

STOCKING Stuffers!



A
HOLIDAY
ROMANTIC
COMEDY
COLLECTION



ALINA JACOBS

STOCKING STUFFERS

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COLLECTION

ALINA JACOBS

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About the Author

SYNOPSIS

Need more Happily Ever After? Need more Frost Brothers?

Then get *Stocking Stuffers*!

This collection has all of the short stories from the Frost Brothers books! These bonus short stories are all being given away individually to mailing list subscribers. But if you'd like the full collection, look no further!

Stocking Stuffers does have an exclusive Jack and Chloe bonus story where they get married!

List of short stories in the collection:

Eating Her Baked Goods – Jack and Chloe

Eating Her on New Year's Eve – Jack and Chloe

Eating Her Wedding Cake – Jack and Chloe

Tasting Her Chocolate Cake – Owen and Holly

It's Christmas Baby! – Owen and Holly

Frosting Her Cake Pop – Jonathan and Morticia


Licking Her Christmas Valentine – Matt and Merrie

Grinch Please! – Oliver and Noel

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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OTHER BOOKS BY ALINA JACOBS

Check out other books about characters mentioned in this one on my website:

<http://alinajacobs.com/books.html>

In which Jack helps Chloe open her restaurant!

EATING HER

Baked



Goodby

A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

This is a bonus short story about Jack and Chloe that takes place after *Eating Her Christmas Cookies* in which Chloe opens her cafe.

JACK

“This has to be the fastest that a restaurant space has been permitted and approved,” I said as Chloe and I walked through the newly remodeled space. The formerly cold and barren two-story retail space in the base of Frost Tower was now bright and cheerful. The second floor held a more elegant private dining space, while the ground-floor level contained some casual seating. On one side was a bar where during the day you could buy coffee and baked goods and at night you could drink cocktails.

We walked back through the kitchen, where there were stacks of baked goods on trays each sporting a sign saying DO NOT EAT written in her perfect cursive. I snuck one—okay, more like three—of my favorite cookies.

“You’re going to get crumbs all over your suit,” she said. I kissed her, leaving powdered sugar on her mouth.

“I’d like you eat you up... or out,” I said in a low voice. Chloe blushed.

“Later,” she squeaked. “I have to finish setting up. There’s already a ton of people saying they’re going to come tomorrow for the opening. Everything has to be perfect.”

I followed her back into the restaurant space. The contractor was fixing a few final things on the punch list. When Frost Tower had been built, the two-story glass-enclosed retail space had been harsh and corporate. Chloe had worked her magic, however, and now the space felt warm and

inviting. Wood and dark navy-blue walls with bronze accents gave it a casual, high-end feel.

We stopped to look at the white lettering spelling out Grey Dove Bistro on one of the large walls.

“It looks nice,” I told her, hugging her.

“I’m ready for tomorrow but almost dreading it. What if the restaurant is a failure?” Chloe fretted. “Some of my fans are flying in from other states to come to the opening. What if they’re disappointed?”

She waved to a group of people standing outside the restaurant.

“This restaurant is going to be great,” I told her. “You can cook, and you can definitely bake. Your restaurant is the most successful thing in this tower.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“The bar looks nice,” I said. It had a glass front to display the various baked goods during the day.

“What are you going to do at night?” I asked her. “People sitting at the bar are going to scuff up the glass,” I told her.

“I know, but we have panels that pop into these bronze brackets,” she pointed. “It helps change the feel of the space. It was hard making the space work for a casual lunch or snacks and for more formal cocktail hours or dinners, but I think it works.”

“Can I have a muffin?” I asked, looking at the tantalizing bakery items in the glass case.

“I thought you had to go meet Mark Holbrook?” she asked, rummaging around behind the counter. “Aren’t they moving in today?”

“Yes, I suppose I should go see that he has everything he needs.”

“Take him this,” Chloe said and handed me a little navy-blue box with a gold bow on it. “I made him some snacks. After what happened with him and his girlfriend...”

“It sounded like she was never his girlfriend,” I said, taking the gift. “She was just trying to ingratiate herself with the Holbrooks to destroy them.”

“That’s so awful,” Chloe said.

“Their family has the worst luck,” I said, hugging her close to me. The newspapers had treated the Santa brawl as a funny Christmas story, but as the Holbrooks could attest, stalkers and family drama could be dangerous, deadly even. I was glad Chloe was unharmed.

“Chloe, you need to look at this,” Nina called.

“You’re in high demand,” I said. “I’ll let you go.”

“I’ll see you tonight,” Chloe said. “Wait, sorry, no, I won’t. I promised Anastasia I would meet with her for an interview.”

I laughed. “I understand. Don’t worry about me.”

“I meant to cook you dinner,” Chloe said guiltily.

“This is the night before your big opening. You’re needed here. I can fend for myself,” I promised. “I’ll order pizza.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she said with a grimace.

I kissed her again and smoothed down her features.

After Chloe ran back to the kitchen, I walked out the side door into the lobby of Frost Tower. The Christmas trees and other décor were gone. In their place were sculptures and various plants Chloe had selected.

“Boss,” Eddie greeted me. He was sober, alert, and out of the ubiquitous Santa suit. I resisted the urge to shudder as I thought about the holidays. I hoped I never saw another Santa again.

I had hired a new security firm at Mark’s request, but Eddie was still the official greeter and doorman for Frost Tower.

“Mark Holbrook is already here,” he said. “I told him you would be right up. He had some questions to ask you. Also, Greg Svensson’s assistant called to say more tenants were coming by at some point to look at space in the tower.”

Mark's people were already moving in when I walked into the space his company was renting from me. Mark and his business partner, Finn, were standing in the middle of the action, fielding questions and directing movers. Finn cast worried glances at Mark. The CEO seemed tense around the eyes and more on guard than he had been the last time I'd seen him.

"Are you finding everything you need?" I asked Mark, shaking his hand.

"Yes, I think we are. I'll want to go over the security protocols. You can't be too careful," Mark replied.

I winced. I knew he was thinking about what had happened not even a week ago with his girlfriend.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said. "That must have been a shock."

"My feelings are irrelevant," Mark snapped. "My whole family could have been killed, and now my cousin has run off."

"I'm sure Wes will be back," I said. "I'm looking to collaborate on some of his robots for search and rescue. We're making new types of drills for uneven debris piles such as in the case of earthquakes."

Mark didn't look that reassured, so I held out the little box of baked goods.

"Chloe made these especially for you," I said.

"Tell her thank you," Mark said. He didn't smile, but he accepted the present.

"I'll let you all return to setting up," I said finally. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do to make this a smooth transition."

I wanted to go back down to the restaurant, but I resisted the urge. I knew I would only be in the way, but I just loved watching Chloe work. Also, I was hoping I could steal her away for a moment. I'd barely been able to spend time with her in the last month. She was always at meetings. And even

when she was home, she was busy trying out recipes or on the phone.

