungs filling with the steamy air with each inhale.

“Oh fucking God!” My grip on the curtain falters and in the next second, my feet are slipping on the shower floor and I'm on my back, but I don't drop the toy.

Never drop the toy.

My eyes clamp closed and a vision of Harry flashes and how his arms wrapped around me. Muscular, warm, and welcoming.

I imagine the toy is his cock, filling me as my cavern pulses and the buzzing of an orgasm slowly begins to take me. My finger finds the buttons along the bottom of the multicolored love machine, and I crank that baby up to sixteen, just to find out what the fuss is all about.

“Oh fuck, Harry! Give it to me!”

I scream out his name and my body rocks with the longest and deepest bodygasms I've ever had. The room lights up with a sparkling rainbow.

That's a rainbow burst alright.

I'm seeing friggin' unicorns and leprechauns, all kinds of mythical beings as my body goes into convulsions that I've never experienced. Every jerk sends the colors bouncing around the shower like I'm inside a damn disco ball.

My fingers grow slippery from the water pounding my body and I drop the toy, letting it fall into the tub with a thud. It bounces around, searching for another woman to please. Its destiny is just that.

“You've done your job, rainbow dick. Well done...well...done.”

It swims its way to me and it turn off. Lean my head back against the end of the tub, I just enjoy the lasting euphoria.

Water pours down over my body, and my chest heaves as I slowly return to my senses, my legs and slit still tingling in the aftershock.

I can't wait to see Harry again. Maybe this time he'll give my pipes a little plumbing attention.

And maybe another round with Mr. Rainbow.

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**HARRY**

My phone buzzes, my heart following suit when I see it's Zena texting.

Zena: I had an incredible time last night. I hope you did too.

Zena: Thanks again for the faucet. Working perfectly.

Harry: That's my specialty...plumbing.

I make the decision then and there to surprise her again that night. I have a caroling job nearby at seven and figure I can pop over after and bring her one of the killer rum and cinnamon eclairs from the bakery near my house, as well as check to make sure her faucet is working well.

It's part of my plumber's oath. Not really, but I have to see her again.

I wore a nice dress shirt and some crisp slacks under my costume, a slip-over, papier-mâché snowman today. Thankfully, only traditional songs and nothing to cringe at. Well, except a six-foot-tall snowman.

I pull up to her house after the gig, grab the box of pastries off the seat, then head up the walkway. I'm nearly on the porch when I hear a sound that makes my heart leap into my throat.

A shrill scream comes from somewhere inside. Without thinking, I whip open the unlocked door and run inside. I don't

bother taking my shoes off as I run around the house, probably ruining the box of eclairs as I toss it onto the dining table.

“Zena? Zena! Are you okay?” I call out and the shouting immediately stops.

I hear a door fly open upstairs and Zena comes running out, stopping when she gets to the top of the stairs. She’s staring down at me, hair wild and eyes wide, a shiny, black, silk robe wrapped around her, only held closed by her hand. Her cheeks are bright pink and there’s a sheen of sweat on her forehead.

“Harry? Uh...what...” she gasps for air. “What are you doing here? Did I leave the door unlocked?”

My heart flip flops as my brain fights to process what’s happening. Have I interrupted something? Is she alone?

“I, um... I was bringing eclairs to surprise you and then I heard a scream, and I ran inside, I don’t know what I was thinking. I can go now if you—”

She comes running down the stairs and whips her arms around me before I can process the rest of my thoughts. Her lips crash to mine, hot and sweet, and she kisses me with a fierceness I hadn’t realized I was missing before she entered my life.

Her tongue fights its way into my mouth, sliding all around mine as I cup her buttocks with both hands. I squeeze hard, pressing her against me and forcing the bulge in my pants against her mound. Her bare womanhood presses against me as her robe slips up, and I groan as I feel the heat of her flesh through my pants.

“Come to my room?” she says while nibbling my earlobe.

I love the way her voice sounds, desperation trickling through it as she begs me to give her what she needs.

I don’t answer, instead opting to follow her as she takes my hand and leads the way, giving me a great view of her bare ass as we run upstairs. When we get into her room, I see the

bright colored, fleshy friend sitting atop her lavender bed sheets.

Holy shit.

“I was,” she clears her throat, and those adorable divots of dimples dot her cheeks. “Just enjoying the gift you brought me.”

