



Rent Yourself
an Elf

SAVANNAH
SCOTT

A SWEET
CHRISTMAS
ROMCOM
NOVELLA

RENT YOURSELF AN ELF

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SAVANNAH SCOTT

CONTENTS

Savannah Scott Wants to Connect with YOU

Untitled

1. Noelle
2. Liam
3. Noelle
4. Liam
5. Noelle
6. Liam
7. Noelle
8. Liam
9. Noelle
10. Liam
11. Noelle
12. Liam

All the Thanks

A Fun Backstory

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SAVANNAH SCOTT WANTS TO CONNECT WITH YOU

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For Jon

You might be an elf.

It would explain a lot.

Whatever you are, I'm glad you're mine. .



For all those who feel

a little not-so-jolly around the holidays.

May you find some joy in the small things

Extend yourself grace.

And perhaps, if you're lucky, find an elf or two.



Life's not always easy. That's true for all of us.



Good friends can be better than a great romance.

Find the friends who stop the world to help you.

And be that friend to those you love.



NOELLE

*I must find some way
to keep Christmas from coming!
~ The Grinch (Dr. Seuss)*

“Oh my gosh, this sauce. I could eat it with a spoon!”

I moan and settle back in my chair at our favorite Italian place, Terra e Mare. I look around at my four best friends and sigh. It's been way too long since we made time to have a night out, all of us together. I see each of them here and there. Alyssa more than the others. And Tori, because she's the secretary at J.Q. Adams Elementary, where I teach second grade.

“Why does it take a holiday or birthday to get us all together?” Alyssa asks.

She's always the one pushing for fun. I think she could have been a cruise director in a past life, only she lacks the organization skills to pull together her own schedule on a daily basis, let alone to manage the schedules of thousands of passengers. It was her idea that we do an early white elephant gift exchange.

“Right?” Stephanie echoes. “We've got to get better about this. We used to see one another all the time. We need a ... book club, or ... a weekly girls' night.”

“I can't commit to something regular.”

I'm disappointed with the reality as soon as the words leave my mouth. But they are true. I'm spread thin. I don't have a bunch of free time.

“With all the prep work I do after school lets out, my afternoons and evenings are slammed. I know it's only second grade, but you'd think I was teaching pre-college courses in high school with the expectations from the school administration. And then there are the parents—whom I love. I really do. Mostly. Most of them.”

My friends laugh. Tori lets out a sympathetic groan. These women are all too familiar with some of the momsters and dadzillas I've had to deal with over the past six years. And Tori gets a front row seat to some of them when they come through the office.

“Between grading, and prep, and extra events for the school, I just don't have the time. I could do once a month, maybe.”

I take another bite of bolognese to quell the sadness rising up at the realization that I've got no time for the four most important people in my life. Between the house I inherited two years ago when Grams passed and the demands of my job, I only end up resting ... well, never. Logically, I know I'm too young to be this weary. And I do love teaching, so there's that. Still, I should do better. These women mean the world to me.

“Scratch that,” I say. “I'll figure a way. But maybe could we make it every other week? The house is constantly doing something to keep me unexpectedly busy. Like this week. The upstairs hall toilet started making a noise that sounded like Marley came back from the dead to tell Scrooge he has to stop being such a miser. It's sort of a gurgly moan with a clanking at the end.”

“You need a plumber,” Jessica states the obvious.

“Tell my bank account that. I need a plumber, a carpenter, and probably a roofer, not to mention, I am pretty sure my heater is mad at me. It only heats up part of the time. And other days it feels like the Bahamas in there when I get home. It's temperamental.”

“Well. It’s funny you should mention that,” Jennifer says.

She’s the most organized, goal-oriented of the five of us. She literally could run a small country single-handedly.

“Mentioned my temperamental heater?”

“Yes. Because ...” Jennifer looks around the table.

I follow her gaze and notice each of my four friends has a mischievous smile on her face.

“What have you done?” I ask.

“Well,” Stephanie says. “We hired you an elf!”

Tori, who is sitting next to me, puts her hand over mine. “It’s a good thing. Smile, Noelle. You’re going to thank us later.”

“An elf? Like Legolas, or Santa’s tiny helpers, or as in Will Farrell? And what is an elf rental, anyway?”

I don’t need an elf, or anything Christmas-themed, for that matter. My Christmas spirit is at a zero on the Claus-o-tron. Grams was always the one who kept Christmas alive. She loved this season so much she talked Mom and Dad into naming me Noelle. Trust me, I’ve heard all the jokes. But I never cared. I knew my name meant something to my grandma, and that’s all that mattered. Ever since she passed, Christmas just feels like a season I have to hunker down and endure. Grams would be horrified to hear me thinking such negative thoughts about her favorite holiday. Maybe next year will be a little easier, but for now, the last thing I need is an elf, or anything related to Christmas.

“It’s the cutest thing ever,” Jennifer explains. “This guy has a handyman business. I looked into him. He’s legit—licensed and bonded.”

“As an elf?”

“No silly. As a handyman. Apparently, he runs a small business doing all the things your home needs. And over the holidays he markets himself as an elf.”

“Get this,” Alyssa says, bouncing a little in her chair. “His holiday name for his business is Rent Yourself an Elf! Isn’t that darling?”

“Uh ... yeah.”

It is darling. But I’m still trying to wrap my brain around my friends renting me an elf.

“So, this guy will be coming to your home, and you just put him to work. You have him for two days this coming weekend,” Jessica explains.

“What if I’m busy?”

“You’re not,” Stephanie says, emphatically. “You’ll be home prepping for next week’s classes and the school Christmas play. Am I right?”

Yes. I’ll be working on the Christmas play, which is my pet project. I loved directing that show every year. Grams would come after school to volunteer. Mostly, she just sat in one of the front auditorium seats grinning. But somehow, her presence made all the difference to me and the kids. And on the day of the play, she’d bake her Scottish shortbread from the recipe that’s been handed down for generations on my dad’s side of the family. When she showed up with those tupperware containers, the entire cast went as crazy as a housewife in the appliance section of Macy’s on Black Friday.

“She’s right,” Jessica says with a nod of finality, and I smile at her. I’m busted. I have no life and my friends know it.

“Yeah,” Alyssa adds. “Now you just get to ... treat yo’ elf.”

The table erupts in laughter.

“At least you don’t have to fix things your-elf,” Stephanie tacks on.

“Har har,” I say through my smile, but I end up laughing despite how corny she is.

“And with any luck,” Tori says, “He’s more of a Legolas than a Will Farrell. Not to bash Will Farrell, but I can’t see him fixing anything.”

“Right?” Stephanie says. “And Legolas can fix my home any day.”

“Mm hmm,” Tori adds with a blush.

We all laugh again.

“You guys are the best.” My heart feels a little pinch of gratitude as I look around at these women. What would I do without them?

“Which is why you’re going to make room once a week for a girls’ night,” Stephanie declares.

“I’ll make it work. You know I will.”

“Good. And send photos,” Alyssa says. “You know, when he shows up. We have to see what a bonafide elf looks like.”

LIAM

*“You’re my brother, which means
you’re stuck with me forever,
like a booger you can’t pick.”*

~ Unknown

“Come here, you little munchkin,” my four-year-old niece, Anabella, says to me in a voice that sounds like she’s imitating me when I call her Munchkin.

“Me? You want me to come there?”

“Yes. You come here.”

“Okay.” I get down off my brother’s couch and join Anabella on the ground where she has a circle of stuffed animals spread out on the floor with dishes filled with plastic food.

“You sit here.”

“Here?” I ask.

I know I’m not imagining her rolling her eyes—at four years old. My brother is in for it when this cutie pie turns fifteen.

“Yes. Here. And you hold this.” She hands me a plate.

“What are we doing here?”

“It’s my picnic. We are very waiting for Santa.”

“Ahhh. A waiting-for-Santa picnic. Good call. You need your sustenance while you wait for the big guy.”

“No one will ever accuse you of using baby talk,” my brother, David, quips as he walks through the room.

“It’s not good for them,” I retort like the baby brother I am.

I might be six foot two and own my own business, but I’m still able to razz my big brothers.

“Stop talking to my daddy,” Anabella demands.

“Okay. Sorry, Princess.”

“I not a Princess.”

“You are to me. But what are you if you aren’t a Princess?”

“A very, very big girl. And ... a fireman.”

“Ohhh. A fireman, huh? Like Daddy?”

She nods.

“And a mommy.”

She picks up one of her stuffed animals and cradles it as if it’s actually her child. She gives it the softest look, and my heart basically melts like butter in a hot pan.

“You’re a great mommy fireman. The best I’ve ever seen.”

Anabella looks at me and smiles big. I get her, and she knows it.

“I’m nearly ready,” David says on his next pass through the room.

My brothers and I are meeting up at our childhood home for the day to help Dad pull off a very special surprise for our mom for Christmas. She’s a baker and cook and she’s always wanted one of these ovens that costs about as much as I’ve invested in tools over the years—and that’s a chunk of change. He had it delivered to David’s house and we’re going to install it for her while Mom’s out with my sister doing some charity thing she’s got going on. My mom’s the best woman I know. I can already imagine her tearing up when she sees this Aga

cooker in her kitchen. It's even bright red—her favorite color. Way to go, Dad.

“Lyndsay? Hun?” David shouts upstairs.

“Yeah!”

“Liam and I are heading over to Mom and Dad’s. You got Anabella?”

“I like Gwamma’s house,” Anabella looks up at me with that look that nearly always gets me to say yes to her.

“I know you do, fireman mommy, but today we’ve got to do a big job that’s very, very boring and hard ... and scary ... And, did I mention it was boring? You wouldn’t like it.”

“Are there cookies?”

There are always cookies at my mom’s.

“Not this time. No cookies. I think there’s broccoli, though.”

Anabella makes the most adorable scrunched up face. She could be a GIF for someone grossed out over veggies. She loves all vegetables except mushrooms and broccoli, and knowing that helps in moments like this.

“I not going to Gwamma’s.”

“Good call. I tell you what, I’ll eat all the broccoli while I’m there, and I’ll tell Grandma to bake some cookies for the next time you come visit. Sound good?”

She nods with a seriousness that makes her look so much older than she is.

“Okay, Munchkin. Come give uncle Liam one of your famous hugs.”

“Okay, Munchkin.”

I smother my smile. Anabella’s so cute, but she does not like it when I’m amused by her.

She sets down the bear she was holding and climbs into my lap. Then she wraps her arms around my neck and I tug

her in close. This is the deal, right here. Life doesn't get any better.

I stand up while I hold Anabella with one arm, and then I tip her completely upside down. She giggles hysterically and screams, "Again! Again!" So, I do, of course, until David walks in and interrupts us. He's all business. I think he was born with a clipboard and a timer in his hand.

"Let's get a move on, Liam. Bye, sweetheart." David leans over and gives Anabella a peck on the forehead, then he walks out of the room.

I set Anabella down and head toward the kitchen where David and Lyndsay are saying goodbye. He's got his arms wrapped around her and she's looking up at him like he's the best guy in the world. News flash, he's great, but ... well, I'm his brother, so I don't truly see the appeal. I'm glad she does, though. Lyndsay is an amazing woman, and she's been good for David too. She softens out his serious edges.

David bends down and puts his face near Lyndsay's belly. "Bye bye, baby boy. Tell Mommy you still want to be named after me. I'll be back soon."

"Lynds already told me she's naming him Liam after his favorite uncle, sorry bro." I pat David on the back in mock consolation.

"Nice try, Munchkin." David chuckles. "Let's go."

I reach over and ruffle my big brother's head. I'm two inches taller than him and I use that to my advantage when needed.

"See ya, Lynds," I say before following David out the door.

"You two be careful," Lyndsay says in her typical, soothing voice.

"Always." I turn back and wink at her.

We are not always careful. We're crazy and a bit out of control, especially when the three of us get together. There's something about being with your brothers that brings out the

twelve-year-old in a guy. But when it comes to a task like this—building something or moving something—we're beyond conscientious.

My oldest brother's a fireman. I've got my own construction and handyman business. My other older brother, Jamison, does something I barely understand. He's the CFO for a finance company that helps businesses plan strategies. After that, you lose me as to what he does. Anyway, we're three guys whose jobs require us to pay attention to details. We're about to take apart a ten-thousand-dollar oven and reassemble it for our mom. We'll be careful.

I hop up in the truck and turn the key. David's already buckled in the passenger seat.

“What's this?” He lifts my Santa hat off the dash.

“A Santa hat.”

“I can see that, Munchkin. What's it doing here?”

“I've got a little gimmick to get holiday business.”

“A gimmick, eh?”

“Yeah.”

I'm not forthcoming. And I've got reasons. My brothers love to taunt me. When they hear about my new marketing strategy, I will never, and I mean never, live it down.

“So ...?”

“So what?”

“Stop playing hard to get. What's the gimmick?”

I look out the windshield, evaluate my options, and breathe out a long sigh. I will not get around this inquisition. May as well get it over with.

“I made up seasonal business cards and did a little promo on social media. Took out some local ads. I'm calling my business, reh-yoselfnelf.” I mumble that last bit, hoping it will go over David's head.

No such luck.

“You call it what? All I heard at the end there was elf. I did hear elf, did I not?”

“Yeah. You did. It’s called, Rent Yourself an Elf.”

“And you’re the ...” he starts laughing.

The back of his hand flies up and he laughs into it. He might look like he’s trying to restrain himself. Don’t be fooled. He’s not.

“Rent yourself ...” he laughs some more.

He can’t even finish the sentence.

“An ...” more laughter. “An ELF!”

The hoot that comes out of my brother almost makes this worth it. He’s so serious and in-charge all the time. Seeing him lose his composure is refreshing, even if it is at my expense.

“You and Will Farrell, man.” David laughs some more. “Oh, man. I can not wait to tell Jamison this one. Our baby brother, the elf.”

“I’m getting a ton of business, so laugh away. I’m laughing all the way to the bank.”

“Is that actual money, or is it play money? Striped red and white? Does Santa pay you in candy canes? Do you take Rudolph out for his daily spin around the North Pole?” David’s having his moment. I let him. “I know you’ve got a thing for Christmas, but this is so much more ... Liam the elf.”

He sits there smiling and then he’s laughing again, and I can’t help the smile that cracks over my face. It is funny. I get it. It’s also been a genius move. People are calling me left and right. I haven’t been this busy since last summer when everyone’s A/C was breaking down during that heat wave.

I’m so busy I’m not even taking the weekend off next week. I’ve got two days booked with a woman who lives in the historic neighborhood in an old craftsman. Her name is Noelle—I think it was her daughter or granddaughter who called me. She said it was “for a friend,” but isn’t that always code for something else? My customer’s probably some grandma who needs a bunch of odds and ends done around the

house. I love jobs like that. It's always extra rewarding helping someone who truly can't do things for themselves.

NOELLE

*Of course you're not an elf.
You're six-foot-three
and had a beard since you were fifteen.
~ Leon the Snowman in Elf*

Saturday morning I'm up early. Yes. The anticipation of my "elf" arriving has me a little on edge. I'm grateful to have someone coming who might take care of a few odds and ends around the house. I'm just not used to having strange men over—or men in general, strange or not.