When I walked into the penthouse, I saw stacks of plastic containers filled with baked goods, random buckets of frosting or glaze, and piles of various ingredients like fruits, nuts, and chocolate bars.

I was happy for Chloe and proud of what she had accomplished, but I missed spending time with her. I had food delivered and split some with Milo. It felt like being a bachelor again.

CHLOE

The restaurant was opening tomorrow. All day, people had been stopping outside in front of the glass to take pictures. It was a little nerve-wracking, if I was being honest. I tried not to freak out in front of everyone. Running a restaurant was very different from a bakery. With a bakery, all you had to worry about were cakes, pies, cookies, maybe some coffee. Now it was liquor licenses and menus and flatware and wait staff.

“The menus finally arrived,” Nina announced, handing me a sheet of the thick cardstock.

“Better late than never,” I said. “They look nice.”

“I’m so glad we went with a simple rotating menu,” Nina said, looking over my shoulder.

I nodded. “There’s no way we could have done several pages of appetizers, salads, pasta, and multiple courses. This way it’s better, too, because it keeps the menu fresh. We can adapt the dishes to what’s in season and make it more likely that the tenants in the tower will keep coming if they know they aren’t eating the same thing every day. But we’ll still keep some of the most popular dishes on the menu, of course.”

Maria came over with a glass. “Andrew is testing cocktails,” she said. “Drink.”

I took a sip. It was sweet but not too sweet. I ate the preserved cherry that garnished the drink. Maria had made several jars of them, and they were delicious.

“Perfect,” I said.

“Do you want a cookie to go with it?” she teased.

“You know I love sweets, but I think I’ve been eating cookies and desserts for weeks,” I told her as Anastasia walked into the restaurant.

“Ready to go?” she asked.

“Oh, uh, yes,” I said, looking around. The restaurant still seemed a little in disarray. “Is this going to work? Tell me it’s going to work,” I pleaded.

“Have another sip of this cocktail,” Maria said. “You need to calm down.”

“It’s okay, we can reschedule,” Anastasia told me.

“You should go, Chloe,” Nina said. “You’re so frazzled, you’re not even being much help. Maria and I will finish up. It’s just last-minute stuff. We’re almost there!”

“I am so glad you two are here helping,” I told Maria and Nina. “I could not have done this without you.”

“Hey, as long as everything is ready to go before tomorrow morning at seven when the Grey Dove Bistro opens, then we’re golden,” Nina told me.

I took off my apron, checked my hair, and followed Anastasia out into the cold evening.

“Soon I can just come downstairs for a nice meal and not have to walk for twenty minutes to find something nicer than a pizza place,” she said.

“I think that pizza place is doing a lot of business from Jack lately,” I told her. “I haven’t had time to cook for him.”

“He’ll survive,” Anastasia said with a laugh as we climbed into a waiting car.

“I just feel bad,” I admitted. “He’s been very supportive.”

Anastasia snorted. “Supportive? Jack isn’t patronizing you and giving you a pretend restaurant to play with. He knows you’re running a serious business. It sounds like he and Greg

are making millions selling the restaurant as an amenity to tenants. Don't sell yourself short. Jack loves you, and he respects what you do. You're very fortunate."

"I know," I said. "That's why I feel bad that I've been working so much."

"After the restaurant has the big opening, you'll find your rhythm."

The car had stopped in front of a cute little restaurant. We walked in then followed the hostess to a table, and Anastasia ordered. I twisted my napkin. Everything here seemed to run so smoothly. Who was I kidding that I would be able to pull off a restaurant?

"Don't be too jealous," Anastasia said. "The food here is nothing special."

"That's what my food is," I said, panicking. "Edible but nothing special."

"It *is* special," Anastasia countered. "It's high-end casual bistro food. You aren't chasing Michelin stars, you're trying to make money. Still, your food is actually quite good, and your presentation is nice too."

The waiter put down a dish of scallops for us. I waited impatiently while Anastasia photographed everything. Then she snapped a picture of us.

"For the blog," she said.

"How is that going?" I asked her.

"It's going. Blogging isn't as profitable as it used to be. If things keep heading this way, I might have to start working in your kitchen."

"You just need to find a billionaire to marry," I quipped. "There's Jack's brother Owen or his friend Liam."

She laughed—she knew I was joking.

"I'm not looking for a handout. I just need to work a little harder. Maybe Romance Creative will have me host another show," Anastasia said. "Maybe now that Jack's tower is a

popular spot, I can sell my condo and move somewhere a little smaller.”

“No!” I protested, “We have to be neighbors! I’ll find something for you, I promise.”

“You’re so sweet, Chloe. Don’t worry about me. Maybe my father will die and I’ll inherit all that narcissist’s money,” she said lightly, though I knew her relationship with her father was a sore point for her. Anastasia and I had traded horror stories about our parents over many a wine-fueled girls’ night.

“I’ll make a post on my blog about the opening,” she promised. “I’ve already contacted some people I know to mention it as well. But don’t worry, no one is going to do a review yet. Usually when reviewing a new restaurant, people wait a few months after you’ve opened so you have your sea legs.”

It was still chilly outside when we walked back to Frost Tower.

“I really need it to go well,” I said, trotting to keep up with Anastasia.

There was a line of people outside of Frost Tower when we arrived.

“What on earth?” I exclaimed as we approached the large group.

“What are you here waiting for?” Anastasia asked them.

“We’re waiting for the Grey Dove Bistro to open,” one woman said.

“Chloe!” someone yelled.

“I’m your biggest fan!”

Though I wanted to go up to see Jack, I stopped to hug my fans. These people were standing out in the cold to see me. It would be rude to just walk past with a wave.

“Wait just a minute,” I told them and went inside.

Maria was sweeping, and Nina was straightening the bottles on the shelf behind the bar.

“This place looks great!” I gushed.

“That last little bit of tidying was just what it needed,” Maria said.

“Maybe we should have had more of a soft opening,” Nina remarked. She sounded slightly worried.

“Anastasia recommended just hitting the ground running,” I told them. “We have a bit of an advantage given that we’re the only decent-ish restaurant in the area. When the new tenants are fully moved in, I expect we’ll be packed for lunch and probably dinner most days.”

“Looks like there’s already a line,” Maria said.

“I know, isn’t it crazy?” I told her. I already had a big pot of hot chocolate made, and I heated it up then put a tray together, carted it outside, and started handing out the steaming cups. Everyone sipped the hot chocolate gratefully.

“I can’t believe you all are waiting outside in the cold!” I exclaimed. “Thank you for your support. This means a lot to me.”

We took more pictures, then I carried the tray and empty cups back inside and started washing them.

“Leave it,” Maria said. “Garcia will wash them in the morning.”

I smiled at her. “I’m so happy your cousins agreed to help work here.”