“I wish I was the one who bought it for you. But I’m going to need to thank this Erick...Zeek guy,” I growl, kissing the side of her neck as I come up behind her and wrap my arms around her. I open her robe, letting it hang off her shoulders as my hands caress her breasts. She moans, pressing her ass back against my throbbing manhood as she slips a hand down her front.

I watch over her shoulder as she begins playing with herself, her back arching as she does, pressing that perfectly round ass into my cock. Her fingertips move up and down along her softness, then in circular motions around her button until her breathing begins to grow fast and raspy.

My hands fumble to get my belt undone, then the button on my pants, then the zipper. It all feels far too difficult, and I need this woman now. I need to know what it feels like connected to her. That toy might have got her started, but I’m definitely going to make sure she ends up good and finished.

I watch my manhood practically jump from my pants as my slacks fall around my ankles. I need this, and I can tell Zena needs it just as badly. She needs me, and I intend to deliver.

I coax her over to the bed, kicking off my pants and boxers as I walk. I bend her over, presenting her ass and that glorious pink slit as beads of anticipation trickle from my head and down my length. Her body glistens, my mouth watering at the sight. As much as I want to bury myself inside her, I can’t deny myself the opportunity to taste her sweetness.

“Oh!” she cries out, jolting as my tongue slides along the folds. She’s sweet like the dessert I brought, and I lap hungrily

as she squirms against my lips.

I'm going to tease her until she's begging me to stop.



ZENA

“Harry, please! I can’t take any more. I need you inside me.” I don’t know where the words come from. I hardly recognize my own voice as I beg for him. As good as his tongue feels against me, it’s just not enough. I need to be filled, just like before he got here. But this time it needs to be the real deal.

And it needs to be him. I need his sweetness, his kindness, and his manliness. They’re a trifecta I was waiting for. I want to hold him, look into his eyes, and savor our connection.

He trails kisses along my spine before grabbing my hips. The way his fingers dig into me isn’t painful. It feels good, like he’s claiming me as his own. He lifts my bottom higher, and my face snuggles into the bunched-up blanket on the corner of the bed.

I gasp when I feel him. He’s thicker than the colorful pool noodle Zeek bought me, and about the same length. His hardness parts me like he’s sliding a hot knife into butter, forcing himself inside until he’s pressed in as far as he can go.

I scream into the blanket as he moves furiously behind me. I can tell he’s wanted this just as badly as I have. His body is screaming for release just as loudly as mine, maybe more so, as he winds me up from the inside out.

“I can’t...It’s been too long... I can’t hold on,” he says, grunting loudly as he plants himself firmly inside me and fills me.

I whimper softly, scared to show the disappointment I’m reeling with. As I look back, he smiles, motioning to the bed with his head.

“Lay on the bed.”

I smile back, wondering what he has in store. I curl up on my bed and watch as he grabs the toy and positions himself between my legs. His face disappears between my legs as he slips the toy inside me, causing me to cry out.

His hand works slow and steady while his mouth wraps around my button and sucks. Immediately my legs begin to tremble, and I feel the onset of an orgasm beginning to creep up from my core into the pit of my stomach.

He hits those magic buttons and I’m sent into orbit.

“Harry, fuck!” I whisper, but he doesn’t stop, doesn’t slow. He keeps his mouth pressed on me as I explode and wave after wave of pleasure shocks my system. I lay there with my eyes closed, drowning in the wonderful sensations.

We climb under the covers and his head lays next to mine on my pillow.

“Well, that was unexpected,” he says with a shit-eating grin.

“Good unexpected?” I ask, my brain still kind of stuck in neutral.

He tips his head. “Zena, that was the best moment of my life.”

“Tell me more about your life.”

“I’m an open book. What more do you want to know?” He pulls the covers over our heads like we’re inside a tent. It’s youthful and a whoosh of emotion rockets through me.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” I ask.

He looks up and my heart falls. “I believe that people can have an attraction that’s so strong that it feels like they’ve known each other forever.” His hands cup my face. “I feel that here. I feel like we’ve known each other in another life.”

“You are special, you know that.”

“Ditto, baby.”

I’ve never felt special, but in his eyes, I see it.

I move in closer, his naked body like a tractor beam, and his arms wrap me up. It’s just like the first time. And I wonder if it’ll feel like this every time.

Special.



I OPEN MY EYES WHEN I HEAR THE SOUND OF A ZIPPER. THE room’s still dark and I stretch to get my bearings. Pushing to sit up, I lean back to turn on my nightstand lamp and catch the time on the clock.