My last boyfriend and I broke up three years ago when he decided to move to New York City to pursue his dream of working on the stock exchange. I'm a small-town girl at heart. When Joseph declared his plans to move, I had a moment of clarity. Our relationship was convenient. What we had looked good on paper. Did I love him enough to relocate? No. I didn't.

I wasn't even really heartbroken. I should have been after dating him for two years of my life. Instead, I wallowed in this overwhelming disappointment with myself. Besides, Grams got sick a month after Joseph left town. I knew then that my decision to stay in Waterford was one I'd never regret. Grams and I spent every spare minute together—right here under this roof. And I wouldn't trade the time we had for anything.

I'm puttering in my kitchen, shutting the cabinet over the dishwasher a second time because it has a habit of popping back open sometimes. And I'm imagining what this elf will look like. His business card says, *Liam Goddard. Rent Yourself an Elf. If you need a helper, let me come work my magic.* Then it's got his phone number.

I picture all the plumbers and repair men who have worked on my childhood home over the years. Some of them should have invested in a belt. Just sayin'. In movies and books, handymen are buff, and they're always wearing plaid shirts over white T-shirts. In real life, they are—real. I picture Ned, the guy who used to fix our leaky sinks and help Dad with the sprinkler system. He looked like he liked to spend his off time curled up with a six-pack of Coors and a plate of nachos while his favorite team battled it out on the television for an NFL victory. Ned was super sweet, but nothing about him screamed “elf.”

There's a knock at the door, and despite myself, my heart rate kicks up.

Chill out, Noelle. It's just the handyman—who is a grown man calling himself an elf. I hope I'm not about to be a feature on the five o'clock news: Elementary school teacher goes missing after opening the door to a stranger calling himself a magical elf. Oh, for heaven's sake. I tell myself to get a grip as I walk through the kitchen to the front door.

With one deep breath, I prepare myself for a stout, older man who knows his way around the house, and I open the door.

And stare. My mouth is shut, but that's only by some Christmas miracle because this man ... well, he's no elf. My eyes move from the Santa hat on his head, past the slight curl of brown hair wisping out under the edge of the white fur trim, over to his kind, but playful brown eyes that are crinkled at the corner. I take in his jawline, covered in just the right amount of scruff—like he hasn't shaved in a few days and he keeps his facial hair at this length on purpose. I would have to give that choice a ten out of ten on Yelp.

He's brawny. Is that the right word? Broad shoulders, nice arms, strong, sturdy, capable. Nice hands. One of which is holding a toolbox. And his jeans cover some very impressive thighs. He's wearing work boots that have enough scuffing to show he actually works. This, my friends, is no elf. If he's an elf, I'm Mrs. Claus.

My eyes finally travel back to the face of this man on my porch and I realize I've been shamelessly assessing him while he stood there with a look of amusement on his face.

"Hi. I'm your elf. The elf you rented?"

I can't be held responsible for the words that come out of my mouth next. I was expecting Homer Simpson and I got a hybrid of Henry Cavill and Chris Hemsworth.

"You're an elf?" I look up, up and meet his gentle brown eyes.

"Yep. That's me. I'm the elf."

"You don't look like an elf."

Oh, sweet linguistic skills, where, oh where have you gone?

"I know, right? Me and Will Farrell." Then he flashes me a winning smile, and I know I'm in trouble.

Move over, elf on the shelf. The elf on the porch is in town.

"Well, okay. Sorry. You just ... caught me off guard. I was expecting someone more ..."

"Short?" He smiles again.

"Well, yes. And ... yeah. Shorter, for sure."

"I'm six two. I'm on the taller side when it comes to elves."

"I'll say."

Whaaaa???

He just smiles a casual smile like he doesn't even notice me tripping over myself at the sight of a handsome man on my

porch.

“You aren’t exactly what I expected either.”

“No?”

“No. I figured you’d be a little ... older.”

“Oh. Well, that makes sense. A lot of these homes are owned by people who have been here for years. I ... uh ... I actually inherited this house from my grandmother two years ago.”

“Oh.” His face fills with concern. “Sorry to hear about your loss.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Me too? And to think, I mold young minds for a living. But, to be fair, I don’t have to look at a man like him while I’m corralling second graders. I’m getting my friends the best gifts ever this year.

“So, you’ve got my services for two days. Do you have a list?”

“A list?” I suddenly remember why this man is standing on my porch. “Um. Come in, please. I don’t have a list. And I should. Usually, I’m the queen of lists. I’ve got lists for everything. Unfortunately, my friends sprung you on me and I’ve been so busy all week I didn’t think to make you a list. But I’ll make one now. Have a seat. I’ll get paper. Do you want something to drink?”

The gorgeous elf-man chuckles. It’s a warm and deep laugh. I’m rambling, and I should be humiliated, but the way he’s looking at me makes me feel relaxed, like we’re old friends and he gets me.

“I’m Liam, by the way. I think your friend gave you my card. And, no. You don’t need to make a list. A lot of people have one, that’s why I asked. Just put me to work. What’s broken, or needs improvement? Do you have any DIY projects you’ve been putting off?”

He hasn’t sat down yet. He’s just standing there, in the living room now, taking up a whole lot of space being all

manly and rugged and masculine. And wearing a Santa hat. His toolbox is at his feet and his arms are comfortably crossed over his chest.

“If only,” I half-laugh. “I don’t have the luxury of planning DIY. This house has needs. I’m really in over my head here.”

As if on cue, the upstairs toilet groans that eerie groan, then there’s the rush of water, followed by the clanking sound.

I tilt my head up and then return my gaze to Liam’s. “Excuse Marley. He’s here to warn me that I need to get into the Christmas spirit. I only hope I’m not about to be visited by ghosts. Maybe I already have been, though. That sure would explain the heater being so temperamental.” Annnnd I’m babbling again.

I’m joking. But my rambling contains more truth this year than I’d like to admit—especially to a grown man wearing an elf hat. And, I wouldn’t put it past my grams to summon three specters to get me back into the holiday spirit.

Liam chuckles that deep, resonant laugh again. “I guess we know where I need to start. One Dickensonian exorcism coming right up.”

He’s handsome and he knows Dickens? My English-major heart does a little involuntary flip. Liam lifts the toolbox and gives me a smile. Then he turns and heads up the stairs while I mentally review whether I remembered to throw my underwear into the hamper last night.

LIAM

*Just because it's not what you were expecting,
doesn't mean it's not
everything you've been waiting for.
~ Unknown*

S *he's not a grandma.*

I type the text to my oldest and best friend, Carson, and then I slip my phone back into my pocket.

I can't wipe the smile off my face. Noelle is not a grandma. That's an understatement. She's cute. No, cute isn't the word. She's got shiny dark hair, cut shoulder length and sort of angled in a way that makes it look stylish even when it's obvious she didn't try to put any effort into her appearance this morning. And she's got the brightest green eyes. She answered the door in sweatpants and a hoodie that says Notre Dame.

Adorable. And the way she babbles on, also adorable.

This house is amazing. Almost as enchanting as the woman who owns it. They don't make houses like this anymore with the solid wood built-ins and all the intricate woodwork. The lines are clean, as they always are in craftsman homes, but the detail and finish work are what make it captivating. One day, I'll own a home like this. Maybe Noelle and I can be neighbors. It definitely would make it

easier for her to get a hold of me if her house needed repairing if I were closer.

My phone pings right when I set the lid to the toilet tank onto the counter. No one ever accused me of being glamorous. A pretty boy? Yeah. My brothers used that term in high school when I finally grew into my nose and ears and the rest of me caught up and shot past them in height. I was never pretty, though. Just a face that seems to get me a lot of attention from the types of people I'd rather pass by with a wave. Noelle seemed to like my face. She didn't hide the way she sized me up from head to foot when she opened the door. Can't say I minded her eyes roving over me. The way she did it was so innocent, as if she couldn't help herself.

Carson: *Not a grandma? Who's not a grandma?*

Liam: *Noelle. The woman I'm doing repairs for this weekend. Remember I told you I was busy doing odd jobs at an old lady's house this weekend?*

Carson: *Yeah.*

Liam: *The owner of the house is our age.*

Carson: *Is she hot?*

Liam: *Seriously? You give neanderthals a good name.*

Carson: *So, is she?*

Liam: *She's sweet.*

Carson: *Sweet. That must mean she's not hot. Oh, well. I guess Sunday football at my place is off the table if you're working.*

I don't bother correcting Carson. He doesn't need to know what Noelle looks like. It's not like they'll ever meet.

Liam: *We'll see. Depends on what time I wrap things up here. I'll come by if I can.*

Carson: *Gage and Mitch are coming over too. Did your mom like the stove?*

The stove. It's a work of art. Calling her new Aga a stove is like calling the Mona Lisa a painting.

Liam: *She cried. Then she kissed and hugged all of us. And cried some more. Dad's so out of any doghouse. Like, for years to come. I can see him messing up and then walking her into the kitchen, angling her just right, and then she'll forgive him on the spot for whatever special occasion he forgot or dish he left out.*

Carson: *Glad she liked it. And that's one more confirmation.*

Liam: *Confirmation?*

Carson: *Of my singleness. No need to get into a situation where I'm buying a high-end appliance to keep a woman happy.*

I shake my head. Carson's stuck somewhere around age twenty-one in terms of maturity. He's a great guy—if you're a guy. I'm sure he'll change his tune in a few years. Life as a bachelor gets old after a while. He'll have to do some growing up if he wants to settle down, though. That's for sure. When I saw the way my mom reacted to that extravagant gift, I nearly teared up, myself. Dad's shoes are almost too big to fill. One day, I hope to have a woman as good as Mom, and I can only hope to be half the man my dad is as a husband.

I pocket my phone, feeling a little guilty for texting while I'm on the job. Not that Noelle's paying me by the hour. I do these elf jobs under half-day or whole day pricing, or customers can choose a specific job type and I bill for that. Keeps it simple and helps people pay up front. Noelle's friend already booked me for the day and I'll make sure Noelle gets her friend's money's worth, that's for sure.

I take a look in Noelle's tank. I already know it's a simple ballcock valve replacement. That moaning sound I heard when we were downstairs was a telltale sign. I verify my hunch, take out my channel locks, and head back out to my truck to get the part. I keep basic plumbing parts on hand since there are a few jobs that seem to repeat themselves in home after home.

When I come down the stairs, Noelle's sitting cross-legged on the floor with piles of green and red felt spread all around her.

“What’s all this?” I ask.

“Oh. I’m working on our school play. I’m an elementary school teacher.”

Of course, she is. As if she needed one more item in the *I’m adorable* column.

“So, this is how elementary school teachers spend their weekends? I never even thought of my teachers as having lives outside their classrooms when I was a boy. I think I imagined them living at the school. I’ll never forget the first time I saw one of my teachers at the grocery store. I just stared in wide-eyed wonder. She had escaped, and here she was, picking out cereal at Kroger.”

Noelle laughs. It’s a sweet, melodic sound.

“You know.” Noelle holds up a green felt triangle with yellow trim. “This is an elf hat. That ...” She points to my head. “... is technically a Santa hat. Not that I’m complaining. I just thought you’d want to know—in case you ever work for someone who’s a stickler about these things.”

“About elves?”

“Yeah.” She blushes a little, but she smiles. “You just never know when you’ll run into some Christmas fanatic. I wouldn’t want it to impact your Yelp score.”

“I appreciate you looking out for me. Rent yourself a Santa just doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

She giggles. “No. It really doesn’t.”

I hook a thumb toward the front door. “Well, I’ve got to go get my ghostbusters kit from the truck. I think I’ve got Marley contained. Time for an exorcism.”

“That turned dark quickly.” Noelle smiles softly.

I feel like asking her if her boyfriend minds her working so hard over the weekend. For some reason, I’ve got the urge to ask her to dinner, even though we just met. And she definitely has a boyfriend. A woman like her would have a line out the front door of guys wanting to date her. So instead of being that guy—the one who comes to fix your toilet and ends up asking

you out when you're in a committed relationship—I walk out onto the porch and toward my truck to grab a ballcock valve like the gentleman my mom raised me to be.

NOELLE

*I don't make merry myself at Christmas,
and I can't afford to make idle people merry.
~ Scrooge, A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens*

Liam's been here all day. He's fixed my toilet, that cabinet door that wouldn't stay shut, and he even tinkered with the heater. It's been the same comfortably toasty temperature all afternoon. When he finished all that, he walked through the house with me, sizing things up, checking walls and beams, opening closets.

It should have felt intrusive. Instead, I felt oddly cared for. No one comes over here unless it's one of my friends for a night of popcorn and chick flicks on my couches. To have a man inspecting the integrity of the structure of the home was so ... masculine, even if he was wearing an elf hat.

I made Liam lunch in the middle of the day. Nothing fancy, just a sandwich and some fruit and chips. We sat in my kitchenette, looking out at the back yard and chatting about all sorts of things. It felt like we had known one another for longer than a few hours.

He told me about his brothers and sister. He calls himself the baby of the family, which made me laugh. He's no baby. And he debases himself at times, making it seem like he's an aimless goofball instead of the conscientious entrepreneur he obviously is. I guess being the baby of a family does that to a

person. Growing up in Delilah's shadow has definitely given me my fair share of an inferiority complex at times.

And now, my sister's engaged. She's the focus of all the family honor, which is fine with me. I don't need the spotlight. I'd just like to dodge the ongoing slew of "When are you going to settle down, Noelle?" and "Have you met any nice young men?" Whatever bar Delilah sets, I tend to run in the opposite direction. She joined the choir. I stopped singing. She ran track. I avoided the gym or any form of working out—until I realized how ridiculously self-sabotaging that choice was and decided to start doing yoga videos and lifting weights in my basement. She became a lawyer. I pursued elementary education. I can't compete with her, so I enter my own races.

But in this one area of life, there's no avoiding standing next to her and falling woefully short. My parents loved Joseph. He was responsible—going places, as Dad said. When I let him "slip away," as my mother so kindly pointed out, I lost a lot of respect from my parents. My family was disappointed in me for staying here and nestling into my life as a teacher and granddaughter. Grams was the only one who said, "Good for you. I never did quite trust that young man to love you like you deserve."

Maybe I'm ready to start dating again. Not because my family is pressuring me, but I definitely need to get on with finding a solid man at some point. I want children, and I'm not getting younger. But I don't have time for a weekly girls' night, let alone a relationship. One thing my ex taught me: men are needy. Though, Liam doesn't appear to be needy. He seems to be the type of person who finds joy in helping others. He also seems to roll with situations—like when I shamelessly looked him over on the porch and then babbled like a teen meeting her idol for the first ten minutes after we met. Just thinking of that uncharacteristic reaction makes me blush.

Now, the sun is dipping low, and Liam's been here all day.

"So," Liam says, leaning comfortably on one of my living room walls next to the fireplace, looking like an advertisement for some sort of hot handyman magazine. "Make me a list.

Sky's the limit. Well, within reason. I'm only here one more day. But if it can be done in a day, I'll do my best."