“It’s nice to have family around,” she said. “Plus it’s easier to commute together. My other cousin is working at the security company that won the contract for Frost Tower. We can all travel together.”

After telling everyone I would see them in a few hours, I grabbed one more cup of hot chocolate and walked through the lobby to head upstairs. It was very late—after midnight—I wondered if Jack would still be awake. He usually woke up early, so maybe not.

Eddie was still at his post, and I handed him the drink.

“Package for you,” Eddie said, giving me a box. “I hope it’s not another creepy gift.”

“I ordered this one, so it should be fine,” I assured him.

Eddie sipped the hot chocolate I had given him. He was sober and seemed a lot healthier.

The penthouse was dark when I walked in. I saw a pizza box in the kitchen, and several of the cookies on the trays I had made for tastings were gone. I smiled. For someone who claimed he didn’t like sweets, Jack sure was eating a lot of them.

After clearing off space on the table, I opened the box. It contained dried sakura blossoms and a bottle of sakura blossom essence I had ordered from Japan. Spring was coming, and I wanted to make cherry blossom cookies. I’d had the idea bouncing around in my head. I itched to start baking.

There was also a surprise for Jack in the box, but I would have to give it to him later.

I tiptoed to our bedroom. I was still tickled that it was ours. I lived here with Jack, and he loved me. All the more reason I felt bad for neglecting him lately.

Jack was sprawled out on the bed, Milo, his husky, next to him.

“Chloe,” he said sleepily.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” I told him, going over to kiss him.

“Come to bed,” he said, tugging me down towards him.

“I will,” I assured him. “Go back to sleep.”

I closed the door. I was too wired to sleep, and I didn’t want to disturb Jack by tossing and turning. So I did what I loved to do—I baked. I tied on my apron and started mixing up a batch of sugar cookies. I made a batch of royal icing with the sakura essence and added some vanilla to bring out the flavor and added a few drops of food coloring to turn it blush-pink. After the sugar cookies cooled, I frosted them and decorated them with a few of the dried petals.

The cookies looked great. After snapping a few pictures, I bit into one and was enveloped by the faint scent of cherry blossoms.

Unfortunately, it still didn't taste exactly how I wanted. The flavor of the cherry blossom wasn't strong enough. I decided not to bake the rest of the batch and put the dough in the fridge to see if I could experiment some more with the flavor. The fridge was jam-packed, and I couldn't fit the pink icing in, so I covered it and stuck it on a shelf along with the precarious stacks of boxes and other random containers from the shop.

I felt bad for the cleaners. After the restaurant calmed down, I would need to sort through all of this baking stuff.

I checked the clock. It was almost four a.m. I was still too wired to sleep, and I needed to be down in the restaurant in an hour, so I made some strong coffee and took a freezing-cold shower. Jack swore by them for waking you up in the morning, and though I hadn't liked icy showers at first, I'd had to admit that he was right.

Trying not to wake him up, I put on my white and black uniform in the dark and headed downstairs. The line had grown. People bundled up in coats stood waiting outside my restaurant. I stuck my head out.

"Two hours, everyone!" I said cheerfully.

They all cheered.

JACK

Chloe didn't come to bed that night. I was worried about her. Her Instagram showed me she had spent the night talking with fans, making hot chocolate, and baking more cookies. She baked when she was stressed, and our apartment was filled with boxes and containers of sweets. When I walked into the kitchen, there was another batch of cookies, along with a big tub of pink royal icing perched on a shelf.

Someone knocked furiously on the door, then I heard it unlock as someone punched the code into the keypad.

"Hi, Liam," I called out.

"How did you know it was me?" he asked.

"You're the only one besides Chloe who has the code. And Chloe is, I presume, downstairs overseeing the opening day of her restaurant."

"Wowza," said Liam as he walked into the kitchen. "Are you sure the restaurant isn't up here?"

"Have a cookie," I said wryly, gesturing around the kitchen. "Chloe stress bakes."

"And you're stress eating," Liam said, poking me in the stomach.

I wouldn't admit it to Liam, but I missed having Chloe around, and if I couldn't have her, then her baking would be a substitute. I looked down at my stomach.

“I upped my daily workouts to counteract the cookies. I can still count my abs through my shirt,” I told him.

Liam made himself a plate of a variety of cookies. There were a lot to choose from.

“How’s Harrogate?” I said. “Are you acclimating to living with all your half-brothers?”

Liam made a face then bit into one of the cookies. “My brothers are kind of exhausting, to be honest. At least I won’t be living with them for long. I’m looking to buy a property and renovate it. The factory is in the works. I’ll tell you more about it at the board meeting today.”

“I should come out and visit you,” I told him, “after Chloe has a chance to find her groove with the restaurant.”

“Unfortunately, there aren’t baked goods like these,” Liam said and took a bite out of one of the sakura cookies. “Though there is a baker.”

“Is she cute?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“But I know you have your eye on someone else,” I prompted. Liam never talked about dating. Like me, he was always too busy and too wary of running into a woman like his mother. But I knew he had met someone special in Harrogate. He just wouldn’t admit it.

“Just because you’re all set in the girlfriend department doesn’t suddenly make you an expert, dude,” Liam said. “Chloe basically fell into your lap. You had no game to speak of.”

“I have game,” I protested.

“You don’t. You’re like a little turtle stuck on its back. Chloe had to come rescue you,” he teased and helped me snap Milo into his harness.

Plate of cookies in hand, Liam walked downstairs with me. Milo needed the exercise, and I wanted to see how Chloe’s restaurant was coming along.

It was absolute chaos. Between the news crews, her fans, and all the Instagram personalities taking pictures with the food, it was insane. I waved to her from across the restaurant, and she gave me a harried smile.

“Guess you’re low priority,” Liam said, cookie crumbs spraying out of his mouth.

“I think there’s enough going on in here without you and me added to the mix,” I told Liam. “Plus Milo wouldn’t be allowed inside.”

We walked to the park instead, and Liam gave me a rundown of what was happening in Harrogate.

There was still snow on the ground, but spring would be arriving soon.

“It’s going to be boiling this summer,” I said with a shudder. “Maybe I should pack up and go to Argentina or someplace on the other side of the world to hide out from the summer.”

“Or you could go to Alaska,” Liam said.

I turned away from watching Milo and looked at Liam and the empty plate in his hand. “Did you eat all those cookies?” I said in shock.

“Dude, my life is a straight-up disaster right now,” he said. “Also, Hunter and Greg aren’t really speaking, so I think this board meeting is going to be awkward.”

The board meeting was definitely awkward. Greg and Hunter sniped at each other, and when Liam admitted that the factory had run into some snags, Greg yelled at Hunter and told him he needed a better grasp of what was going on in Harrogate.

Though I wanted the factory to be successful, I missed having Liam around. I wondered if he would come back to Manhattan after the factory was up and running. Maybe not if he had a girlfriend there.