4 a.m.?

“Where are you going?” I ask, realizing Harry has already put his pants on.

He gets his shirt on before coming to sit beside me on the bed and kissing my lips. “I’m sorry, Zena, I have to go. I need to catch a flight this morning at nine to Denver to see my family for Christmas.”

“Oh. I see.” But I don’t see. My vision is clouded with fear that he’s making a quick getaway.

I’m at a loss for words. I assumed that we’d be going on dates and taking it slow, but he never mentioned his plans. I thought maybe...no, that’s the fairy tale, the Christmas movie on one of those famous TV channels that ends in them kissing under the mistletoe. This is real life. It never ends up in the happily ever after. I get paid by people who prove that every day.

But still, I want him to know that I expect open communication. I don’t lie, but right now honesty feels heavy and like it’ll lead to an argument.

State the facts. That’s what they teach us in law school.

I pull the blanket up to my chin, covering what's in full-birthday suit view. "You didn't say you were visiting your family this year."

"I know. I didn't think it really mattered, I guess. I mean we've just started...this." He sighs. "And I thought you'd be going to yours and probably wouldn't want me there. Was I wrong?"

He's giving me good counter arguments, but I want a judge to rule. It's hard to be the lawyer, the jury, and the judge in love. My heart is overruling my head and saying that I should be upset, when I logically know that we had one amazing, special night and that doesn't make a relationship. He has no obligation to stay.

"Zena, I...I..."

I hold my breath, I want him to utter the three words I desperately want to hear, but I can see he's not where I am.

He pushes off the bed and I feel small as he looks down on me. "Anyway, we should get back together when I get back next week."

I hear the "if it happens great, and if not...oh, well" in his voice. Either that or I've just been labeled a booty call. I've been there on both and that's why I don't rush into things.

I force a smile, silently reminding myself that strong, independent women don't cry over such things. I've got my life at the office. "Okay, sounds good."

"Great." He kisses me again and I grab his face holding him to me, wondering if it'll be the last time.

"Wow, now that's a kiss I won't forget while I'm gone."

I swallow down the rising tide of emotion. "I hope not."

His head tips and he seems a little confused, but he looks to the clock. "Thanks for everything, Zena."

As I walk him to the door, there's only one thought on my mind.

Is this going to be the last time I see him?

And I'm going to give Zeek a tongue-lashing when I see him next.

You started this...

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**ZENA**

“Mmm, seriously, girl, this place has the best hollandaise I have ever had in my life.”

I roll my eyes at Zeek. “Did you even hear a word I said?”

He looks up from his dish, seemingly annoyed that I’m trying to dump my life problems on him while he’s trying to enjoy his carb-laden meal. “Are you serious, Zena? He’s going to call you back. Dude’s just gone to visit his family for the holidays.”

His indifference at this issue has me wanting to throw my Eggs Benedict in his lap.

I called him right after Harry left. Zeek was already up and on his stationary bike doing his hour morning ride. He immediately jumped off and said he’d meet me at the diner around the corner from my house in an hour.

He takes longer to get ready than I do.

“You don’t understand, Zeek.” My voice comes out far whinier than I want it to, and I sigh at myself. Coughing away the petulant inner child that my childhood friend can bring out of me, I collect myself and lean forward, whispering. “I’m telling you, he left so quickly after the...deed. I don’t think he’s going to call or text me ever again.”

He picks up his phone and starts typing, talking at the same time in a multi-tasking way that is completely Zeek.

“You think he’s gonna ghost you?”

“Yes! No? I don’t know. I hope not, but—”

“Hey you guys!” Our friend Bella comes running over to our table. She throws her arms around Zeek’s neck and squeezes before kissing me on either cheek. “How have you been? I haven’t seen either of you in forever.”

“Bell, what’s going on?” I say, pushing my plate away. My appetite has left with Harry’s plane.

“Just grabbing a quick bite to eat before I head back into work to finish up a brief.”

“Fun, fun,” I lie, but she gets it and chuckles. “You should join us. Sit, please.” Normally I wouldn’t want the interaction, but Zeek’s giving his meal more attention than me and for some reason being with Harry has made me want to...

Ugh.

Reconnect and connect with people?