He smiles that smile again—the one that makes me feel relaxed and keyed up all at once.

"I'll make a list. Honestly, I don't know where to start. You fixed my three biggest issues in one day. I feel so spoiled."

"Well, consider making a list your homework." He gives me this smile that reminds me of the boys in my class. I bet he's been waiting to say something like that to a teacher for years and years.

"I'm good at homework." *Am I flirting?*

"I'd bet you are." *Is he flirting back?*

Then he winks. And I don't know what to do with myself. Give me an unruly or disgruntled eight-year-old any day. I can tame the best of them. Give me a sexy handyman with kind eyes and a killer smile, and I'm at a total loss.

I stand up, intending to walk Liam to the door, and he steps forward at the same moment with a big stride that matches his height, putting us very much face-to-face and in one another's personal space.

I'm overwhelmed by the smell of him—manly, clean, and a bit like sawdust and warmth.

He's seemingly unaffected by our nearness to one another. He just gently cups my elbow and then steps back. My skin feels the ghosting of his touch through my bulky and oh-so-unattractive sweatshirt even after he releases me.

"I could decorate around here for Christmas for you. Hang your outside lights. Are you putting up a tree?"

Liam looks around like he just noticed the lack of holiday decor. It's the first week of December, but my house has no sign of cheer. It could be summer—or any season but Christmas, for that matter.

"I ..." I don't really know what to say.

“Just think about it. I’m your guy. Whatever you need tomorrow, I’ll get on it.” He smiles again. Then he says, “See you in the morning,” and he turns and walks out the door.

After Liam leaves, I spend the rest of the evening making elf hats, ironically, and cutting out little felt vests which I stitch together on Grams’ old sewing machine. It’s pretty dark when my cell rings, snapping me out of my craft-induced time warp. My stomach suddenly lets out a growl that fills the quiet guest bedroom where I’ve been stitching together costumes for hours.

“Hey, sweet friend!” Alyssa’s voice makes me smile. “I’ve drawn the short straw.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means I’m the one who gets to check up on you and your day with the elf. What’s the verdict?”

“So, you’re going to what? Report back to everyone?”

“In the interest of efficiency—and nosiness—we set up a group chat.”

“What? And why am I not on this group chat?”

“We want to talk about this guy without you. Because, obviously, we want to speculate and maybe take bets. You see, Jennifer did more digging and saw his photo. Then she passed that fine specimen to Stephanie, who had to sit down and drink ice water at the sight of him, or so she said. And then Stephanie formed an emergency group chat with the four of us. It’s called *Noelle and the Hot Elf*.”

“What?! You have got to be kidding me. You ... you ... this is all so you can talk about Liam?”

My friends, ladies and gentlemen. I love them, but I’m not quite sure what to do with them at times.

“Even his name is sexy.”

I laugh. She’s not wrong.

“You’re laughing. You. are. laughing. Like a full-blown, light-hearted laugh. And there’s no one under ten years old

saying something goofy to inspire that laugh. That, my sweet friend, is *not* your teacher laugh. Oh, yes! This is good. Better than we had hoped.”

“We? You guys are killing me. He came over, alright. Because this was his workplace for the day, may I remind you. He fixed my groaning toilet, my stubborn cabinet door, and got the heat just right.”

“I bet.”

“Of my heater! In my house! Sheesh. I’m not saying anything else unless you admit me into the group chat.”

“No fair! You can’t send me back to them without details. Just throw me a bone. Did he wear the Santa hat all day?”

I pause, picturing Liam in that hat. He even wore it to lunch, though he took it off at one point and ran his hand through his hair, and whew-ee, that nearly did me in.

“He wore it all day. There’s your bone. Now go tell my so-called friends to let me in the chat if they want to hear about my elf.”

“Your elf! I can’t even. I love the sound of that.”

“Why are you so weird?” I laugh.

“It’s my gift.”

“I’m going to go. I haven’t eaten dinner and I have to attach pompoms to elf stockings.”

“For Liam?”

I laugh hard. “No! For the costumes for the school play. Oh my gosh, Alyssa! As if I’d be sewing pompoms onto something for Liam.”

“I know. I lost my mind there for a minute. Pompoms would be more like a fourth date kind of thing, right?”

I snort laugh. Alyssa and I are laughing so hard it takes me a minute to catch my breath.

“I don’t know if I’m ever going to be able to look at a pom-pom the same way again! And that’s a job hazard as an

elementary school teacher.”

Alyssa laughs.

Then my stomach growls again. “I’d better get dinner.”

“Love you, Mrs. Elf.”

“I’m not Mrs. Elf. I’m not even ... anything. So, go get me on that group text.”

“You’re not Mrs. Elf yet. Everything starts from nothing, sweet friend. Have a little faith.”

I’m still smiling when Alyssa and I hang up with one another. And that smile drops when I come downstairs to a succinct knock at my front door. That knock I’d know anywhere: my sister, Delilah. She’s not a horrible person, but she’s not a huge fan of mine, and she’s definitely self-focused in a way that borders on narcissism. I’ve had a long day of facing Christmas—indirectly through fashioning costumes for children, and directly by watching a man wearing a Santa hat all day in my house. As fun as this day was, I still feel strangely raw.

I open my door because I don’t really think running upstairs and hiding until Delilah gives up and goes home is an option.

“Noelle! Oh my goodness.” She gives me air kisses to both cheeks as if we are the Kardashians or something. And then she steps back and looks me over. “What exactly are you wearing?”

“Uh.” I look down to make sure I’m wearing what I think I am. Yep. I am. “Sweats. Why?”

“They’re so ... sloppy.”

“I’m at home, Delilah. I can be sloppy. Besides, Notre Dame is my alma mater.”

“No matter. It’s time to get a new sweatshirt. But you do you. Anyway, I have big news.”

“You already announced your engagement.”

Okay, that sounded irritated. I don't need to stoop to Delilah's level.

"Yes! I announced our engagement to you and the family, and his family. Well, and to my colleagues, and a bunch of friends. But we didn't *officially* announce it."

"Officially?"

"Yeah. You know. With a party?"

"A party?"

"Yes. People have engagement parties, Noelle. And I am going to have one in a week."

"A week? Isn't that soon?"

"It is. But Christmas just dominates this whole month. So, I have to move fast if I don't want to have to compete with *that*."

She says it as if Christmas is trying to overstep her boundaries, and she'll have none of it.

"So, I came to bring you an invite."

Delilah reaches into her perfect purse, which is hanging perfectly off her perfect forearm, and produces from it the perfect invitation in a perfectly embossed envelope. So perfect.

I slip the envelope into the pocket on the front of my favorite hoodie. Delilah gives me a look.

"What?"

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"Now?"

"No time like the present. I'm meeting Crispin at La Table for a late dinner."

Yes. Her fiancé's name sounds like a wafer cracker. And yes, they dine out for high-end French food and fusion Thai and other pretentious meals regularly. I probably wouldn't mind all those restaurants—it's the way she says Luh

Tahhhbluh. It's so extra. Some days, everything Delilah says feels like she's trying to rub my nose in something.

This is the same girl who cut Barbie hair with me in our backyard and taught me how to use the rubber stopper on my skate as a brake. Those days are long gone now. The Botox and collagen enhanced woman standing in my foyer barely resembles the girl who once shared a childhood bedroom with me. And it's not really the external alterations that make her so different.

To expedite my sister's departure, which will only happen once her agenda is met, I pull her invitation back out of my "sloppy" sweatshirt pocket. I tear open the envelope and read the card inside.

*Mr. & Mrs. Furst
cordially request your presence
at the engagement party
for Delilah Furst and Crispin Ellison II
On the second Saturday of December
R.S.V.P. regrets only.
Guest ~ Plus One*

I reread the invitation.

"Is this for me, or is it generic?"

"It's for you, Noelle. I'd never give you a generic invite to something this momentous."

"So it's for me and a ... plus one?"

"Yes. If you can scrounge someone up. Not one of your friends. A plus one is a date—in case you didn't know that."

I look at my sister. Her makeup is flawless—on a Saturday evening. She's on her way to a French restaurant in pressed palazzo pants, a silk blouse, and a cashmere sweater. She looks like someone going out for a photo shoot to be on the cover of Conde Nast magazine.

I've stayed in my lane, forged my own road, made the choices that make me proud and happy. And now, despite my best efforts, our lanes have merged. Delilah may not consciously be trying to one-up me, but she's throwing her engagement in my face, and in the process, she's pointing flashing neon arrows toward my singleness.

"I've got a plus one." The words just fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. "I was just checking to make sure that's what you meant."

Delilah's mouth nearly pops open. Her eyes go momentarily wide before she schools her features again.

"Oh. Well. Great. I mean ... you do? Who is it?"

"Yeah. I do. I have a boyfriend. It's new. I have to check if he's available next Saturday. But if he is, he'll come with me."

"Oh. Wow. Noelle, that's great. Mom and Dad will be so relieved. They've been so worried about you ever since Grams passed. Well, probably since Joseph left for New York. You've been a little aimless, you know? So, who is this guy? Do I know him?"

There's too much in what she said to even begin to unpack. I can't really be held responsible for the next word that comes out of my mouth. I'm under duress, and I won't lose here.

No. Scratch that. Delilah can't win.

"Liam."

Just saying his name floods me with this odd feeling of safety. It's like he's standing right behind me, showing off to Delilah, mouthing something like, *Noelle is captivating and she's all mine*. Hey, this is my fib, I get to embellish it however I want. I'd love to see Delilah's face if Liam were to come as my plus-one. He won't. But man, that would be something.

I picture his warm eyes, the way he listened to me when we talked over lunch, the smell of him when we accidentally nearly bumped into one another before he left. I picture his muscles flexing as he reached up to secure the cabinet door. And I picture that smile.

Of course, I'm not expecting Liam to go to this sham of a celebration for my sister. I just blurted out his name. He's the last guy I saw. His name was on my mind. My sister and Liam will never meet.

I used his name. I won't use him.

"Wow. You look totally smitten. Whoever this Liam guy is ... good for you."

I look *smitten*? I definitely am not smitten. I only just met the man today. I don't really know him. I'm just ... not smitten. That's what I am.

"Yeah. He's pretty great."

"I'm glad, Noelle. You deserve a great guy."

She seems to mean it. And with that strange inconsistency, Delilah turns and gives me a finger wave. Then she heads down my walkway, shouting, "See you next Saturday, and we might need to go shopping! You can't come to this party wearing something frumpy!"

LIAM

*Being a handyman is about
more than just fixing things.*

It's about making a difference in people's lives.

~ Unknown

My house is a flipper I bought a few years back. It turns out I live about a twenty-minute drive from Noelle's neighborhood. It's a traditional 1950s ranch style home. Brick exterior. The first things I did when escrow closed a few years back was tear out the god-awful orange shag carpet that looked like it came straight off the set of *The Brady Bunch* and scrape the popcorn ceilings. The home is mostly updated now. But I still have a few more projects to do before I sell for a profit. Then I'll invest in my next flipper, live in it while I renovate, and sell it off.

I got into my first house flip by accident. I was just starting my own business after apprenticing with another contractor and finally securing my own license. Finances were tight. I couldn't afford the house of my dreams. But I had the skills to renovate. Now, I'm on house number three.

The great thing about my method is that it's a win-win for everyone. I get to buy homes that need some serious loving at rock-bottom prices. I get the satisfaction of bringing them back to their original glory. And then I make a sweet profit.

Whoever buys a house from me gets a fully restored home they can be proud of.

The usual quiet of my living room roars at me tonight. I find myself wondering if Noelle is alone in her four-bedroom home right now. Does she get lonely? I stretch my feet out onto the ottoman and lean back in my chair. I'm channel surfing, trying to find something to watch until I feel tired enough to sleep. I should feel exhausted, but thoughts of an adorable schoolteacher are dancing through my head.

I'm batting around the question as to whether she's in a relationship. What man would leave Noelle alone all weekend? And why isn't *he* fixing her toilet and securing her cabinet doors. Those are menial jobs most laymen can handle with a good YouTube tutorial and a trip to Home Depot. Maybe he's like David—a fireman who works odd days and hours. But even David would have been at Lyndsay's place throughout the week when they were dating. And he'd never leave her to-do list hanging undone. Maybe Noelle's dating a guy who never gets dirt under his fingernails—one of those men who has his eyebrows waxed and wears argyle socks. Yeah. Maybe he's a suit and he likes to hire other guys to do the dirty work.

If that's the case, though, why did her friend hire me?

I could just ask. It's a simple question.

"Noelle, do you have a boyfriend?" My empty living room has no answers.

No. That sounds too direct—almost creepy.

"So, Noelle, what's your boyfriend up to this weekend?"

Nah. That's even creepier. Why would the handyman need to know her boyfriend's schedule?

I could always jump right into the deep end.

"Are you busy next Saturday?"

I change my voice to a falsetto. "Why, yes, Liam. I'm going out with my boyfriend."

Nope. This is not working.

It occurs to me that I could call my sister. Zara would totally know what to do. She also would not tease me—at least not to mercilessly, like David and Jamison totally would. But Zara might say something in front of David and Jamison. She’s not always careful about my confidential information.

I’ll sleep on it, and then I’ll call Zara tomorrow before I leave Noelle’s if I haven’t come up with a better idea.

I yawn—a sure sign I’ll be able to sleep now. I turn off the lights in the main rooms and walk down the hall to my bathroom. My mind drifts around the architectural features of Noelle’s home while I’m brushing my teeth: the mortise and tenon joint work, the gabled eaves, the multi-paned windows. I can’t help it. I geek on construction and that home is amazing. It would look picturesque with a simple, live garland over the fireplace, a classic tree in the living room corner, some potted poinsettias going down the steps, lights along the porch roof.

I’m losing it, decorating a near-stranger’s home in the quiet final hours of my day. I guess Noelle’s not exactly a stranger anymore. We basically spent a whole day together. And lunch felt like the most comfortable first date ever. We fell into such easy conversation, and she laughed more than once during that meal. It didn’t feel like I was encroaching on another man’s life. Noelle seemed single—the way she engaged with me, the way her bright green eyes nearly danced when she lit up talking about her students. She wasn’t guarding herself from me, drawing lines to make sure I didn’t cross them. But I can’t be sure until I’m sure.

And why isn’t she decorating her home for Christmas? I suddenly realize my error. Noelle’s a teacher. She’s the type of person who would decorate the heck out of a classroom, let alone her own house. Teachers live for theming their spaces with each holiday. I bet Noelle has matching Christmas towels and dishes stashed away somewhere. She’s probably got a pair of goofy Christmas socks and an ugly Christmas sweater. She’s not decorating for a reason. And there I went putting my foot in my mouth suggesting I hang her lights for her. I can’t shake the feeling that I might have inadvertently rubbed salt in a wound.



THE NEXT MORNING when I knock on Noelle's door, I'm holding a toolbox in one hand and a bag containing two orange cream cheese pastries in the other. They're a seasonal offering at Cups & Crumbs, my favorite bakery.