I wondered about my own girlfriend. I texted her but didn’t expect to hear back.

Greg followed me out of the room after the meeting.

“I have two groups of tenants coming by Frost Tower this afternoon,” he said. “Make sure you’re ready to show them around. I have an older couple looking to purchase a condo. They ate at Chloe’s restaurant today, loved it, and decided they want to move there. Give them the VIP treatment and make them feel special.”

“Why is Jack dealing with tenants?” Hunter said, coming out of the room with his arms crossed. “There should be a leasing agent.”

“Yes,” Greg snapped at his brother, “but we want tenants to feel special. They need to sign. This tower has gone unprofitable for too long. If having Jack spending an hour showing them around convinces them to pay in cash, then that’s what he’s going to do. But I wouldn’t expect you to understand anything about real estate.”

“I understand plenty,” Hunter said in a clipped tone. “I also understand that the restaurant has only filled one of the retail spaces at the base of the tower and that neither of you have made any moves to fill the rest.”

“I’m working on it,” I interrupted them before they could spiral into another fight. “I’ve had interest, but I need to poll the tenants to see what types of retail would work best for them. We need a good mix. Also, just send me the files of the prospective tenants and what their needs are. I’ll make sure the space is ready.”

Chloe’s business was still packed when I returned to the tower. All the tables were full, and the wait staff was hurrying back and forth. A few times I saw her personally seat people.

“That was really great,” said a group of people coming out of the restaurant. They walked over to me. “You must be the famous Jack Frost,” one woman said. “We’re here to look at some of your office space.”

“You must be from Harrington CyberTech,” I greeted them smoothly. I was glad I had read over their file in the car on the

way back from the Svensson Investment tower. “Right this way, please.”

“We are currently located in Brooklyn,” the woman said, “but it’s far away from the finance center.”

“That it is,” I said as we stepped into the elevator. “You will find that we have the space here that can accommodate you.” I took them to a few floors below where Mark Holbrook’s company was setting up.

“That restaurant is great,” the woman gushed. “Honestly, this tower is so cool. I had no idea it was here!”

“And they have condos,” one of her colleague said.

“Yes, our CEO, Steve Harrington, mentioned we might purchase a few of those.”

“They’re going fast,” I told them. “I have people coming in later today to look at some.”

“Oh, we’d better jump on it. I’ll talk to Mr. Harrington today,” the woman said.

They took pictures of the space as we walked through it.

“We’ll be in touch,” the Harrington CyberTech representative said as we shook hands.

The older couple showed up next. The older woman had a cookie from Chloe’s bakery. It was one of the special ones she’d made that said Frost Tower.

“I couldn’t resist,” the older woman told me with a big smile. Then she wrapped me in a hug. “I feel like I know you from Chloe’s Instagram!” she said, squeezing me.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted them as my neighbors, but a sale was a sale, and they seemed nice enough. The elderly couple also seemed very much in love, and I hoped that would be me and Chloe when we were that old.

“Look, Bernard!” the woman said to her husband as she gushed over the condo. “Isn’t this view fabulous?”

“What is the policy on renovations?” her husband asked.

“Right now, there aren’t that many people moved in yet,” I explained.

Chloe and I could handle any noise, and Anastasia would probably take a discount on her HOA dues if I gave it to her in exchange for tolerating construction noise. Chloe had said Anastasia was having some financial difficulties. I thought about offering her a loan or at least introducing her to my brother Owen, who was a cryptocurrency billionaire and who I thought Anastasia would like. But I knew the woman had too much pride for that.

“Frost Tower can accommodate any construction you need completed,” I assured the couple.

“I love this space! It’s perfect.”

“I think we’ll take it,” Bernard said and offered his hand for me to shake.

“Wonderful,” I told him.

“I can’t wait to be neighbors!” his wife gushed.

“I think it’s commendable that you live here,” Bernard told me as we headed downstairs. “To me, that says something about your integrity that you stand by your project so much that you live in it. A lot of these real estate types are fly-by-night investors from China or the Middle East. Trudy and I have been looking at condos in a variety of buildings, and you never know who you’re dealing with. I like to look a man in the eye and shake his hand and have him guarantee what he’s selling me. That’s how it was in my day. It’s reassuring to see there’s still honest men left in this city.”

“Yes, sir,” I said and waved at them as they left the tower. I looked over into the restaurant space. It didn’t appear as if the restaurant was experiencing a lull at all. I checked my watch. Soon it would be dinner time.

“Pizza again, I guess,” I said to myself.

CHLOE

When we opened at the Grey Dove Bistro promptly at seven, the place was immediately packed.

“Please don’t let us run out of food!” I begged the kitchen gods. That was my worst nightmare, what kept me from sleeping, and probably why I frantically baked. I did not, under any circumstances, want to run out of food. That was the ultimate faux pas and the ultimate insult in the small Midwestern town in which I had grown up. To run out of food was to be a bad hostess. To not have enough food for everyone meant you were inconsiderate and probably a little dense.

My oma had liked to brag that the whole town could show up at her house unannounced and she would have enough food to feed everyone and give them seconds. The whole city of New York might not have shown up at my restaurant, but it sure felt like it. Nina, Maria, and I had spent the last week baking thousands of cookies, cakes, and tarts in the large commercial kitchen.

The baked goods were going quickly. There was a constant stream of people at the counter and waiting to be seated in the dining area. The wait staff were professional and were quickly taking orders and bringing food. Maria and Nina had also enlisted family members to come help out.

“You guys are a lifesaver,” I told them while doling out muffins, cookies, and cups of coffee. I saw Jack across the room. He smiled at me, and I gave him a frantic wave then turned back to my customers.

In front of me was a representative from a large hotel chain. She waved one of the special Frost Tower cookies in front of my face.

“I need to put in standing orders for thousands of special cookies each day. We want to give them to our hotel guests,” she said. “We want ones just like the Frost Tower snowflakes except with our branding, obviously.”

“We can accommodate that,” I lied. Those special cookies were time consuming to make even with the Platinum Provisions tools. I would need to talk to Jack about renting more space in his tower. The commercial kitchen we had in the restaurant was not going to be able to handle all those cookies and desserts.

“Schedule a time when you can come back and talk with us about what you’re thinking, okay?” I plastered a smile on my face, and the woman seemed satisfied and left.

She was quickly replaced by another man who I recognized as a restaurateur.

“I’m going to email you about supplying my restaurant with desserts,” he told me while I was trying to ring up customers and tell my back-of-house staff where I had stored more of the soup muffins.

“Yes, absolutely, we can do that,” I told him.

“I want a special dessert only my restaurant will have,” he demanded.

“Talk to that woman over there and schedule a time,” I said with a tight smile. One more thing to add to the list.

I recognized other restaurant owners from around the city. They had also come in to sample desserts. I knew when I opened up my email account that night, I would have more requests.