No. That can’t be. Two meetings with Harry, one with a very happy ending, and I’m back to needing people in my life? That’s a development I never saw coming. But it’s true. He’s made me want to be involved in other’s lives and have them back in mine. Even if it doesn’t work out with him or anyone, I want to know that I connected with people.

“Oh, no, I’m so sorry. I can’t. There’s a handsome gentleman waiting for me over there in the corner.” She points and a stunning guy seated at the far side of the restaurant waves. “It’s our second date. My schedule’s been super hectic, but luckily his is flexible and he agreed to meet for an early breakfast. The first date went really well, so wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” Zeek and I say in unison and the guy’s head rears back.

She takes a second look at me, as I push my breakfast around the plate. “Zena, you’re practically glowing.”

Zeek spits his mimosa all over the table. “Sorry...sorry...” He smirks at me. “But you are.”

Bella tips her head with confusion. “But anyway, text me sometime and we’ll go grab coffee and catch up, okay? We can update each other on all our man gossip!”

“Right, okay,” I say with a weak-hearted laugh.

Bella practically skips over to where her new man is sitting. She looks so happy and carefree, and I’m immediately jealous.

“That could be you, you know.” Zeek leans forward. “And you *are* glowing.”

“But at what cost. I’m glowing because I let a man into my protected circle,” I say, turning back to Zeek.

I wish it wasn’t true, but the facts stand. Since elementary school, I’ve felt like everyone, except for Zeek, is a temporary fixture in my life. That they are here and willing to leave at any moment. And yet, after seeing Bella, I can tell that I want things to change. I want to have connections and meet-ups with people outside of work. I want to have a life. Fuck, I want so much more today than three days ago. I want it all.

“And you see how over the moon Bella is because of that guy? That could be you. If you’d just open up and learn to trust a person. That asshole fiancé who dumped you wasn’t a good guy. And Harry doesn’t sound like your father, he sounds better, different. Hell, I’m ready to find him and date him.”

“First, he’s mine.” I say, stabbing at his hand with my fork. He fake pretends to be hit. “And second, don’t let Geoffrey hear you say that...or wait, oh God, are you having issues?”

“Jeez, Zee, you think everyone is going to get a divorce! Your career has damaged you.” But he stops and smirks.

“What?” It’s the same smirk I remember hearing through the phone when rainbow god came into my life.

“You just said that he’s *yours*. You claimed the puppy.”

All the blood runs from my hands and my body chills.

I did? Oh, shit, I did. I don't want this to be the end. I want the happily ever after that's in those cheesy movies.

“Zena...Ze!” He shakes me from the tumble down the emotional hill I’m taking inside. “Harry’s *not* moving on. He’s just going to see his family. You should stop assuming the worst and just be honest with him.”

I hang my head. “Yeah... but he’s already left for the airport. It’s almost eight. He’s probably—”

“Planes get delayed all the time!” Zeek cries, hands waving about frantically. “Why don’t you drive Missy Stang over to the airport right now and tell him how you feel before he gets on that plane?”

I fight the tears forming on at the bottom of my eyes. “You really think so?”

“Yes, girl, yes!” he says with so much excitement that I can’t help but jump up from the table. “Go! Otherwise you’re going to be a miserable wreck until he gets back, and who knows when that’ll be. At least this way, you’ll know with certainty how he feels. If he just wanted a quick bang and isn’t into you, he’s an asshole, but then at least you’ll know and can move on with your life.”

I throw my purse over my shoulder. “You’re right.” I lean across the table and peck Zeek on the nose. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, girl. Just get out of here and go settle things with your man, and then call me and give me all the juicy gossip.”

I look down at his phone and see that Geoffrey has text back: **OMG...YAY FOR RAINBOWS!**

I shake my head. “Nice.”

“You’re part of the gossip now. I always knew you had it in you.”

“Love you!” I call out as I’m walking away.

“I know.” He toasts me with the remaining mimosa. “Love you, too!”

I run out of the restaurant and hop into my car, speeding to the airport as fast as I can without risking a ticket. Never looks good when a lawyer has to go before a judge. They will say you know better. I’ve heard it before when my brother had a ticket. Thankfully the roads are pretty clear on this Saturday morning. When I get to the airport, I find a parking spot and rush inside, looking around for customer service.

I find a man dressed in a Santa hat and suit standing behind a small booth that reads Customer Service. As I approach him, he lets out a jolly roar.

“Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas! How can I help you, young lady?”