Noelle answers the door in ... not sweats. She's wearing jeans and she's got fluffy striped socks on her feet. Her long-sleeved red T-shirt says "Ho, Ho, No." She definitely showered and put something on her lips that makes them a little softer and more ... kissable. Which is not what her handyman should be thinking first thing in the morning.

"Hey," I say like a dork.

And believe me, it's the dorky way of saying *hey*, not the smooth way I usually pull off. She just caught me off guard looking so adorable. No. Yesterday she was adorable. Today, she's drop-dead gorgeous. Noelle in sweats had me thinking about her after hours. Noelle like this might just do me in.

"Hey, yourself." She smiles warmly, waving her hand to invite me in. "What do you have there?"

"Um. I brought orange pastries. They're from Cups & Crumbs."

She puts her hand over heart. "You brought me pastries? And I love that place!"

"You know Cups & Crumbs?"

"I actually went to school with the owner's daughter, Jenny."

We're walking to the kitchen like it's inevitable that we have to eat these now. We sort of have to. They can't just sit in this bag taunting us. Noelle looks as good from behind as she did facing me. And I need to stop thinking about her and how she looks.

"So, do you bring all your customers pastries? Or am I special?"

She turns and looks at me. Our eyes lock, and a blush rises up her cheeks. “I mean ... I didn’t mean to ask that.”

We’re still looking into one another’s eyes. I’m ninety-nine percent sure she’s not in a relationship. Noelle has integrity. And the warm way she’s looking up at me, with a note of invitation ... She wouldn’t do that if she had a boyfriend.

“I don’t bring pastries to my customers as a rule.”

My voice is soft and deep. I hear the difference in how I’m talking to her, like we’re sharing a secret just for the two of us.

“Oh.” Noelle stares at me a few more seconds and then she turns and starts chatting up a blue streak. I noticed she does that when she’s nervous.

She grabs down two plates.

“These call for coffee.”

“They do,” I agree. We obviously need to regain equilibrium here.

I notice a card on Noelle’s counter. The envelope looks like it was chewed open, but the card inside is formal—an invitation of some sort.

“Looks like you’ve got a Christmas party coming up that’s definitely black tie.”

I tip my head toward the note.

“Oh. That.” Noelle grimaces.

“Not looking forward to it?” My instincts about her aversion to this holiday seem to be confirmed.

“Coffee black? Or do you take something in it?”

“Black, please. Here, allow me.”

I take the carafe from her, and our fingers brush. She’s also right here, even nearer than she was yesterday when we both moved too quickly and ended up far closer than we intended. She smells like vanilla and cinnamon. Or maybe that’s the pastry. No. It’s her.

She looks up at me again and I step back. It's either that or do something unprofessional and totally out of character. I don't move quickly into romantic involvements. But Noelle doesn't seem like someone I just met. There's a familiarity and ease with her that I haven't felt in years—if ever.

“So, this party ...” I try changing the subject while I pour our coffees. “And, do you take yours black?”

“Oh, nope. No way. My coffee must taste like ice cream. Black coffee gives me the chills.”

She giggles, then she turns to the fridge and grabs out a carton of half and half. She sets down the creamer and pulls some cocoa out of a cabinet.

We take the same seats we had at lunch yesterday, facing one another, only pastries and coffee serving as a sweet barrier and helpful distraction.

Noelle stands briefly and grabs the envelope and card.

“This,” she says with another grimace. “Is my sister's engagement party.”

“Ah ha.”

I grab the note and read it quietly.

I almost say something when I read the dude's name. Crispin? Who names their child Crispin? Oh. Wait. He's Crispin the second. Wow. Talk about not learning from your mistakes. My eyes snag on the last line of the invitation.

Then I look at Noelle. Here's my opening.

“So, a plus one?” That's casual, nonchalant, totally not fishing. Right?

“Yeah.” Noelle basically groans.

I stifle my smile. Either she's totally not happy with her current plus-one, or there is no one to be the plus one. I'm rooting for Option B.

And then Noelle's blush deepens to a level that neither of us can ignore.

“Sorry,” she says, bringing her palm to her heated cheek.

“What for?”

“Welllll ...” She looks around the kitchen nervously, then back at me. “It’s kinda a funny story. You’d have to know my sister. She’s incredibly perfect: lawyer, beautiful, always put together. She’s good at basically everything.”

I’m not interested in how perfect Noelle’s sister is when I’m sitting across from the person who seems to be the most perfect woman I’ve ever met. But I’m here for the story, especially if something about it makes Noelle this rattled.

“So, she’s already engaged. And she already popped the news. At Thanksgiving, of course. Our families had Thanksgiving together.”

“Yours and Crispin Ellison the second’s?” I clarify, nearly biting my cheek when I say his name.

“Yeah. Crispin’s.” Noelle rolls her eyes. Whether it’s about the name or the person, I can’t tell.

“Anyway. The announcement has been made. But Delilah is never happy with simple or easy. She basically needs the Macy’s New Year’s parade to follow her around throughout life. And she’s especially not happy when she takes second chair in anything. She has to shine. So, somehow, she talked my mom into hosting this engagement party. And she hand-delivered the invite last night after you left.”

“That’s awfully close to Christmas to throw a big party. Not the most convenient time of year to host something since everyone already has work parties and church parties and school parties.”

I take a bite of my pastry and nearly moan. These are the best.

Noelle follows my lead and picks up her danish and takes a bite. She does actually moan. Oh, man. Then she licks this stray bit of glaze off her lips and I have to glance out into the backyard to keep my composure.

“Delilah honestly believes Christmas is overstepping into her world. She wants this month to be all about her and her engagement.”

“So, now you’ve got a party next weekend.”

“Well, here’s where it gets embarrassing.” Noelle blushes again. “And I apologize in advance.”

I feel my forehead scrunch in confusion. Why would she need to apologize to me?

“Delilah was belittling me. She actually insinuated I would have to scrounge for a date.” Noelle looks at me with a sheepish expression. “So I told her I had one. Not only a date—a boyfriend.”

“Makes sense.”

“It does?”

“Yeah. I’m a baby brother, as I told you. When those older siblings start treating us like we can’t find our way from our bedroom to the bathroom without some assistance, we react. It’s hardwired into us to prove we aren’t what they think we are.”

“You’re right. I know. But I never lie. I flat out lied to my sister. And the worst part was the story just rolled off my tongue.”

“You’re just quick on your feet. That’s another gift of being the baby of the family. We’re scrappy.”

She giggles. “I never thought of myself as scrappy.”

“In a cute way.” I add that since it’s obvious now she has no plus-one, and I’m ready to gun for the position.

She smiles but blushes a little again and averts her eyes to her plate.

“Well, there’s more.”

“More?” I’m intrigued.

“Yeah. Delilah pressed me for a name—of my boyfriend.”

NOELLE

*There is something quite wonderful
about sharing a secret.*

~ Joyce Rachelle

I'm staring at Liam. I don't know what made me confess everything about Delilah's party. Maybe it's just the guilt.

Or maybe it's just him. He puts me at ease like a good friend. Though, trust me, the thoughts I have had about him, especially after that horrible lie I told Delilah, are not friendly. I'm feeling drawn to him in very not-a-friend ways. Even now, we're sitting so close—like a couple would—at my kitchen table, sharing Danish and coffee, and laughing. Well, he's laughing now. I haven't told him the worst of it. He might give me a refund and leave when he hears what I've done.

I take a deep breath and say, "Oh. Hey. Where's your elf hat?"

Yeah. I'm a chicken.

Liam chuckles. "I brought it, if you're dead set on me wearing it. I didn't know how into the whole elf thing you were."

"I'm not into elves."

"Okay. Good to know."

We both burst into laughter.

“I mean. I have nothing against height-challenged people,” I clarify. “Or people who work at the North Pole.”

“Noted.” Liam has this sexy, unassuming grin on his face.

“Gah. What I mean is ...” Well, since I can’t bring myself to tell him he’s the name I gave my sister, I may as well confess my other deep secrets. “I just have a hard time with Christmas lately.”

“I thought you might.”

“What? You did?”

“You’re an elementary school teacher. I’m assuming that means you love to match things and color code and celebrate even minor holidays most of the rest of us have never heard of. Am I right?”

I can only nod. No one has ever taken the time to think about me so specifically. Joseph barely thought teaching was a profession despite the fact that he had his master’s in finance. I guess, in his mind, professors deserve respect and elementary school teachers don’t.

“And then, there’s the shirt.” He points to me and I look down.

“Yeah. I got this online. I had to have it when I saw it.”

“So, it looks like I owe you an apology.” Liam’s eyes are soft and sincere. “I put my foot in it yesterday, suggesting I help you decorate. It was just a thought. Some people hire me to hang lights or get their decorations down from the attic. The offer just popped out of my mouth before I really thought it through.”

“No. No. It’s fine. Usually, I’d have beaten you to the job. It’s just ...”

He takes a slow sip of coffee, his warm brown eyes never leaving mine. He’s not pushing, but he’s definitely interested.

“Ever since my grams died, I just ...” I pause and take a steadying breath. “She was the reason I’m named Noelle. She loved this whole season. Every nook and cranny of this house was decorated. All gingerbread people in here.” I look around

the kitchen, remembering. “And she decorated every single room, even the guest rooms where no one stayed. Christmas music played daily through the living room speakers, and the smell of baked goods or savory holiday meals greeted me every time I walked through that front door. Maybe it would be easier if I lived somewhere else. Living here it’s just ...”

“Nearly impossible.” Liam’s voice is soft and careful. He’s still gazing at me, compassion written all over his features.

“Yeah.”

“I get it. You feel like you can’t live up to her level of awesomeness. And you don’t even want to try. Like hanging one ornament means you’re moving on and accepting her absence. And yet, not doing anything festive feels like you aren’t honoring her enough. What a pickle.”

“Yeah.” I’m dumbfounded and nearly speechless. How did he know?

“So ... back to your apology. I can’t imagine what you’d need to say sorry to me for.”

Ugh. He remembered.

“Well.”

I look over at Liam. He’s not wearing the hat and his soft brown waves are a little disheveled, but in a way that makes him look both sexy and approachable. Maybe he won’t hate me after he hears this.

“When Delilah asked me for a name. I just ...” I take a breath. “I just said ... Liam!”

I don’t look into Liam’s eyes in case the soft, kind expression has vanished. For some reason, I can’t bear the idea of him not looking at me with that same look he had been giving me all of yesterday and so far this morning.

Then, as one does when dropping a bomb on the sexiest, sweetest man to cross my path in a long, long time, I launch into a word-fest. “I mean, you were with me all day. You were the only man I’d seen since I said goodbye to our principal on Friday. So, your name was fresh on my mind. Right there.

Ripe for the picking. I could have said any number of names. I teach. I've got a roster. Joey, Stuart, Calvin, Brett, Andy, Jeremy ...” I rattle off the boys in my class for no apparent reason at all except that my tongue is now a runaway freight train. “Not that I'd use a student's name. Or a parent's. Of course, I wouldn't. So. Yeah. I said Liam. Your name. That's the one I said.”

I can barely glance at Liam after that prolific display of word vomit. And I really, really wish I could take back even talking about this wretched party with him in the first place. Everything was going so well.

But Liam doesn't frown or stand up. He doesn't even look mad. When I finally look into his eyes, he's got an amused expression on his face. His eyes are crinkled around the edges and his lips are cocked into a half smile.

“So, your sister thinks I'm your date.”

“Boyfriend,” I correct.

Why not lay it all out there in its dishonest glory? I really didn't hold back in this whole lying thing. I went for the gold.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” *What does he mean, okay?*

“Okay. Let's do this thing.”

“Do ... exactly what?”

“Let's go to the party together. I'll be your boyfriend. If you need to show up with a man on your arm, I'll go as tribute.”

“You'd do that? I mean. I can pay you. I can ... rent myself an elf!”

He chuckles, but something feels a little off. Was it something I said? Does he feel obligated? I don't want him to feel like he has to bail me out.

“Not necessary.” He smiles. “This one will be on the house.”

“An elf on the house.” I smile at him.

“Better than the elf on the shelf.” Liam winks.

I can’t help myself when I mumble into my coffee mug,
“Much better.”

LIAM

*You can fool all the people some of the time,
and some of the people all the time,
but you cannot fool all the people all the time.*

~ Abraham Lincoln

The grin on my face feels like it will never fade. I heard her say it. *Much better.*

But what was I thinking? This was my big chance to ask Noelle out, officially, for real. Instead, I not only agreed to be her fake date, I suggested it. No. I suggested I pretend to be her boyfriend. Now she has no idea that I'm interested in her. What a mess.

My brothers often live rent free in my head. At moments like this the image of them, each holding their respective bucket of popcorn and eating it one slow kernel at a time fills my head. They have expressions of bewilderment and amused superiority on their faces. Then one of them says, "You did what?" And they both burst out laughing at my expense.

Still, I'm grinning because Noelle threw me a scrap. She said I was *much better* than Elf on the Shelf. Okay, granted, he's small and scrawny, and wears that red getup, but still. Her words weren't, *you're better*, or, *yeah, you're okay*. It was: *much better*. Which means she's at least a little into me. And also, happy dance, she's single. I'm not doing an actual happy dance. Not now. I'll save the happy dance until I get home

from work. Then I'll do a very manly happy dance—alone, in the privacy of my own home. Like Hugh Grant in *Love Actually*, or Tom Cruise in the classic, *Risky Business*.

The day flies by. Noelle has some posts on the back porch that need replacing, so I go to the lumber store, pick up what she needs, swap out the wood and paint them. Then we eat lunch. Today it's grilled cheese and tomato soup with a side of sliced apples. She fixes lunches that remind me of my childhood. It's the best kind of comfort food. We sit in our chairs at her table and talk about the party. This time it's all strategic.

“So, my family will want to know how we met.”

“May as well stick with the truth.”

“That you came to my house as a rented elf?”

“Sure. Why not? You aren't ashamed of my elven roots, are you?” I wink.

Noelle blushes again. I want to reach out and touch her. Just to assure her we're going to do this and it will be fine. I take a spoonful of soup to keep my hands busy.

“Okay. So we tell them you came to my house to do repairs ... and then what?”

“Then, we spent a few days together, and I asked you out.”

“As if that would happen.” She laughs.

“Stranger things could cross a man's mind after spending time with you.”

She shakes her head lightly and takes a bite of sandwich. There's no way she's this beautiful and kind and funny and doesn't know it. I guess she must harbor some doubt since she seems unable to believe I was ready to ask her out before the whole engagement party opportunity dropped into my lap. I'll straighten this all out in time—sooner than later, I hope. She'll know that I was already going to ask her out. We just need to get her through this family event first.

“Okay. So, you showed up as an elf. Worked on my house. Asked me out ...”

“And you couldn’t resist me.” I wag my eyebrows playfully.

She blushes again. “Okay. I said yes.”

I do a fist pump in the air and shout, “She said yes!”

“Liam!” She laughs. “You’re really something, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.”

“No. I mean, you do these jobs helping people, and when I told you I lied using your name, instead of getting mad, you jumped right in to help me save face.” Her voice gets soft and she looks me in the eyes. I couldn’t look away if I wanted to. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. I like you. And I’m glad I can help.”