“It will calm down after lunch, right?” I said to Nina when she brought me some water.

It did not calm down. Four p.m. came and went. The coffee crowd died off, but the dinner crowd picked up. Maria’s

cousin and brother quickly switched the bakery counter over to a wine bar.

“I can already see that this is not a viable solution,” I told Maria.

“Maybe we can expand into a nearby retail space and keep that open as a coffee shop and bakery?” Nina suggested. “Jack’s tower has other empty retail spaces. They’re a little smaller than this one, though.”

“We’re going to need to do something,” I said as more people came in looking for baked goods and coffee. I sold them some because I felt bad, but the bartender had arrived and needed the space to start making drinks. Then some people asked for cookies *and* wine.

“I should make a cookie cocktail or something,” the bartender joked.

“Can you?” one customer asked. “That’s all I ever wanted.”

I made more mental notes for what I would do in the future, then I jumped in to help the hostess seat people. There was a line for dinner, and I did not want people to have to wait for a table.

I recognized an older couple who had come in for breakfast then come in again for a cookie, and now they were back for dinner.

“We want to support you!” the woman said, waving when she saw me.

“Thank you,” I told her, grabbing two menus and leading them to a table.

“We’re going to be neighbors!” she told me. “We just talked to your husband.”

“Jack’s not my husband,” I said, smiling.

“He will be, though,” the woman said and winked at me. “What’s that song? Put a ring on it?”

“You’re going to live near them? Good luck,” Nina snickered after I came back from seating the couple at a table near the window. “Expect to have her ask you when you’re having kids every single day.”

“I’m glad Jack sold a condo, but honestly,” I sighed, looking at them.

“I’m sure they’ll travel a lot,” Maria said diplomatically.

“We can only hope,” I replied.

“We’re almost sold out of all the baked goods,” Nina said. “We’ll have to bake more for tomorrow before we leave.”

“I don’t know how we will be able to bake everything,” I fretted.

“I called my family,” Maria said. “They’re in the back starting to mix the batter and dough.”

With the bakery traffic dying down and the chefs on their game making savory food, I wasn’t needed as much. The wait staff were experienced, and after the initial rush, things hummed along smoothly. With the lights dimmed and the bartenders slinging drinks, the Grey Dove Bistro felt like a relaxing, upscale establishment.

“I feel like I can breathe,” I said as I tied on an apron and started baking. With Maria’s mom, grandmother, and sister helping us, we managed to bake and decorate enough items for the next day.

“You need a bigger kitchen!” Maria’s grandmother said. I started to choke up a little. That was what my oma would have said.

“I’m working on it,” I assured her.

I offered Maria’s sister a job on the spot and begged to have her mother and grandmother come by to help bake as well. It was after midnight when we finished.

“Do it all again tomorrow?” I said to Nina.

“You know it!” she replied cheerfully.

One of the chefs gave me a box of leftovers, and I hobbled out into the lobby to go upstairs to see Jack.

JACK

After the older couple left, I took Milo for another walk, and then I met Owen for a drink. I was tempted to go to Chloe's restaurant, but I didn't want her to feel obligated to entertain me. I knew it had to be stressful. I remembered when Liam and I had first started Platinum Provisions—we'd barely slept for weeks. There was a constant churn of product design meetings, emails, and conference calls.

Owen was at the bar with Jonathan when I arrived at a restaurant near the Svensson Investment tower.

"You have the worst taste in bars," Jonathan was saying as I walked up.

"I didn't know you were coming," I said, hugging my younger brother.

"Belle says I need to be more proactive about being a member of the family," he replied.

I wished Belle were here, but she was off with Dana and Gunnar, filming the next Romance Creative production.

"She said she's coming back into town next week," Owen told us. "She wants to try Chloe's restaurant."

"It's a big hit," I said. "The place is packed. I think she'll need to expand."

"That hotelier I know, remember Mike with Greyson Hotel Group?" Jonathan said. "He was asking me about Chloe doing cookies for his hotels."

“How much is he talking about?” I asked him as the bartender handed me a whisky.

“The entire group in the Greater New York area has like ten thousand keys or something insane. He owns all these boutique hotels. They’re all over the city. He said his group is moving away from the bigger hotels to better compete with Airbnb. He wants special cookies for each hotel to give them that personal touch.”

“The restaurant kitchen won’t be able to handle that much,” I said. “I mean, every single day? That’s a lot of cookies.”

“Give her some more tenant space,” Owen said. “You can put in a big factory-style kitchen.”

“Chloe is not going to accept industrialized cookie production,” I said. “Her cookies are all hand made.”

“I’m sure she could find people to come decorate cookies,” Jonathan said.

“I guess.”

We drank and talked. It was nice to hang out with my brothers. Since Belle had returned, it was as if the tension that had existed between us had dissipated.

It was late in the evening when I returned to the penthouse, but Chloe still hadn’t come home. A few people had still been eating in the restaurant when I walked by, and I knew she wouldn’t leave until the last person was gone.

I ordered in some food for her, and though it was close to midnight when it was delivered, she still hadn’t come home. I watched TV with Milo while I waited. I was starting to drift off when I heard the door open.

“Chloe,” I said. “You should have told me you were coming. I could have had a bath ready for you.”

“You’re so sweet,” she said as I wrapped her in my arms and kissed her.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you in years,” I said into her hair. It felt good to hug her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, her expression serious.

“Do not ever apologize for success,” I told her, tilting her chin up and kissing her mouth.

“I still want to spend time with you,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“Are you hungry?” I asked her. “I ordered you some food.”

She smiled and held up a box. “I brought you some too.”

I made a plate for her while I heard the shower run. I expected her to come out in a bathrobe and thick, fluffy socks. Except when she walked into the kitchen, she was not in a bathrobe. Instead, she was wearing a very sexy outfit.

“What are you supposed to be?” I asked, feeling my mouth grow dry. My pants were uncomfortably tight.

“It’s a sexy French pastry chef outfit!” she exclaimed. I could tell she was loopy from lack of sleep, but she struck a pose, and it was all I could do to keep from ripping the tight-fitting costume off of her.

CHLOE

I walked over to him. I had seen the sexy French maid outfit when I was shopping on the Japanese store for the sakura flavoring, and I couldn't resist. I was larger than the typical Japanese woman, but the costume had a little bit of give, plus I knew I wouldn't be in it long.

"That's... quite an outfit," Jack said. He was looking at me as if he was hungry for more than cookies.

Then Jack seemed suddenly angry. "Did your stalker send you that?"

"No," I snorted. "I bought this just for you."

He smiled and relaxed. "In that case, then..." He pulled me close to him, running his hands over my body, the forcefulness of his kiss telling me I was his. He pushed me up against the kitchen counter. I felt his hand creep between my legs, and I spread them, offering myself to him.