“I’m looking for a nine a.m. flight to Denver, please... Santa. Do you know which gate it’s at?”

He points straight down the terminal. “Ho, ho, ho. If you go this way, you’ll see the big message board with all the flights listed, but I’m fairly certain it’s in Zone C.”

“Thank you, Santa! Merry Christmas!” I don’t even regret calling him Santa. Everything just feels different. I have joy and happiness.

“Merry Christmas to you too!”

When I get to the message board, I see that he was right. The flight is boarding at gate C49. I don’t have a boarding pass, but I show one of the guards my I.D. and explain the situation. “Please, sir, I need to get to this gate just for a minute. I know it sounds cheesy, but I need to tell a guy how I feel before I potentially never see him again.”

The guard grins, stroking his chin. “You know this is like something out of a movie, don’t you?”

I nod. “Yes, I know it sounds dumb, but—”

“Alright, I’ll escort you to the gate, but you’ll have to stick right by me and follow me straight back after you talk to this

guy.”

I give him a hug and he stiffens. “Thank you!”

“And no more hugging the airport workers.”

I chuckle. “Right.”

It takes everything in me to walk beside the guard and refrain from bolting to the gate. When I get there, I’m shattered to see that the lobby is empty. Huge glass windows reveal the plane already in motion, rolling down the strip before the wheels tuck up and it soars away.

I stand there and watch until it disappears, my heart soaring away with it.

I’m too late.

A hand lands on my arm.

But it’s not Harry.

“Miss, I need you to go back out.”

I shuffle back, my lips curled in.

He’ll be back soon.

Or he won’t.

The old me pulls down on every happiness I had. All the bright colors of Christmas look muted and I sink into myself.

Santa’s brow furrows when I walk by. “Everything okay, Miss.”

I sniffle. “No it’s not Santa.”

“Come here.” He steps from the booth and I crash into him. “Whoa.”

I’m not going to stop the tears. I need to cry this one out.

He pats my back. “Hey, if this guy is anything worth running through an airport for, he’s probably worth waiting for, too.”

I back away and he hands me a tissue. “Thank you. I just wish he’d been there. I had so much to say to him.”

“I hope you get your Christmas wish to see him soon.”

I hope so, too.

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HARRY

My heart sinks in my chest when I don't see her car in the driveway. Figuring she may have parked it in the garage, I walk up to her door and ring the bell. I wait a bit, ring it again. Still nothing.

Damn. That's what I get.

I call but there's no answer. Sounds crazy, but I couldn't bring myself to get on that flight without telling her how I feel. I was a total asshole this morning, taking off after our time together. I felt myself urging the words "I love you" to come out and I panicked.

What would've happened if I had said them to her? It would've scared her away, right? I convinced myself that I couldn't be in love with a girl I've just met. I can't fall head over heels for someone after this first time I make love to them.

Make love? Yeah, make love.

Was it making love in her eyes as well, or was it just casual sex? My heart feels like it's reeling, not knowing the answer. And that's why I postponed my flight to one later today and showed up at her doorstep at nine o'clock in the morning. I was hoping to catch her still a home. I'm sure she has people to see and places to be, but it seems I'm a little too late.

I turn to leave and see a car round the corner, top down and her curly hair whipping in the breeze. My heart skips a beat.

The car rolls up the driveway so slowly, like she's afraid she'll scare me away. Her eyes lock on mine through the windshield. Time crawls by tick by tick of each second as I wait for her to get out of the car, and when she does, my chest might explode.

“Harry? Umm...aren't you supposed to be on the C4991 flight to Denver?”

“I wanted to come talk to you first.”

“Really? What about?”

“Wait, how did you know my flight number?”

Her cheeks flush that familiar crimson. “I went to the airport to find you. I wanted to see you before you left.” She shrugs, a sheepish grin on her lips. “I guess I felt I had some unanswered questions after last night, and I was hoping not to leave them unanswered for too long.”

I take a step towards her, bridging the gap between us. Taking both her hands in mine, she stares up at me, those big, dark eyes gloss over.

“What kind of questions?” My heart ticks along like a racecar is inside of me, revving its engine higher and higher.

“The kind that let me know what last night means to you, and whether or not you feel the same as me.”

“And how do you feel?”

“I that my heart really hurts when you're away. I feel lost and like a part of me is broken.”

“Well, I am Mr. Fix it.”

She chuckles, but the tears fall over the edge and about gut me.