“You might not say that after you meet my sister in person. Oh, and Crispin.”

“That’s got nothing to do with how I feel about helping you. I’m all in.”

“Speaking of all in ...” Noelle smiles, but her eyes flit down toward the table before she looks at me again. “Um ... we probably need parameters or some idea of ... um ... Well, my family will think we’re dating. So.”

“You’re talking about kissing?”

She looks away and then back at me. “Not only that, but yeah. Touching. Affection. What should we do or not do? We probably need to work details out in advance. I did say we were newly dating. But I also said you were my boyfriend.”

Kissing Noelle will not be a hardship. But I don’t ever want to kiss a woman if she’s not as interested in me as I am in her. I haven’t really wanted to kiss anyone in a long, long time. I’ve been focused on family, my work, and renovating my home. No one caught my interest. For some reason, Noelle did, almost instantly.

“I’ll let you set the boundaries,” I say. “I’m here for any input you want, but you need to tell me what you want from

me.”

“Okay. Um. Well. Just thinking logically here. I guess if we were dating for like three weeks?” She looks over at me and I nod. Three weeks sounds good to me. “We would have kissed. I mean, we would, if we were dating already.”

“Right. Kissing would have definitely happened.” I look in her eyes. “I would have kissed you the first night I took you out—if you let me. I would have walked you to your door, told you what a fun time I had, and then I would have watched to see if you gave me the signals.”

“The signals?”

“You know. Tilting your head up, stepping toward me, tucking hair behind your ear. All the body language that tells a man a woman would like him to kiss her.”

“Oh. And if I gave you the signals?”

“I would have kissed you.”

“You seem to have this down to a science.” Her tone isn’t accusatory, but it’s not as relaxed as it has been.

“Trust me, I don’t. I haven’t been on a date in ... well, a long time.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Really?”

“I mean, look at you. And ... Anyway, you seem to know what you’re doing.”

“I’ve dated. I’ve had a few longer-term relationships. It’s just been a while. But we don’t need to talk about my dating history here. I’m just letting you know, if we had been dating three weeks, I’d probably be texting you every day to see how your day at school went, maybe popping by with dinner when you came home exhausted from work, and we definitely would have kissed.”

I could be wrong, but the look on Noelle’s face is a little dreamy. I hope I’m right. I’d do all that and more if things progressed between us. I’m not one to withhold affection

when I like someone. And I definitely would want to pamper Noelle. I've already started taking care of her house. Maybe one day she'll let me take care of her in other ways.

"Okay. So, we would have kissed." She's all business. "And depending on how you are, you would probably put your arm around me in public, or ... this is so weird. Are you having second thoughts?"

"Not at all. I'm in. How about I tell you what I'd be like if we had been dating and we decided to see one another exclusively?"

"Yes. Please. I'm not as good at this as I thought I'd be ... Yes. That would be great."

I chuckle, and she smiles. Her awkwardness with this only serves to make her all the more desirable for some reason.

"So, we've been seeing one another for three weeks."

"Yep."

"Okay. And we just decided we like one another enough to be exclusive."

"Mm hmm."

"I'd definitely be affectionate. It's a shortcoming or strength of mine, depending on how a person feels about these things. I'm a pretty physical guy. It's one of the reasons I went into this line of work. Sitting all day at a desk is not my idea of a good day. I love using my hands."

I glance over at Noelle and she's staring at my hands with this look in her eyes that makes me want to skip right to the part where I kiss her.

"Anyway ..." I clear my throat. "If you were my girl, I'd have my arm around you pretty often, or I'd pull you into my lap if we were hanging out at a friend's, or I'd put my hand on the small of your back when I opened a door for you."

"Mm hmm."

It seems to be all she'll say right now. I don't know if I'm helping the situation or making her more uncomfortable.

“You tell me. What part of that sounds good?”

“Um. All of it?” She blushes.

I chuckle and she laughs, but it’s slightly nervous.

“Good.” I forge forward, pulling up enough confidence for the both of us. “So, I’ll hold your hand. I’ll put my arm around you. I’ll put my hand on your back. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be kissing you in front of your family, but if the situation warrants it, I can improvise.”

“A kiss.”

“Yes. A kiss.”

“Won’t it look like our first kiss if we ...”

“If we?”

“You know what? That’s good. I think we’ve got everything covered.” Noelle stands so quickly her chair skitters backward and makes a sharp screeching sound. “Let me get these dishes.”

So, we’re not talking about the kiss. Got it.

I want to put Noelle out of her obvious discomfort, so I purposely change the subject.

“Do you have more work for me? Otherwise, I can get out of your hair. Up to you. If I leave early, I’ll send your friend a partial refund.”

“Um. Actually, I was thinking I’d love it if you helped me get the decorations out of the attic.”

“Christmas decorations?” I try to keep the excitement out of my voice.

“Yeah. Our talk this morning got me thinking. I want to honor my grams. She’d want me to decorate.”

“I think that’s a great call. No pressure, of course.”

“You didn’t pressure me.” She looks at me with a tenderness in her eyes. “You inspired me.”

I stand, and before I can overthink it, I’m stepping toward her.

I pull her into a hug. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon makes me hold her a little closer than I had planned. She wraps her arms around me and gives a little squeeze.

“Thank you,” she murmurs into my chest.

“Thank you. I don’t usually get called an inspiration. That kind of made my day.”

Reluctantly, I step back. “Well, let’s get crackin’.”

Noelle clears the dishes and rinses them while I wipe down the table, and then we make our way to the attic. By mid-afternoon, I’ve helped her unpack a bunch of decor. She placed things all over the house while I hung lights out front. She still doesn’t have a tree or a garland, but the house looks festive.

It’s getting slightly dusky out, the way late winter afternoons do, when I finally step toward the front door, carrying my toolbox with me.

“I’ll call you later this week to iron out any other details. You can text me anytime if you think of something. Or ... just for whatever.”

“Okay.”

Noelle smiles at me. She’s been a little more reserved ever since lunch—quieter, but not completely distant. Maybe it was the emotions of unpacking her grandma’s decorations. Maybe it was all that talk of fake dating and kissing. I hope I didn’t mess things up. I’d really like to have the chance to date her in real life after this event is over.

“See you Saturday,” I say, stepping out onto the porch.

“See you Saturday. And thank you again, Liam—for everything.”



“So, then I told her I’d go as tribute.”

I'm sitting in Carson's family room. I came over here after I left Noelle's. I wasn't quite ready to go home and be alone after the day we had. And, for some crazy reason, I thought I'd bounce my situation off the guys.

Gage and Mitch are on the other couch and the game is on the big screen, but I'm not really watching it.

"Tribute! That's classic, man. But, hey. You got the date."

Carson doesn't take his eyes off the screen. They say guys can't multitask. Put on a game and test that theory. We're watching every play, listening to the commentators, and carrying on a discussion about my love life.

"I got the date. But she doesn't know it's a date. She thinks I'm doing her a favor."

"So, tell her," Gage chimes in.

"Tell her exactly what?" I ask.

"Tell her you're not faking. It's easy. You just say, 'Hey. You know how we were going to fake it for your family? I'm not faking. I was going to ask you out anyway.'"

"I can't."

"Why not?" Mitch asks.

"Because. This event is big to her. I don't want to put pressure on her. And I don't really want this to be our first date. I want to ... cook her dinner ... or take her out. The first time we date, I want it to be just the two of us. And I want us to both know we're on a date. You know?"

"Details. Details. Does it really matter? One way or the other you're going to end up dating this girl. You might as well make this your first date. Tell her or don't. Eventually, you'll have to confess that you're interested." This from the perpetual bachelor, Carson.

"Talk about the blind leading the blind," I mutter.

Carson shouts, "Get him! Sack him!" and then he turns to me "I, for one, am not blind."

Multitasking at its finest.

“I’m just not as invested as you are, so I can spout off any advice I want. No skin in the game, you know?”

“I’ve got skin in the game,” Mitch says. “If this goes south, Liam will be all sulky for weeks. He’s not casual about romance.”

He’s not wrong. But I hate him shining a light on my sentimentality.

“I can be casual.”

“You can’t,” Gage says. “And that’s nothing to be ashamed of. You should be proud. You’re the settling down type. Unlike this yay-hoo over here.”

“Who’s a yay-hoo?” Carson asks, and then he shouts at the TV again. “Take a look at whose couch you’re sitting on and whose nachos you’re eating.”

I don’t share any more of my dating angst with the guys. Surprisingly, despite their near ineptitude, they actually settled something for me. I can’t tell Noelle how I really feel yet. I need to help her through this party. Then we’ll see where things stand.

NOELLE

Have your elf a merry little Christmas.

~ Unknown

Get Yo'self an Elf, Girl

Stephanie: *Okay, so Noelle's in the chat now.*

Noelle: *Who named this chat? Seriously. Get yo'self an elf?*

Alyssa: *That was me. Catchy, huh?*

Noelle: *You are too much.*

Alyssa: *And you love me.*

Noelle: *I totally do.*

Stephanie: *Enough sweet talk. Give us the scoop. How's your elf?*

Noelle: *Good.*

Stephanie: *Nope. No. We did not let you in here so you could dodge the questions or give one-word answers.*

Noelle: *We still need to talk about you guys looking Liam up and forming this group text without me.*

Stephanie: *Jennifer did her usual detective work. Still waters run deep with that one.*

Jennifer: *I'm right here. And, look who's talking. You had to fan yourself when you first saw Noelle's elf.*

Alyssa: *And who could blame her. That man is fire level hot.*

Noelle: *Good thing his brother's a fireman. And, he's not my elf.*

Stephanie: *Stop the train! Shut the front door! You have that level of knowledge about this handyman? You know what his brother does. Just wow. You need to spill ... Spill it ALL.*

Noelle: *This really isn't the place. I wish we were all together in person.*

Stephanie: *That can be arranged. Who can make their way to Noelle's?*

Jennifer: *Now?*

Stephanie: *Yes.*

Alyssa: *I'm down. I can be there in twenty minutes.*

Tori: *Me too.*

Noelle: *Tori, I didn't even know you were here.*

Tori: *:)*

Stephanie: *The only one in our group more stealthy than Jennifer is Tori.*

Jennifer: *I'm already in my pjs.*

Stephanie: *Come in your jammies. I'll see all of you within a half-hour at Noelle's.*

Noelle: *I won't be home. Help yourself to drinks in the fridge.*

Stephanie: *Nice try, apple pie. We'll be there in a jiffy. Order Chinese. We'll split the tab, and then we'll leave early enough so we can all be responsible adults tomorrow morning. Stay put.*

I SET down my phone and pull out the Chinese take out menu from my drawer where I keep a stack of menus from all my favorite restaurants. As much as I half-dread my friends coming over, I'm also relieved. I need to process everything that happened this weekend.

Less than an hour later, the five of us are sprawled out on my living room furniture and floor with take out containers scattered on the coffee table and in our hands. We don't bother with plates.

"So, tell us everything," Stephanie says, pointing a pair of chopsticks in my direction.

"Where do I start? There's a lot to tell, honestly."

"First of all, you decorated!" Tori looks around. "It looks so nice in here."

"Thanks. Yeah. Liam helped me bring down boxes. He hung the lights out front too. I don't think I would have done it without his encouragement."

Everyone's chopsticks freeze midair. My four friends are all staring at me like a statue entitled *Chow Mein Among Friends*.

"What?"

"What do you mean, what?" Alyssa says. "He encouraged you? He hung the lights? You're talking about him like you've known him forever."

"The hot elf hung her lights." Jennifer's voice is dreamy.

"Please. Do not say hot and elf in the same sentence," Alyssa says. "It makes me picture a man who comes up to my armpit running around all red-faced with his trousers on fire."

"What? Why?" Stephanie asks. "You know what? Never mind. Back to Liam. Noelle. I'm picking up some serious potential for something more here."

"I don't know what it is," I admit.

I spend the next ten minutes going through everything from the moment I opened the door and saw Liam's face, to all

the repairs he did, to the conversations we had over lunch, and finally to the way Delilah crashed into my life with her invite Saturday night and how I blurted Liam's name and then confessed it to him over lunch today.

"He literally told you how he would kiss you?" Jennifer's eyes are soft. She has a faraway look that's reading way more romance into the situation than there is.

"He didn't tell me exactly how he'd kiss me. But he made it clear he would have—if we were dating. It actually might have helped if he had given a step-by-step outline of his method."

"Sweetheart, what would make you say that?" Tori asks. "Are you unsure about being kissed by him? Just because he's hot doesn't mean you have chemistry. Don't let us bulldoze you. We're just living vicariously through you right now."

"Thanks, Tor." I pause. It's a little embarrassing how comfortable I already feel with Liam after two days. But it was two *full* days. And we did have some pretty deep talks along the way. "I definitely want him to kiss me. Is that crazy?"

A chorus of "no" goes up around the room.

"It's just, I haven't kissed anyone since Joseph. What if I forgot how? Or what if Joseph and I only had one way of kissing and Liam has another. What if I mess it up?"

I bury my face in my hands. I'm a twenty-eight-year-old woman, and I sound like a ninth-grader.

"Kissing's not like that." Stephanie's using what I call her mom voice.

She's a force to be reckoned with, but when someone she loves is hurting or anxious, she brings out her soothing tone of voice. No one can reassure me like she does in times like this.

"Have you ever watched the Animal Channel?" Alyssa asks.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Jennifer asks Alyssa.

“Bear with me here.” Alyssa shifts her gaze to me. “Have you?”

“Sure. I mean, not a lot. But I’ve seen it.”

“Bam. There’s your answer.” Alyssa nods and crosses her arms across her chest.

“What?” Tori asks. “I think I missed the punchline.”

“Animal Channel. They just go for it. You know. They know what they want, and there you go. Bam. It’s all instinct.”

“Oh my gosh!” Jennifer nearly squeals. “You are not comparing Noelle and Liam to wildebeests.”

“I was thinking more of the lioness and her lion, but whatever. Same story. Those animals don’t think thoughts like, ‘What if Joseph kissed me wrong?’ They just go for it—on instinct. And when the moment hits with Liam, believe me, Joseph will be the last thing on your brain. You’ll go into autopilot and you’ll have the kiss of your life.”

“As unconventional, random, and very Alyssaesque as that just was, I have to say she’s onto something,” Stephanie says. “When you like someone, you don’t have to overthink it. Let him lead. He’ll kiss you. Just follow his lead.”

“I’ve seen his picture. I’m sure that man will know how to give you a kiss,” Tori says shyly.

“That was never the question,” I say softly.

Stephanie pulls her phone out of her pocket. It’s buzzing with an alert.

“Oooh. Speak of the devil. Or the smokin’ hot handyman elf ...”

“What?” we all ask.

“I have a message from Liam.”

“Why would he message you?” Jennifer asks.

“I’ll just read it. He says, ‘Stephanie, thank you for the referral to your friend Noelle. I spent two days doing odd jobs around her home. She seemed satisfied with my work.’”

Stephanie pauses, looks at me and says, “I’ll say she was satisfied.” I blush.