"I think your costume is ripped," he said when I felt his fingers in the wet warmth.

"I bought it that way," I whispered in his ear then bit it gently. He ripped the bodice of the costume, his mouth hungry at my breasts. He rolled a nipple around with his tongue, the feel of his mouth sending a shock straight down through my body.

His hand was still between my legs, stroking me. It had been a spell since we'd made love, and my body was on fire for him.

“I want—” I moaned.

“I know you want me to fuck you,” he murmured, “but I want to take my time.”

He hoisted me onto the counter. Boxes toppled to the floor.

“My cookies!” I gasped.

“I’m going to eat your cookie right now,” he said, his voice deep with lust.

He spread my legs even wider, and I moaned and arched back as his mouth kissed and licked between my legs. It didn’t take much for me to come. My chest heaved against the costume. My fingers slipped out of the tangle in his hair as he stood up.

“I’m not done with you yet,” Jack said.

I was still seeing stars as his belt slid out of the loops and he stepped out of his pants and boxer briefs. I reached out to stroke his cock, hard and thick in my hand. I wanted it.

Placing a hand on my lower back, he brought me closer and teased me with his cock.

“Please,” I begged.

He put two fingers in the crotch of the little outfit then pulled, ripping the slit longer. He ran his cock around the hot flesh revealed by the slit in the costume. I moaned, and he kissed me, stifling the sound. Then he entered me.

The sensation drove me wild.

“Jack!” I cried, repeating his name as he thrust into me. He wasn’t even trying to go that slow. His movements were pure lust. Jack wanted me, and I loved him for it. I was letting out high-pitched gasps and whimpers with every thrust from him. The stuff on the counter was jostled. More boxes crashed to the floor, and I smelled sugar in the air.

He kissed me sloppily, and I panted against his mouth. His cock rubbed against my clit with every thrust, and I angled my hips towards him, needing to feel him. I felt my whole body tighten once more, then I came from the sensation of him. My

legs, wrapped around him, needed him to milk all the pleasure from me.

Jack buried his face in my neck when he came. He kissed up my jaw then up to my mouth to kiss me long and slow.

“That was fantastic. I missed you, and I love you,” he said against my mouth.

“I love you too,” I said. My legs were still wrapped around him. I didn’t want to let go.

He nibbled my ear as we slowly untangled. “You want to come to bed and do this all again?” he asked, nuzzling my neck as he spun me around to direct us to the bedroom.

Unfortunately, the tub of royal icing I had made last night finally gave up its precarious grasp on its perch and toppled off the shelf, covering Jack with pink frosting. He stood there in shock, blinking at me.

I snickered then laughed as he started guffawing. Giving me a devilish look, Jack wrapped me in his arms, covering us both in the sticky pink icing.

“I think I might bake too much,” I said.

“Never,” he replied and kissed me, covering my face in streaks of pink.

“You’re the best-tasting thing in this kitchen,” Jack said with a chuckle.

I smiled and swiped a finger through the icing on his forehead. “And you’re my Jack Frosting!”

SYNOPSIS

This is a bonus short story about Jack and Chloe that takes place after *Eating Her Baked Goods*.

JACK

“So,” Liam said to me a smirk on his face. “How’s Chloe? When’s the wedding?”

I shook my head as we walked out of the board meeting. It was the end of the day—through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows, I saw it was pitch dark out. Chloe would probably be home already. I loved coming home to her. She would always be in the kitchen or in her craft room. It felt good to have her there sharing my home and my life. I couldn’t wait to marry her, but there was one little obstacle in the way.

“I haven’t proposed yet,” I admitted.

“You need to get on it!” Liam exclaimed.

“I have the ring, but I just need the proposal to be perfect. You know how Chloe is—she loves a good Instagram moment.”

“Gee, I can’t believe you’re having trouble,” Liam said with a quirk of his mouth.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said, slugging him in the shoulder.

“First of all, that weak, flabby punch barely even hurt. I feel like you’re eating too many baked goods.” I punched him harder.

“Second,” he said, rubbing his arm, “As I have said before, you have absolutely *no game*.”

“I do have game!” I argued.

“Oh yeah? What are your ideas?” Liam asked as we walked into the elevator.

“I thought maybe I should take her on a helicopter ride, but then you’re wearing those headsets and the seatbelts and everything, which wouldn’t make great engagement photos. Then I thought maybe I could take her to Paris or the Bahamas.”

Liam rolled his eyes. “That’s so impersonal.”

“Happy New Year’s!” the receptionist called out as we walked out of the elevators.

“Happy New Year’s to you, too,” I said with a wave.

“Any plans?” Liam asked her, a smile spreading over his face.

She blushed. “I have a bottle of wine and a few episodes of the newest *Romance Creative* show that I have to catch up on. Not super exciting.”

“*Au contraire!*” Liam said. She giggled.

“What about you two?” the receptionist asked.

I could practically see the lightbulb go off in Liam’s head.

“What?” I growled at him.

His smile grew even bigger until it was a Cheshire Cat-sized grin. “Jack’s going to propose.”

I felt my heart jump in my throat. “I am?” I choked out.

The receptionist squealed and clapped her hands. “That’s so exciting! Congratulations!”

“I don’t have anything planned!” I protested as we walked outside.

“But I do,” Liam replied as he followed me to the waiting town car.

“Oh yeah? What’s your big idea, Mr. Proposal Planner?” I scoffed.

“It’s going to be spectacular!” he said. “I know a guy with a boat. Don’t worry about it. I have it under control. Wear

something nice!” He pulled out a Sharpie, snatched my hand, and wrote down something on the palm.

“Hey, stop!”

“Shhh. These are the details. You want memorable and spectacular?” Liam asked.

I nodded.

“Well, this is it. I’ll have it all taken care of, just show up when you’re supposed to.”



I STUDIED Liam’s messy scrawl on my way back to Frost Tower. When the car dropped me off, I could see that Chloe’s restaurant was busy, and it teemed with well-dressed people. The restaurant had found a groove in the few years since Chloe had opened it, and she and I had found a groove as well. I know she wanted to get married—we had discussed it. I wondered how it would be to have Chloe as my wife. Chloe Frost had a nice ring to it.

Eddie was in the lobby when I walked in. He was sitting at the desk wearing a silly hat and eating a plate of pasta that I recognized as Chloe’s handiwork.

“Happy New Year’s Eve!” he greeted me. I waved.

“Chloe went upstairs already,” the security guard said, wiping his mouth.

I grinned. “Thanks, Eddie.”

I heard my husky, Milo whining as I walked into the penthouse. It was boiling hot, and I smelled the scent of freshly baked cookies in the air. I loosened my tie as I walked into the kitchen.

Chloe was dancing at the counter. I noticed her clothes draped over the couch and saw that she was dressed in an apron and not much else.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” I said.