I pull her in closer to me and press my lips down on hers. “Zena, I'm so sorry for running off this morning. I hate seeing you so upset because of me. Part of me was scared because I wanted to tell you something, but I wasn't sure how you'd react. I should have said this last night, Zena...I love you.”

She smiles up at me and it's the prettiest damn thing I've ever seen.

"I love you too, Harry Smith."

My heart bursts in my chest, sending fireworks through my body. This is what love feels like. And there will be those who say it's fast but fuck it! We know what we feel and that it's real.

I brush her hair back from her face, messy from the drive with the top down. "Come with me to Denver to meet my family."

Her eyes widen. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious, sweetheart. I don't want to leave you. I want you by my side."

She kisses me and whispers, "I'd love to."

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EPILOGUE



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I YEAR LATER

ZENA

“I got you guys a little extra something this year!”

“Stop trying to pass off tickets to your show as some selfless gift,” Geoffrey says with a laugh. “Just tell them you want them to come.”

“Hey!” Zeek cries defensively. “I’ll have you know these tickets are worth forty dollars apiece for a sold-out show, and they come with four *free*” he stretches the word like taffy, “drink tickets, and they’re at one of the best tables in the house. They. Are. A. Gift!” He rocks his head back and forth.

I laugh as Zeek hands me an envelope. Inside are two tickets for the Christmas burlesque show he’s performing in later this week. He’s been performing as a drag queen known as Miss Rainbow Herbert for the last year and watching and supporting him has been nothing short of a blast.

And the rainbow never ends...

The *buzz* on the street is that Zeek’s shows are fantastic, and I giggle at the thought of how well the phrase suits him. It was thanks to Zeek and that buzz of a gift he sent me that Harry and I ended up getting together. It’s hard to believe we’ve been a couple for a whole year now, with half that time spent engaged.

Everyone thought we were crazy for getting engaged only six months into our relationship, but when Harry proposed, my

heart said there was only one answer I could give him.

I've traveled more in the last twelve months than in my whole life. We've been to Acapulco, Costa Rica, and Montreal. Next comes Lisbon and Tokyo. The adventure that Harry has brought into my life has taken my...okay, boring... life and made it into a whirlwind of joy that just keeps on giving.

Definitely not dying at my desk anymore.

"We have a little extra gift for you guys as well," Harry says.

"Oh, yeah," I say, pulling the envelope from my purse. "Here."

Zeek takes it, opening the envelope as Geoffrey reads over his shoulder. Zeek wipes a few tears from the corners of his eyes. Geoffrey just smiles.

"I can't believe it. You're going ahead and making it official." Zeek says.

The silver embossed invitations give Zeek thirty days to think about how he's going to torture us with his wedding gift.

Harry kisses the side of my head. "I love you."

"I love you too." I squeeze him tight.

"I'm going to go grab a bottle of champagne and flutes," Geoffrey says. "This deserves a toast!"

"I'll help," Harry says, following him to the kitchen and leaving Zeek and I alone on the couch.

He throws his arms around my neck and squeezes. "I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks, Zeek. I'm so happy, too." Didn't know how miserable I was with life until Harry. Now I know and I can't go back.

"And you know, girl, long-term relationships might not be all butterflies and rainbows, but you can thank me for the little

battery-operated rainbow that started your forever love.”

I laugh at his sassy comment. The man has no boundaries, that’s for sure.

And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Thank you,” I say slowly so he hears me.

He snuggles up to me on the couch and wraps his arm around my shoulders. “You can thank me by coming to my show.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Zeek.”

This year I’m going to ask Santa for something to add to our family. A baby is what I really want. A part of me and a part of Harry. Afterall, Santa gave me what I wanted last year, I’m counting on him to do his magic again.

Who says a woman can’t have it all?

And the rainbow, too.

Thank you for reading. We’d love to hear what you thought in a review! [Zena’s Zing](#).

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Tessa

I've lived my life in my sister's perfect shadow.

It only makes sense that I'd still be single on her big day.

Being her maid of honor is my destiny, so I'm having fun with it.

But when a bachelorette gift buzzes to life in the wrong hands, everything gets turned on its head.

Derrick is sexy, charming, and he knows how to push all my buttons.

But can one night really stand the test of time?

Tessa's Tryst is the third in the Babes in Toyland series of heartwarming, humorous, instalove stories. No cheating. No cliffhangers. Always a happily ever after.

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