She keeps reading. “I wanted to check with you. You can leave a review here.’ Then he gives a website where I can review. And then he says, ‘And tell Noelle it was a pleasure working for her. If you would, tell her I’d like her number. It’s only fair, since she has mine.’”

I’m blushing a megawatt blush now, and my friends are all squealing like a gaggle of teen girls at a sleepover.

“Send him her number!” Alyssa shouts.

“May I?” Stephanie looks at me.

“You’re asking?”

“Sometimes I ask permission before steamrolling my friends. I’m a softy that way.”

“You can send him my number. He needs it anyway—for the party.”

My friends all squeal and talk over one another while Stephanie shoots a text to Liam.

It can’t even be thirty seconds later when my phone chimes from the coffee table.

“It’s him! It’s him!” Jennifer shouts. “It’s got to be him!”

“Pick it up!” Alyssa says.

“Sorry you guys have to leave. Work tomorrow and all ...” I’m mostly joking. But it does feel a little under-the-spotlight to be answering Liam’s text with a rapt audience sitting around me.

“I’m good,” Stephanie says. “That’s what coffee’s for.”

“Yep. I’m a night owl,” Alyssa says.

“I’ll stay,” Jennifer agrees.

“Me too,” Tori says with an apologetic look on her face.

I breathe out a sigh of resignation and then I pick up my phone.

Liam: *This is Liam. You probably already know that. I just wanted to say goodnight and tell you I'm looking forward to this weekend.*

"He just wants to tell me he's looking forward to the weekend."

"What are you going to say?" Jennifer asks.

"Thanks?"

"No." Stephanie shakes her head. "Say ... I appreciate all the work you did. Looking forward to Saturday too. Thanks again."

"That's not half bad." I type those exact words into my phone and hit send.

Noelle: *I appreciate all the work you did around here. Looking forward to Saturday too. Thanks again.*

Liam: *My pleasure. Have a great day at work tomorrow.*

Noelle: *You too. Goodnight.*

Liam: *Goodnight, Noelle.*

I know I'm smiling when I set down my phone. I can feel my cheeks stretch, I'm smiling so hard. Surprisingly, my friends don't flip out and act half our age. They just smile back at me.

"I can't believe this is actually happening," Tori says.

"What exactly do you think is happening?" I ask her.

"You and the rental elf."

"We're just faking."

Only, my heart doesn't seem to get that memo.



THE WEEK FLIES by after that night with my friends. Having them over made me realize something. It doesn't have to be planned or perfect for us to gather. Even though it's three

weeks away, I've made my first New Year's resolution: more spontaneous moments with the people who matter most to me.

The knock at my front door makes me jump. I know it will be Liam. We've texted on and off all week. Nothing crazy—just things about what the dress code is, what time he'll be here, and the weather forecast, which was spot on. It's snowing, and not just a little. This is our first real snow of the season where it's accumulating and turning everything just a little more magical. I have the porch lights on—the ones next to the door, and the ones Liam hung for me.

I'm wearing a red velvet dress with a tasteful white fur trim along the edge of the sheer angel-cut sleeves and these black boots Alyssa brought over. They feel a little out of character for me, but I'm rolling with it. Maybe this outfit will send the message to Liam that I'm interested in more than faking with him. And maybe I'm setting myself up for disappointment. He's amazing, beyond attractive, and a self-made entrepreneur. I'm me. But tonight, we're going to my family's and we're going to pull off the pretense that he's my boyfriend. I can be Cinderella until the stroke of midnight, right?

I open the door and he's standing there in a dark suit with a black wool, tailored coat over it. I've heard my friends say they wanted to climb a certain man like a tree. I don't want to necessarily climb Liam, that seems awkward, and I'd probably make us both topple to the ground. But the way he looks makes me want to pull him inside my home, light a fire, and keep him to myself.

“Wow,” he says. “You look ... wow.”

LIAM

*If you didn't get enough of our dysfunctional
family circus at Thanksgiving,
we're inviting you to Christmas, too!*

~ Unknown

I know I'm staring. Noelle looks stunning. She's wearing a red dress and black boots and her hair is sleek and shiny. To top it off, she's painted her lips red to match the dress. I probably look like one of those cartoon characters with a big ah-oooo-gah noise in the background while his eyes pop out on springs. I clear my throat and gather my wits. This woman. It's unbelievable what she does to me. And to think, she's been living twenty minutes away from me all this time.

"Thanks," Noelle says with a slight blush.

She averts her eyes for a moment. Compliments make her momentarily uncomfortable. I've noticed that. But I've also noticed the shy smile she tries to hide whenever I mention something sweet or beautiful about her.

"You look wow, too." She smiles. "I like this suit."

"It's one of two I own. One's for weddings and fancy parties, the other for funerals. If you didn't notice, I'm more of a jeans and T-shirt type."

"Those work."

On me? Is she flirting? Was that a compliment, or a statement of the fact that jeans work? I wish I had a translator to tell me. Unfortunately, the men in my life are as clueless as I am, or they'd mock me for caring. Maybe my New Year's resolution will be to get some more mature and encouraging friends. I won't ditch the guys. But I could use some men who don't use their shirts as napkins in my life. Can't trade my brothers. Not that I really would.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes. Let me get my coat.”

I step inside Noelle's home and the first thing I notice is the balsam fir in the corner of her living room. She's got a ribbon garland woven through the branches and a bunch of gold and silver ornaments placed in a pattern throughout the tree. The white strands of lights reflect off the ornaments. It's elegant, but cozy.

“You put up a tree.”

“I did. It didn't feel complete without one, so I went after work Wednesday. I paid a high school boy down the street to bring it in for me. I love the smell. It really makes me happier than I'd imagined it would. Thanks again—for inspiring me to do this. It was the right decision. Everything feels so much more complete now. And ...” her voice trails off for a minute and then she looks up at me. “I feel like I'm closer to my grams somehow. With each ornament I hung and decoration I put up, I felt like I was honoring her instead of avoiding the pain of missing her. I still miss her, but decorating made me feel closer somehow.”

I smile down at Noelle. I've been happier this week too, but not because of her decorating. Meeting Noelle has given my life a new focus. Looking forward to this night together has made the week fly by in anticipation of seeing her again. I probably should be nervous about this farce we're about to attempt, but I feel too much for Noelle. I'll barely be faking it. She just can't know that—yet.

She takes a red coat off a hook near the door, and I lift it out of her hands, holding it open so she can slip into it.

“You don’t have to ...”

She smiles back over her shoulder at me and I feel like something I’ve been missing just came home to me.

“I know. I want to. Let me do all the boyfriend-y things tonight. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I also want to lean in and kiss the silky spot on her neck that’s calling to me right now, but I can wait. She makes me crazy in the best of ways. It’s unexpected, but I’m rolling with it. I may never get to kiss Noelle. That thought frustrates me, but then I push it aside. We’re here now. The night is open with possibility.

Once we’re on the porch, I offer Noelle my arm. The snow has already built up a bit on her walkway. If I had my shovel with me, I’d clear it for her.

“Careful. It’s getting a bit tricky out here.”

“Thank you.” She looks up into my eyes and loops her hand over my forearm.

We walk to my brother’s sports car arm in arm.

“Where’s your truck?” she asks when I go to open her door for her.

“I borrowed my brother’s car for the occasion. It’s a little more impressive.”

“You don’t have to impress me, Liam. And I happen to like your work truck. It suits you.” She looks away again, but I heard every word she said. I’ll probably be replaying that sentence in my head for weeks. It speaks to so much more than automobile choices. A spot in my chest warms and I feel something I haven’t felt before. It’s a lot like a longing, but deeper.

I shut Noelle’s door and carefully make my way around to the driver’s seat. She already sent me her parents’ address, so my GPS chimes out directions along the way. Noelle’s family lives in an established gated community about fifteen minutes from her place. It’s a neighborhood that has a strict HOA.

Plenty of high-powered executives and people with old money live there. I don't intimidate easily. My family isn't poor. And Dad moved up in the company after the four of us were out of the house, so he's able to afford things like an Aga for Mom now. Still, I feel a case of nerves set in the closer we get to Noelle's childhood home.

I put on a Christmas music station to soothe myself and set the mood. The windshield wipers thunk out a rhythm, swiping snowflakes off the glass. Every so often, I glance over at Noelle. She's staring out at the road ahead of us, her gloved hands clasped in her lap. I can't believe she's here—with me.

"Are you nervous?" she asks when the GPS says five minutes until arrival.

"No. Yes. A little, I guess. I'm not nervous to meet your family. Just wishing it were only the two of us going out somewhere to hang out for the night. And I know your family's neighborhood. I've done a lot of jobs here. It's a little ... well-off."

There. I said it. I wish it were just the two of us. I don't know if she heard what I was really conveying there, but maybe if I slip comments like that in often enough tonight, she'll end up knowing I want more time with her. I want to get to know her better. I want to take her on a date. And then another. I want to see if something could build between us. It's been a long time since I couldn't get a woman off my mind. And that woman was nothing like Noelle.

"The neighborhood's a bit pretentious at times. Some of our neighbors are so into image it's distracting and sad, actually. But my family isn't so much that way. My sister is, for sure. She picked up on all of the social climbing and then some. For her, everything is about making an impression and being noticed. But my parents are pretty down to earth. They'll love you."

"I just don't want to let you down."

"I don't think that's possible."

Her confidence in me shores me up and makes me even more unsteady at the same time. I could let her down. I never would want to.

We pull up to an ornate wrought iron entry gate embedded in brick columns. A fountain sits at the center of the entrance to the neighborhood. It's empty for winter, but I've been here when water cascaded down the rocks into an ornamental pool. The trees along the brick wall are back lit from underneath and the gate has garlands of pine tied off in red ribbons. I punch in the code Noelle rattles off to me and the gate slowly swings open. I drive through and we weave back along curving streets flanked with houses the size of small libraries until we're at her family's house—more like a mansion—with a circular driveway and offset parking in front of the four-car garage.

“You can park near the house, or on the street, whichever you like.” Noelle acts like we're pulling up to a McDonald's, not a home that's worth well over a million dollars.

I pull up along the curb behind a Mercedes. Then I hop out and run around the front of the car to help Noelle out. She could make it through the snow without me, of course, but I want to touch her and to walk up with her on my arm. We have this one night and I'm going to make the most of it.

When we reach the door, it opens before we ring or knock. There's a young man in his twenties, wearing a black and white uniform, ushering us in like we're in some movie.

I lean in so my mouth is near Noelle's ear and ask, “Is that your butler?”

She giggles. “No. We don't have a butler. Mom just hires a full staff for events like this one. It's really over the top.”

“Good evening,” the young man at the door says in a very detached tone.

“Hey,” I say.

I'm not about to fake a level of polish I lack. I'm not a cretin, but I'm definitely not anyone with numbers after my name or a pedigree of any sort. I don't know if I ever could fit into this kind of lifestyle. Is it a deal breaker? When I look

over at Noelle, I know nothing could be a deal breaker with her.

“May I take your coats?”

“Thank you, yes.” Noelle slides her coat off into the hands of the awaiting servant like she’s been doing this all her life. She probably has.

It’s so funny, she comes across so unassuming. When she told me she was an elementary school teacher, something in me said, *just right*. She’s the epitome of a teacher: sweet, creative, genuine, sentimental. I never would have imagined her coming from a background like this. It might sound odd, but it feels like she’s risen above her upbringing. She could have chosen to fall into the patterns and expectations that go with this class of people, but she forged her own path and has obviously pursued the calling of her heart.

I smile down at her as I shuck off my coat and hand it to the dude in the suit. I smile at him too. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

Noelle beams up at me.

“Ready?” I ask.

“As I’ll ever be.”

The words are barely out of her mouth before a woman in a black dress with a red sash saunters over to us.

“Oh, Noelle. You made it! We wondered if the snow would start to make the roads impassable. But, so far, so good. This must be Liam.”

The woman, I’m assuming is Noelle’s mom, leans in and gives this sort-of air hug to Noelle. Noelle smiles a wooden smile while standing still for the hug.

“Mom, this is Liam, my ... boyfriend. Liam, my mom, Georgia Furst.”

“Pleased to meet you.” I smile over at Noelle’s mom and instinctively put my palm on Noelle’s lower back.

“Aren’t you something. Let’s find your father. He needs to meet Liam.”

Noelle and I follow her mom through several rooms where more staff in uniforms are holding silver trays of finger foods and drinks and passing them among people. I’m guessing there are eighty to a hundred people here already. It’s not crowded, but it’s not intimate either.

We end up in a spacious living room with a large fireplace along the back wall flanked by floor to ceiling windows that look out onto the vast lawn that borders a golf course. The snow falling outside makes the scene look like it’s straight out of a snow globe.

“Henry, this is Liam,” Noelle’s mom says, addressing a man who looks like he could run for office. He has a commanding air to him, broad shoulders, and a winning smile, but what catches my attention are his bright green eyes. And they are kind, like Noelle’s.

“Nice to meet you, Liam. Did you get a drink?”

“We just got here, Daddy,” Noelle explains.

“Of course. Well, make yourself at home. Delilah and Crispin are somewhere around here. I think she’s making sure he makes the rounds with everyone who’s anyone.” Noelle’s dad laughs as if his daughter’s antics are adorable.

Noelle’s body goes momentarily stiff. My hand has returned to her lower back, but I have the impulse to put my arm around her shoulder, so I do.

She looks up at me and smiles. It’s a smile that seems to radiate gratitude. I’m glad I can be here for her. I picture her coming alone to this event and I wouldn’t want her to have to face this crowd without backup.

“So, Liam. How did you meet my daughter?”

“Well, sir, it’s a funny story.”

He doesn’t look amused.

“I have my own business, doing odd jobs and handyman services for people.”

Noelle cuts in. “Liam’s a contractor. He’s a genius with houses.”

Does she feel like she has to build me up? For the first time in our short acquaintance, I feel like I’m definitely not enough for her. I don’t know what I really was thinking. She’s from all this. I’m a handyman. Talk about slumming it. She’s probably used to dating senators or CEOs. I assumed I might have a chance with her. Maybe I was wrong.

“Anyway,” I continue. “Noelle’s friend hired me to do some work on Noelle’s house and I was there for two days. We got to know one another over that time. When the job was over I asked for her number. And, well, that’s how it started.”

It sounds horrible now that the story’s out of my mouth. I’m this handyman that hits on his clients? That’s not me at all. But standing here, it feels like I’m slimy and not at all what this man would have in mind for his daughter.

Noelle looks up at me, though. Her gaze is tender and assuring, as it always is.

Then she turns to her dad. “Liam is the reason I decorated for Christmas. He helped me take down all Grams’ boxes and sort through them. Then he hung the lights out front. It looks so much like it did when the house was hers.”

Her dad smiles at this revelation. “I sure do miss her.”

“Me too, Daddy.”

I feel out of place here with them sharing such private thoughts and feelings, but my arm is around Noelle and she leans into me for support, so I give her shoulder a squeeze.

“Well, it seems I owe you a thank you. Noelle’s been struggling ever since my mother passed. Mom and Noelle were such kindred spirits. They had a special bond. I’m grateful Noelle has you this year to make it through the holidays.”