Chloe screamed. Milo jumped up from his spot at the counter, barking, and ran over to me. I opened the door to let him outside in the cold air, then made my way over to Chloe.

CHLOE

“I don’t think he’ll be back for a little bit. He said he had a board meeting tonight.”

“On New Year’s Eve?”

I was in the penthouse kitchen on the phone with Maria. I had left the restaurant after I was sure the dinner service was going well. We had a number of large groups and couples eating at the Grey Dove Bistro before going to a New Year’s Eve party or a quiet evening at home. That’s what Jack and I were doing. I was going to cook my boyfriend a nice dinner and make everything cozy and warm.

“Maybe it will prompt him to propose,” I told Maria over the phone. Milo bumped his head against my bare leg. I had worn nice clothes today because I’d had a meeting with the owners of a major conference center. I didn’t want to ruin my good clothes while cooking, so I’d taken them off and put on an apron. Don’t judge—it’s comfortable.

“Does he even have a ring?” Maria asked. I could hear the background noise of the subway she was on.

“I don’t know,” I said with a sigh as I took his favorite cookies out of the oven. “I love what Jack and I have, but I need him to take it to the next level. I’m half about to propose myself. If it doesn’t happen by the New Year, I’m marching down to the jeweler and buying a ring for *him*.”

Maria laughed. “Today is New Year’s Eve, so that’s not a lot of time for an ultimatum.”

“Hence the fancy dinner!” I told her. “It’s not a super Instagram worthy moment like being in Times Square or anything—”

“Ooh,” Maria said. “Don’t say that. I did Times Square on New Year’s Eve once, and it was terrible. They don’t let you out of the little pens to use the bathroom. It’s freezing cold, smelly, and miserable. Definitely not romantic.”

I grimaced. “Well, it would look nice in a picture with the confetti and the ball drop. Or he could propose on a rooftop with the skyline in the background.”

In the last few months since I had started heavily hinting at Jack that we needed to get this show on the road because my cookies were starting to get stale, I had envisioned what the proposal would look like. I imagined being proposed to in front of a waterfall, in a field of flowers, at a fancy restaurant, or at the Grand Canyon. I obsessively watched proposal videos online in my spare time, all the while weeping at the girls who all looked so ecstatically happy to be marrying the love of their lives.

“Honestly,” Maria said, “You two are practically already married.”

“Yeah, but I want to make it official.”

“I’m going into the cell phone dead zone,” Maria said. “Text me if he proposes!”

I went back to cooking. I turned on my music and sang along as I rolled the cookies in powdered sugar. Along with the cookies, I was going to make a nice Italian dish. I threw Milo a piece of bacon for the gnocchi I was going to cook.

“You’re drooling on my foot,” I told him. He whined at me, and I started chopping for the salad.

“I love this song!” I yelled to Milo and cranked up the music, twirling along and mouthing the words into my microphone whisk.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” I heard Jack say.

I screamed. “What are you doing here? I didn’t expect you back so early,” I said, waving the whisk at him as he let Milo outside.

“Looks like I’m right on time,” Jack said, a wolfish smile spreading on his face. If anything was dangerous in here, it was him.

“It’s really warm in here, isn’t it?” I commented as he approached me.

“That’s why you’re dancing around ovens and knives in barely anything?” he asked, hooking a finger in the bow of the apron string and pulling it.

I gulped. The apron went on the floor.

“I was making you dinner,” I explained, looking up at him. I was starting to salivate as much as Milo as I watched Jack slowly unbutton his shirt.

“You know I like it when you cook naked,” he said, his voice deep with desire.

“I’m not naked!” I protested as his shirt joined my apron on the floor.

He unhooked my bra. “You’re about to be.”

“You’re wearing more clothes,” I said, reaching out to run my hand down the planes of muscles on his chest.

His pants came off. Then his mouth was on my nipple.

“I have food out,” I whispered hoarsely.

He picked me up and wrapped my legs around his waist, took me into the living room, and deposited me on the couch.

I groaned as his hand pushed my panties aside, stroking me.

“I thought you were going to be the main course,” he said, kissing me. His tongue moved in my mouth as he stroked me, making me moan.

I gasped as Jack kissed down my curves.

“I want you,” I told him

“You know I have to eat your cookies first,” he teased. “It’s like a cookie tax.”

“Like a bribe for your cock,” I said as he pulled off my panties and tossed them on the floor. His mouth pressed against the hot flesh between my legs, and I groaned as his tongue coaxed me. His hand reached up to pinch and rub my nipple. I moaned, my fingers laced in his hair as his tongue teased me. I whimpered pushing his head closer. He obliged, and I hissed as I felt him lick and suck on my clit. Two fingers slid inside me, stroking me.

“You know just what to do,” I gasped. My hips pushed against his fingers, and he continued to drive me to the edge. I cried out and bucked against him as the waves of pleasure washed over me.

“You made me come,” I murmured to him, carding my fingers through his hair. He pushed me back against the couch. I stroked the hard bulge in his boxer briefs, my nails catching on the seam slightly as I pushed them down.

“I love how wet you are,” he said.

“Put it in me.”

“You’re so demanding,” he said, his voice low, rumbling through me as he teased me with his cock.

He lifted my hips and pushed in me. I arched up against him.

“Your pussy is so tight,” Jack said, kissing my neck, nipping me as he pushed me back into the couch with each thrust.

I wrapped my legs around him, wanting to feel all of him.

My breath came out in little high pitched pants; my hips grinding against him. My nails dug in his back when I came. Jack thrust erratically, drawing out the electric sensation then I felt him shudder.

Flipping us over, Jack cuddled me to his chest. The cold air drifted in from the open French doors. I shivered, and Jack snuggled me closer

“I love you,” he murmured in my hair.

“I love you, too,” I told him.

And I want you to propose to me, I thought as I traced the tendons on his forearm.

“What’s that?” I asked, noticing the black marks on his hand.

“Nothing,” he said standing up in one smooth motion and pulling me up with him.

I stepped back from him and glared.

He put his hands up placatingly. “Liam wants us to come hang out tonight for New Year’s Eve.”

“But I’m cooking dinner!” I protested. Now Jack was making me mad. What gave him the idea he could just make plans without consulting me?

“It will be fun,” he said, pulling me gently to the master bathroom. In the shower, Jack started to get handsy, and I slapped him away and jumped out, grabbing a towel.

“Why are you mad at me?” he asked, following me into my closet, his eyes wide.

“Sorry, just grumpy,” I told him. He kissed me, then left me. I tried to calm down and collect my thoughts. This was supposed to be a nice evening! I hid in my closet while I heard him dress and go out into the living room.

I tried to force myself to be calm as I tied my hair up into a ponytail.

“You are a logical, rational business owner,” I told myself. “Stop acting like a child.”