Okay, then.

So many conflicting thoughts and emotions flick around my head and heart. The feeling of Noelle tucked up in my

arms has me all warm and hopeful. But her father's compliment is only half-earned. I'm standing in front of him pretending to have a place in Noelle's life that isn't actually mine. The urge to blurt out the truth rushes over me. But I'm saved when Noelle's mom comes back to where we're standing.

"Delilah is looking for you, Henry. She wants to prepare for her big announcement."

I hope I'm not imagining the way Noelle's father seems put out by the request.

"Duty calls," he says as he takes a sip of his drink and then sets it on the empty tray of a server passing by. "Go get yourselves some food and drink before the circus puts up a tent in the great room."

The great room? Isn't this the great room? The ceilings are twenty feet tall at my estimation. The walls are adorned with wainscoting, intricate crown molding, and exquisite paintings. I can't imagine what the actual great room looks like.

I guess I'll see in a matter of minutes.

NOELLE

Every girl deserves a guy that can make her heart forget that it was ever broken.

~ Elizabeth Gilbert

I shouldn't have interrupted Liam when he was telling Daddy the story of how we met. I don't know what came over me. Liam mentioned odd jobs and referred to himself as a handyman, and I saw my father's facial expression pinch just the slightest. I had a flashback to Joseph's connection with my parents. Joseph fit our lifestyle and our family. But he didn't fit me.

So, when Liam didn't paint a flattering picture of himself, I had this unexpected urge to make my dad view Liam with the same level of respect he gave to Joseph—because Liam deserves it so much more. He's a man of integrity, a hard worker, and he's got a heart of gold under all those scrumptious muscles.

Thankfully, the conversation took an unexpected turn when I told my dad about decorating my place for Christmas. I should have let the conversation between Daddy and Liam roll out. And does it really matter if my parents like Liam? It's not as if we're actually dating. Though, if he would ask me out, I'd definitely say yes. For now, he's doing me a favor—playing the part. And I'm giving him an academy award for his performance so far. He's very convincing—too convincing. It feels like he's my real boyfriend. The way he looks at me,

like he's doing now as we stand surrounded by guests in the great room, awaiting my sister's takeover of the microphone. Yes. The microphone.

Kill.me.now.

Or don't. I'd rather die after I've had a chance to kiss Liam, even if it's just one kiss.

My father takes a champagne flute off one of the trays and clinks the edge of the glass with a cocktail spoon. The room stills. Daddy always has that effect on people. He's someone who commands attention without even making an effort. He's a steady and serious presence, intelligent and a natural-born leader. I'm blessed to have a father like him, even if he misjudges my friends and boyfriends at times.

"Thank you for joining us this evening, and for making your way out here in this unexpected weather. Looks like we might have a white Christmas after all." The room fills with polite, refined laughter.

"As you know, we have an announcement to share with you all. Most of you have heard our news, but Delilah wanted to make it official. And what she wants ... well, those of you who know her ... what Delilah wants, Delilah gets." More laughter fills the room. "My first born is very much like her mother that way—very driven and suited for a high-profile life."

My dad means this as a compliment. I know him. And the crowd nods as if it's not a bit sad that someone would spend their life trying to live up to the ever-changing standards of beauty and design. I'm all for having tasteful decor and taking care of yourself. The priorities are just a little off when it comes to my mom and sister. But they are making their choices. I get to make mine.

Liam's hand gently rubs a circle on the small of my back. He's not kidding about being physically affectionate. Anytime we've been standing still, his hand is on my back or around my shoulder. Even when we move from place to place, his palm lands gently on me, guiding us through the crowd as a

connected couple, assuring me he's right there. It would be something a girl could get used to way too easily.

He leans in. "You doing okay?"

I can't help the way I tilt closer toward his warmth. "Yeah."

Never better. Here I am at an event I dreaded more than a double root canal, but Liam's here with me and he's not only serving as a buffer, but his touch is sending little hums of sweetness through my body and heart. I need to shore up my defenses, but I'm not really interested in doing that right now. If this ends up being my one night with Liam, I'd rather bask in all he's offering than guard myself prematurely.

"You're doing great." His words are a breath across my neck and ear and I involuntarily shiver. He draws me close in response.

My dad makes a few more witty remarks and then he hands the mic over to Crispin.

Crispin stands with his arm around my sister's waist. Delilah looks demure and lovely, a picture-perfect fiancée. "Thank you everyone for being here. As you know, I met Delilah when I was at her law offices to meet with my lawyer. I was making a quick visit to drop off some contracts. On the way out, I passed Delilah in the hallway and said hello. Our eyes locked, and I stopped in my tracks to ask her for a date on the spot. We'd never even met before—two total strangers. I didn't know her name. I guess you'd just say my heart recognized hers, and the rest, as they say, is history."

Crispin's speech was actually way sweeter than I anticipated it would be. When my heart recognizes Delilah's, it runs and hides, quickly. Maybe there's a side to her that still has love to give and she's doling that out on Crispin. I hope that's true.

Liam turns toward me. We're off to the side of the room, in a spot that's not really prominent. No one's paying attention to us, as all eyes are on the happy couple up front.

Liam bends in, and in a hushed voice he asks, “Do you believe in that?”

“In love at first sight?”

“Mm hmm?”

“I don’t. But I believe in something clicking between two people, and that can grow into love over time.”

He studies me. It’s like we’re the only two people in the room when he gazes at me so intently. “I believe in that too. The click.”

Is that what Liam and I had? I sure felt something when I first saw him on my porch, wearing an elf hat and looking so gorgeous I couldn’t get ahold of myself. But then I got to know him, and that’s when the real attraction started. I just don’t know if the attraction is one-sided. I hope it isn’t. Something in me thinks we might both be feeling this. But I’m a horrible judge of signals when it comes to men. I’m the woman who settled for Joseph because he was convenient. Maybe I’m also the woman who thinks the kindness of a hot man means he’s my soulmate.

My sister takes the mic, and it’s as you’d expect: over the top, dramatic, and nearly the opposite of Crispin’s heartfelt profession. She even sheds one tear and makes a show of wiping it. I wish I could buy what she’s selling, but being a sibling means seeing through all the veneer. I’m glad she has Crispin, though. He seems to love her, and she loves him with all the love she’s capable of giving.

The snow keeps falling, so after the announcement, a toast, and Crispin and Delilah’s perfunctory celebratory kiss, people start to filter out into the cold night air to get to their cars before the snow accumulates and makes driving home that much more difficult. I’m obliged to stay until the end of the event. Hooray for sisterhood.

Liam wrangles us some plates piled inappropriately high with all sorts of hors d’oeuvres and we sit on a couch in one of the front rooms eating our hearts out.

“I’m starving. You must be ravenous,” I say between bites of a mini quiche.

“I could eat a large pizza.” He chuckles.

“By yourself?”

“I’d share a slice or two if you asked nicely.” He winks.

That wink. I feel it down to my toes.

My sister and Crispin enter the room and the air changes from comfortable to chilly in an instant. I quickly set my plate on the coffee table in front of us and Liam follows suit.

“So, this is the boyfriend?” she asks.

Crispin walks over to Liam and extends his hand. “Crispin Ellis the second.”

No. He didn’t.

“Liam Goddard, the only.” Liam shakes Crispin’s hand, and I stifle a giggle.

“Nice to meet you,” Crispin says in a tone that suddenly feels very country-club-esqe. “Glad you could make it. We had no idea Noelle here was seeing anyone. You’re a surprise.”

“It’s new,” Liam says. “But we hit it off pretty fast. Kind of the same way it sounds like it went for you two. Noelle’s special. I’ve never met anyone like her.”

“You haven’t met women who lounge in their sweats all weekend?” Delilah asks.

I want to poke her eyes out. Not in a permanently damaging way, but in a way that makes her reconsider her life choices.

Crispin gives her a softly scolding glance followed by a kiss to the cheek. Then he says, “I’m pretty sure he meant her personality, sweetheart.”

“I did.” Liam jumps to my defense and I almost physically feel my claws retracting. “Well, it’s everything about her, really. Noelle is ... someone I never thought I’d meet, but I’m

so glad I did. My life has been far more interesting ever since the day I met her.”

“Isn’t that sweet?” Delilah asks, not sounding like she thinks it’s even a little sweet.

Is she jealous? Heck. I’m jealous of myself. If a man like Liam meant what he was saying, I’d be the luckiest girl in the world. He’s laying it on thick.

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and I sink into his side without a second thought. We’re definitely pulling off the boyfriend-girlfriend charade like champs. That’s for sure.

Then Liam surprises me by tilting his head down and placing a kiss on my temple. And it’s not exactly a peck-and-retreat kind of kiss. No. His soft, warm lips linger on my skin. I think my eyelids flutter for a moment. Then he slowly pulls back and squeezes my shoulder. As corny as it sounds, I’m pretty sure I won’t wash that one small spot for at least a week. It needs to be commemorated. There’s a sweet buzzing sensation where he kissed me. And I’m ridiculous, but I don’t care, because: LIAM KISSED MY FOREHEAD. Yeah. I need to get out more often.

“You two are the cutest. And to think, I told Crispy you were faking having a boyfriend.”

Crispy? Oh sweet mother of Elvis. What the ever-living heck is that nickname? And, who cares. LIAM KISSED MY FOREHEAD. Also, she thought I was faking? Of course she did. No one would believe I could actually scrounge up a boyfriend. At least not anyone related to me.

“I told you Noelle couldn’t be faking, Lilah,” Crispy the second says. “She’s too straight-laced to ever tell anything but the truth.”

And now I feel like a jerk for lying to my whole family and dragging Liam into this farce. But Liam’s here, and he must be a mind-reader, because he gives my shoulder a soft, reassuring squeeze.

I’m not really faking. If only I could grab a moment alone to tell him that. It would be the greatest risk of my entire life,

but if it meant possibly having more with Liam, it would be worth it.

Liam stares at Delilah with a determined look in his eyes. “I would fake it with your sister if that’s what it took to give her someone to lean on during your party. Noelle’s worth faking it. Thankfully, I don’t have to. What I feel for her is very real.”

He what?

I need a moment alone here. With him. Alone with Liam. Also, I need to phone a friend—like they do on that game show. Oh, boy howdy do I need to phone a friend.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, of course,” Delilah back pedals. “You two are obviously head-over-heels for one another. I just was ... surprised. But you make total sense now that I see you together. I really wish you the best. Noelle is special. You’re right about that. And I want to see her happy.”

And there she is, the fragile remnant of the sister I knew as a child. When she says things like that, I get emotional. I miss that Delilah, the one who seems so deeply buried under layers of concealer and high-end beauty products she’s nearly breathed her last. I almost get misty-eyed when I look over at my sister.

Words seem impossible past this lump in my throat, so I just say, “Thanks, D.”

“Of course, Ellie.” That’s the name she called me when we were kids—during a stage when I was so very over the chronic teasing about my name. Delilah was the one who gave me a new nickname. She was the only one who really used it, but it meant something to me that she would go to the effort of making a nickname for me when she knew I needed it most.

“Um, do you mind if I have a moment ... I, um, need to use the restroom.”

Liam stands without a word and extends me his hand so I can stand. I realize most of the guests have cleared out. It will be time for us to go soon too. I just have to wait for the few

last party stragglers to make their way out, and then we can formally say goodbye to my parents.

I walk out of the sitting room and toward the hallway in the direction of one of our downstairs guest bathrooms. It's occupied, so I head toward the one off the kitchen. I hear heavy footfalls behind me, so I turn. Liam's following me.

"I'm not trying to be creepy. I promise. I just want to know where you are, so I'll just wait ... here." He stops in the doorway to the kitchen.

I stop too, ready to thank him for everything, but especially for all he said to Delilah when she was trying to make me feel small.

He glances up at the top of the door jamb. And there it is. A sprig of mistletoe. Mom only hangs those in private doorways so she doesn't have to contend with guests kissing all over the house during her holiday parties. Some lessons are learned through experience.

"I guess I'm supposed to kiss you." Liam stares at me with those deep brown eyes, a note of mischief in his glance. But there's something more underneath his playful expression. It's tentative and vulnerable.

"That's the way mistletoe usually works."

And, Alyssa's right. I'm not thinking of Joseph. Instead, I'm inconveniently thinking of wildebeests.

I chuckle. Then I start to giggle.

Maybe it's nerves. Maybe it's Liam. Maybe it's the wildebeests.

"What's funny?" Liam asks. His face looks so boyish, and yet so manly.

"Nothing. I was thinking of this thing my friend said about wildebeests."

Gah. Why did I admit that?

"Wildebeests, huh?" His mouth tips up in a crooked smile.

"Yes. But never mind all that. You were saying?"

“I was saying that I’m deeply devoted to holiday traditions. You may not know this about me yet.”

“I didn’t know. But I had a hunch.”

“Did the elf hat give me away?”

I lift my fingers into a pinch. “A little.”

He chuckles that deep rumbling laugh, but it’s quieter and private—just between us.

“So, in the name of tradition, I’d kiss you,” Liam says in a very low and sexy voice.

“Okay,” I breathe out the word, suddenly feeling lightheaded and expectant.

“But I’ve got one problem.”

“You do?”

I’ll solve it. Later. Just kiss me.

“Yeah.” Liam reaches over and brushes a piece of hair behind my ear. His touch feels decadent, exquisite. I want more. I think I’ve wanted more of him ever since he stepped onto my porch.

“You see.” Liam’s eyes search mine. “I’m not faking here. I would have asked you out, but the party came up. And then I jumped ahead of myself and said I’d fake being your boyfriend, but I already had wanted to ask you to dinner. I didn’t want to tell you any of this before we made it through tonight. I knew you were stressed—rightly so. And now, I’ve met your family. I don’t know if I’m the kind of man ...”

He means to say more, and I’m all for letting a person finish their thoughts. I spend half my classroom time teaching eight-year-olds to raise their hands and wait their turns. But right now, I need one thing and that’s this kiss—from Liam.

I go onto my tiptoes and loop one of my hands behind Liam’s neck. I tug him down toward me. He stops speaking when he realizes what I’m doing. And then I’m no longer the one controlling this kiss. He’s taking charge, putting his arm

behind my back and pulling me toward himself, bending so his face is aligned with mine.

“Noelle,” he whispers.

“Liam. Kiss me already.”

He chuckles and then he brushes his lips across mine, softly, teasingly. It’s not enough and it’s everything. Then he comes back for more. And his hand runs down my hair, landing on my neck and holding my head in place while our lips dance and my whole body feels electric. He tastes like promises and mulled cider and a hint of champagne and everything I ever wanted in a man. I hum and a gentle growling noise echoes back to me from Liam. My hands travel across his shoulders, down his arms, gripping the front of his suit. He runs his hand across the back of my dress, carefully, sweetly.

Then a voice interrupts us. My sister. “Okay! Definitely not faking!”

Liam and I pull apart, laughing.

“Seriously, D?” I give my sister a stink eye.

“I’m just saying.” She wags her eyebrows.

Liam loops his arm around my waist and I lean into him. This time I know I’m allowed to. He wants to hold me. We aren’t playing our parts. Liam actually wants me.

LIAM

If kisses were snowflakes, I'd send you a blizzard.

~ Unknown

The snow keeps falling. Noelle and I stand in the foyer saying goodbye to her parents, her sister, and Crispin.

Her dad clasps my hand in a firm handshake. “We hope to see you at Christmas.”

“Yes,” Noelle’s mom echoes. “You’ll have to come for Christmas dinner.”

I look over at Noelle. She’s smiling up at me.

My head swims just a little. A week ago I was standing on Noelle’s porch, a total stranger in an elf hat. Now I’m being invited to Christmas dinner. And the craziest part is that I might just accept the invitation. Though, if we’re anywhere for Christmas, I’d kind of like her to be with my family. Noelle and I haven’t even had an official first date, and I’ve already met her family and I’m planning for her to meet mine. Nothing about how we’ve gotten to know one another is conventional.

I’m going to fix that and take her out for a real first date. Soon.

Delilah looks at her parents and says, “Liam only just met us. Give him a minute to decide where he’s spending his holidays. Maybe he has plans.” Crispin smiles down at Delilah

and tugs her a little closer toward himself. Delilah and Crispin are staying here for the night. I'm ready to take Noelle home.

"You sure you're okay to drive?" Noelle's dad asks.

"I think we'll be fine. I'll be careful," I assure them.

Noelle gives each of her parents a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Then she and Delilah hug. Delilah says something quietly into Noelle's ear, and Noelle smiles. I hear her say, "It's okay."

I open the door. A cold rush of air sweeps past us. Noelle's family steps back into the warmth of the house. I extend my arm and Noelle clings to me as we carefully make our way down the front steps and driveway to my brother's sports car. I should've brought the truck. Those tires are made to traverse snow and ice.

"This is crazy. Maybe we should just stay at my parents' home."

"If you really want to, we can. But I think I can get you home safely. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't be walking you out here. I promise I'll drive carefully."

My brother's car is more suited for a drive down a country road in springtime, not navigating freshly fallen snow that's accumulating quickly. But I'm a skilled driver and I'd take a bullet before I'd put Noelle in danger.

I help Noelle into her side of the car and then I slip into the driver's seat and start the engine. The heater kicks on right away, unlike my truck where it takes a minute before the chill leaves the cab. Noelle shivers and puts her hands in front of the vents to warm them. Her nose is a little red from the cold air. She looks adorable, and that kiss we shared in the kitchen feels almost like a dream.

I clasp one of her hands and bring it up to my mouth, blowing warm breath across her fingertips and then the rest of her hand.

She smiles shyly at me.

"That was nice."

“The party, or the mistletoe, or me warming your hand up?” I place a soft kiss on her palm.

We stare at one another through the darkness of the car, a street light faintly illuminating our features.

“Definitely the mistletoe. And the hand warming isn’t too bad either.” She smiles again. “But the party wasn’t as awful as I had feared it might be. Maybe I should have come clean and told Delilah we actually had been faking.”

“Let’s work that out later. After I’ve taken you on a few real dates.”

“So, we’re going to really date?”

“If you let me. That was my plan all along. By Sunday, I knew I wanted to keep seeing you.”

“Me too. My friends are going to be ridiculous about this. They’re a bit over the top about you. And they really want to see me start dating again—dating someone who is good for me.”

Noelle looks over at me. It’s too dark to tell, but I imagine the blush rising up her cheeks as it always tends to when she confides something vulnerable to me.

“Your friends can’t be half as ridiculous as mine. I think I’ll let you meet the guys on our one year anniversary of dating. If you decide to stay with me that long, you’ll be prepared to deal with them.”

“They can’t be that bad.”

“No. They really can.”

I chuckle thinking of Carson, Gage, and Mitch. I’ve always hung out with them in my spare time. I love them. But they resemble an episode of *Dude Perfect*. I’m sort of joking about keeping Noelle at a distance from them, but I honestly want her to myself. When I picture the three of them meeting her, I cringe. No telling how they’ll act or what they’ll say.

I set Noelle’s hand back on her lap. Then I put the car in gear and carefully pull away from the curb. The snow’s coming down in soft fluffy flakes, but it’s falling fast, a whirl

of white everywhere you look. A thick layer blankets the whole street. I take things slower than normal.

Noelle and I don't talk much on the drive. There's a comfortable ease between us. She feels like someone I've known for years, and yet I long for more when I'm with her. In our shared silence, the reality of our kiss and the professions we made to one another make everything alive with possibility. Now she knows: I was already planning to ask her out. And now I know she wanted me to.

The roads get a little more treacherous as we drive. Going around one of the roundabouts between her parents' home and hers, the car fishtails just enough to feel out of control for a moment. Noelle gasps. My knuckles go white as I grip the steering wheel, turning it in the opposite direction of the swerve we've taken. I tap the brakes just right. We're fine only seconds later, but both of us are obviously a little shaken by the near miss.

"I've got you," I say in a voice that's more solid than I feel.

"I know you do," Noelle says.

The weight of her words heightens my focus. My chest feels like someone pumped it full of helium. She trusts me to take care of her. By the time I pull up in front of Noelle's home, the snow has piled high enough that I can't pull into her driveway. I park at the curb, wondering if I'll have to dig the car out just to get home.

I kill the engine, intending to get out and help Noelle to her porch.

"You shouldn't drive in this. It's only getting worse," Noelle says.

"I can probably make it. I know that was scary back there. And it sure would help to have my truck right now. But I've been navigating snow since I was a teenager. I think I'll be fine."

"I'd feel better if I knew you weren't out in this storm. I know it's not too far, but it's getting deeper and more tricky by

the minute.”

“What’s the alternative?” I don’t want to assume anything.

“You could stay here, in one of the guest rooms.”

“Would it make you feel better?”

“Much.”

“Okay. I’ll stay in one of your guest bedrooms, and then I’ll dig the car out in the morning and drive it to David’s.”

The wind whips snow around us as we make our way from the car to the porch. Noelle fishes her keys out and opens her front door. The warmth of her home and the smell of pine surrounds us as soon as we step inside.

After we shed our coats, boots and shoes, Noelle offers, “Would you like some cocoa or tea? Something to warm up?”

“That sounds good. Anything.”

I don’t quite know what to do with myself. The last time I was here I was picking her up for a date that wasn’t really supposed to be a date. Before that, I was her handyman elf. I linger in the living room. Should I walk into the kitchen? Going in there feels presumptuous. I’m usually a man who takes charge of situations. Noelle matters more than anyone ever has. I don’t want to mess this up.

Maybe I should tell Noelle I changed my mind, and try to make my way home in the snow. I look out the window. The storm’s not letting up. When I glance toward the street, I can barely make out the car, but there’s already snow piling onto the roof. She’s right, I shouldn’t drive in this.

“Are you just going to stay out in the living room?” Noelle’s voice comes through from the kitchen.

“No. I was just heading your way.”

“Good.”

I walk into the kitchen and stand in the doorway, leaning on the jamb and taking in the sight of Noelle making two mugs of cocoa in her red dress and stocking feet. Her boots are

near the front door where she kicked them off. She's holding a pan, pouring heated milk into each of the mugs and stirring.

"Whipped cream?"

"Is that even a question?"

"It's in the fridge. Can you grab it?" She smiles over at me.

I open the refrigerator and bring Noelle the can of whipped cream. She takes it from me, but her eyes aren't on the can, they're on me. She smiles up at me. Both our hands are on the can as if it's a conduit for our connection to one another. Noelle's expression is soft and inviting. My eyes drift to her mouth. She sucks her bottom lip in just the slightest and lets it pop back out. I reach my hand up and cup her face.

"Is this okay?"

"Mm hmm. Definitely."

I can work with *definitely*.

I lean down and brush my lips across Noelle's. It's a careful caress of my mouth to hers, unassuming, tentative. We've only shared one kiss under the mistletoe. She just asked me to stay here so I don't risk my life on the road. I don't want to take advantage of our circumstances.

But as soon as our lips touch, something ignites like a fire between us. Noelle's still holding the can of whipped cream in her hand, but she deftly places it on the counter behind her without even breaking our connection. Then she's up on tiptoes, looping her arms around my neck, and returning my kiss with an intensity that matches how I'm feeling.

I run my hand through Noelle's satin hair, then down her back. I break the kiss so I can run my mouth along her jaw and down her neck, peppering soft kisses as I go. She lets out a little sound of contentment—a soft hum that's now my favorite noise on earth. It feels like someone pressed the turbo boost on an engine when she grips the back of my neck and runs her fingers through my hair, pulling my mouth back to hers.

I kiss her and then I separate slowly, leaving one more soft touch of my lips on hers before I force myself to end the kiss

while I still have a shred of self-control left. I pull Noelle into a hug, running my hands down her hair and kissing the top of her head. She loops her arms around my back and nestles her head into my chest.

When I speak, my voice is gravely, even to my own ears. “Let’s have that cocoa. Do you want to light a fire?”

“That sounds perfect.” Noelle places a hand on my chest and stands on tiptoe again. Then she surprises me by placing another soft kiss on my lips, as if we’ve been dating for years and kissing in her kitchen is just run of the mill for us. She giggles lightly when she pulls back.

“Something you want to share with the class?” I ask.

She’s still in my arms, tucked close to my body. I wonder if I’ll ever get used to being allowed to hold her like this. We’re new, but I imagine if we last I’ll always be a little in awe that Noelle is mine.

She looks up at me. I keep my arms looped around her back. The ease and familiarity we have shared since the first day we met makes everything feel more natural than it should—like she belongs here in my arms.

“I didn’t know if I could do this.”

“Do what?” A barrage of thoughts go through my mind as to what Noelle might be regretting or second-guessing.

“Kiss you.”

“Kiss me?” I look down at her for clarification.

“Yeah. I ... it’s crazy. I just ... it’s been a while since I’ve kissed someone and ... Why did I bring this up again?” She shakes her head and tugs away as if she’s going to step out of my arms. “This is so embarrassing. Let’s just have cocoa.”

I smile down at her. “You don’t have to feel embarrassed. It’s been a while since I’ve kissed anyone too.”

“But you probably didn’t go through a minor freak-out over whether you’d be able to kiss me when the time came.”

“Only because I didn’t dare dream I’d actually get to kiss you.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but you’re way out of my league.”

“What? No! You mean because of my parents?”

“Maybe. Yeah. That for sure. But also—you.”

She shakes her head lightly. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Underestimate yourself. You might just be out of my league.”

“I mean, I do know Santa.” I wink at her.

“Exactly. How many women can say they’re dating a bona fide elf?”

We laugh and I tug Noelle in for another hug, just because I can.

“And, as far as kissing goes, I’m here for any practice you might need. You know, if you feel the urge to verify your kissing skills. I’m your man.”

“Such a giver,” she teases.

“Always here to serve a good cause.”

Noelle chuckles. I grab both the mugs and carry them into the living room. She settles onto the couch while I light the fire. The only other light in the room comes from a lamp on one of the side tables, so I plug in the Christmas tree. We snuggle close, sipping our mugs of cocoa and watching the flames in the fireplace, and I wonder at how I got here. A week ago, I showed up on Noelle’s porch dressed like an elf. Tonight I’m the man she’s choosing to share this perfect moment with.

My phone rings. I fish it out of my pocket.

“It’s my brother, David. I forgot to text him.”

“No problem.”

“Hey, David. What’s up?”

I turn my head to look at Noelle while I answer the phone. My hand is on her knee and her head is resting on my shoulder.

“Hey. You didn’t make it back here with the Vette, so I was worried about you.”

“Sorry. I forgot to text. I drove a friend home and the weather looked sketchy, so I’m staying here overnight. I’ll bring it back in the morning.”

“A friend?”

He would camp out on that fact.

“Yeah.”

“This the *friend* you took to the party tonight?”

“It is.”

“Wasn’t that friend a woman?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re having a co-ed sleepover?”

“Not that it’s your business, but the roads look hairy, so I’m staying at her place.”

“Sounds serious.”

“The storm?”

“You sleeping over.”

“In the guest room.”

I look down at Noelle.

I hear my sister-in-law in the background, and then David says, “Lynds wants to know if you’re officially dating someone.”

I mouth to Noelle, *My brother is being nosy.*

She answers me softly, “He’s being a big brother.”

My sister-in-law’s voice comes through from behind David. “Ask Liam to bring her to supper this week.”

Noelle whispers, “I’d love to. But it’s up to you.”

I cover the phone and ask her, “Are you sure you’re ready to meet my brothers?”

She nods. “You met my crazy family. I want to meet yours.”

“Tell Lynds we’ll come to supper this week. And I’ll have your car to you tomorrow—as soon as I can dig it out and make it safely over to your place.”

“Behave,” my pain-in-the-rear brother says.

“Mind your business,” I answer him like the baby brother I am.

Then I hang up the call and Noelle and I curl up together and finish our cocoa. The fire burns down while we sit quietly, not needing words, just enjoying the stillness together. After a while, Noelle yawns. Pretty soon, we’ll make our way upstairs. In the morning, we’ll wake and I’ll free David’s Corvette from the snow and drive away.

But for now, Noelle is nestled in my arms, and I’m pretty sure I’m the happiest and luckiest man on earth.

I murmur my thoughts into the top of her head, brushing my lips across her hair between words. “I’m going to take you on a date. I promise. It feels like we did this all backward.”

“I think we did it just right,” she mumbles into my chest in a drowsy voice. Her hand plays with the hair on my arm, swirling little mindless patterns across my skin.

She tilts her head up so we’re looking into one another’s eyes. “Sometimes romance takes a while to build. And sometimes you meet someone, and you just know.”

“And with me you just knew?” I want to hear her say it.

“I definitely knew.”

“Me too,” I say. “Me too.”

The End ... until next Christmas



If you loved Noelle and Liam, you'll love so many of Savannah's other stories.

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All the Thanks ...

I want to thank Leticia Sexton for the initial, unintended inspiration for this novella.

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And to the readers who faithfully read Savannah Scott romcom books—that’s **YOU**. Thank you for believing in me and loving the stories I weave.

You are the best!

It all started on a Monday ...

Leticia Sexton and I send one another videos and photos of highland coos. It's our thing. So, the first Monday in December was no exception. But this time, Leticia sent me a blow-up coo in someone's yard. Her caption was, "You need this."

I answered, "I need elves."

"Blow up elves?"

"No. Real elves who will come to my home and do all the things: cleaning, laundry, decorating."

"Right?!"

And then I thought, *That would make a great novella ... what if a woman could rent herself an elf. Oooh! Rent Yourself an Elf! Yes! She's a single woman, overwhelmed Hey! What if she inherited a house from a relative? What if he's a handyman? ... Yes!* And the idea for this novella grew into near completion within a matter of moments.

But then, I had to take this burgeoning idea to my assistant, Tricia. She's always way more level-headed and realistic about what I can manage to squeeze into my workload. If she said, no, I'd have tabled this concept until next Christmas. As you can see, Tricia didn't say no. And now, we all have this story to enjoy together!

Have your elf
a merry little
Christmas
~ Savannah