It seemed petty to be annoyed about the party with Liam, and I would sound spoiled and self-centered if I told Jack I had wanted to set this evening up to make it as easy as possible for him to pop the question.

“Is Liam having food at this shindig?” I asked as I walked into the kitchen and turned on the stove to start boiling the water for the gnocchi.

“No? Can you box this up?” he asked, gesturing to the ingredients for the meal I had carefully planned.

“*Excuse me?*” I hissed.

Jack looked at me blankly. “We’re going to be late.”

I noticed he was dressed in another fancy suit. I did not have the patience to go to a party tonight, let alone a fancy one. I would have to wear my Spanx. It would be a whole situation.

“It’s several hours until New Year’s,” I said carefully, trying not to lose my temper.

“I know,” he said, checking his watch, “but they’re expecting us.”

“I don’t have enough food for—who knows how many people are going to be there!” I threw up my hands. “I can’t *believe* you expect me to cook for a hundred people!”

“It’s not a hundred,” Jack said, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t you *dare!*” I shouted at him. “I could have had a nice meal prepped, but I need some actual notice to make it happen.” I picked up a wooden spoon and waved it at him threateningly. “Do you know how hard it is to cook for a crowd?”

“Really hard?” Jack said, his eyes shifting. “But this isn’t a crowd. It’s just a few people Liam invited and some of his brothers.”

I glared at him. “Liam has *a lot* of brothers.”

“Look,” he said. “Forget about the food; let’s eat it tomorrow.”

“So you don’t want my cooking,” I said flatly.

The cooking was part of the elaborate plan that right at this moment slipping through my fingers. I had intended a one-two-three punch of food, cookies, and sex. Jack was supposed to have the dopamine hit of the savory dinner, then his favorite cookies, then his *other* favorite cookies, then we would watch the fireworks, and he would propose and all would be right in

the world. Now we were going out with Liam, and I couldn't even finish the dinner.

Jack was texting someone.

"You're not even listening to me!" I screeched.

"I am," he said. "Look..." He turned off the stove.

"Don't touch my stove," I hissed.

Jack looked like he was stifling a laugh. "Liam says he has food already. Let's table this. Go get dressed and let's go. They're expecting us." I huffed into the bedroom.

"You need to wear something nice," Jack said as I walked back out into the living room.

"You are on thin ice, mister." I was wearing boots and black jeans and a nice jacket. It was comfortable but chic. I thought I looked fine.

"Wear, like, a dress and heels," he said. I was about ready to dump all the gnocchi over his head.

I stomped back into the bedroom, pulled on Spanx and a sexy black dress with a slit up the side. Then I teased my hair and did smoky eye makeup. I finished the look with a fur wrap around my shoulders and my best fuck-me heels.

Usually cool as ice, I could tell Jack was antsy when I walked out. There must be some business deal at this party that he wasn't telling me about. His eyes almost popped out of his head when he saw me. I saw him visibly swallow.

"You know," he said after a moment, "maybe we don't *really* have to go."

I dragged him to the door by his tie.

"Except that now I *really* want to go to this party," I told him, smirking.



THE BLACK TOWN car took us to the pier where a large yacht was waiting. There were several people dressed in white uniforms waiting to greet us when we walked up the gangway.

“Champagne?” one man asked and handed me a crystal flute.

“Thank you,” I said and took it. After the day I’d had, I deserved a drink.

“Where is everyone else?” I asked Jack as we stood on the large deck.

“Oh,” he said. “We’re going to meet them.”

As the yacht took off into the bay, I started to relax. The night wasn’t too unbearably cold, and I did like being out on the water—I found it soothing. The copious amounts of champagne also helped soothe my bad mood.

There were little snacks, and since we were the only ones there, I didn’t feel guilty eating anything that was offered to me.

“This is pretty good,” I said, biting into a clam fritter. “I need to get the recipe.” Jack leaned back against the railing. Silhouetted against the skyline, he grinned at me and I fell in love with him all over again.

The boat came to a stop. Jack looked around as the captain came over to us.

“The boat is stalled, sir,” the captain said. “Something’s wrong. Maybe debris?”

Jack sighed. “I guess we’ll be late.”

“That’s fine,” I said as he pulled me against him. I could feel his heart beating rapidly. I was about to ask him what was wrong when I heard booms.

“Look, they’re already doing fireworks!” I checked his watch. “It’s a little early.”

“I’m sure they stagger them,” he said, “So parents can lie to their kids about it being New Year’s then make them go to bed.”

I laughed and he kissed my hair. “The fireworks would be nice for your Instagram page.”

I squeezed his hand then pulled out my phone and started snapping pictures.

“The fireworks look great,” I said, taking a few more shots. “Hey, those over there are spelling something out. Will—You—Marry—Oh! Someone’s getting proposed to! Isn’t that a sweet idea, don’t you think? Jack?” I asked, reaching for him. But he wasn’t there. I whirled around and he was down on one knee, a dark blue ring box open in his hand, the large diamond reflecting the colorful fireworks.

I started tearing up. “Oh my gosh, it’s *me!* I’m getting proposed to!”

“Chloe,” Jack said, “I loved you from the moment I tasted your cookies...”

“You’re terrible!” I said, choking up.

“Will you marry me?” Jack asked.

I sobbed as Jack slid the ring on my finger.

“She has to give her answer first!” one of the servers yelled.

“Yes!” I said, “Yes, I want to marry you, Jack!” Jack stood up and swung me around, kissing me. Then he set me down and leaned over me, wiping away the tears. I knew my makeup was running.

“You’re going to ruin your photos,” he said, softly kissing me again as a photographer snapped pictures of us.

“I have you,” I told him. “I don’t care about pictures!”

“Yes, you do!” I heard a woman yell. Maria and Nina ran out from the cabin screaming and hugged me, jumping up and down.

“How are you even here?” I shrieked.

“A helicopter!”

“We have to celebrate!”

I screamed, “I’m engaged! I’m going to be married!”

I kissed Jack again, and he grinned as more of our friends and family streamed out of the cabin onto the deck. Jack’s brothers all hugged me and his sister, Belle, kissed me on the cheek.

“I’m so glad it’s not just going to be me and all these boys,” she said.

“Let me see that ring!” Liam demanded. He whistled when I extended my hand.

“Nice, Jack. You actually have decent taste.”

“Maria and I helped!” Nina said.

“It’s a beautiful ring,” I said, hugging Jack.

There were toasts and more alcohol and food—lots of food.

“I can’t believe you organized all of this,” I said to Jack. “Was this why you were being so cagey?”

Jack looked a little chagrined. “Actually, Liam organized it.”

“I had to kick his butt into gear,” Liam said. “You two would be ninety before Jack had the perfect proposal plan in place.”

“This was wonderful,” I said.

“Countdown!” one of Liam’s brothers shouted.

“Five...four...three...two...one...*Happy New Year!*”

I kissed Jack, and it was probably way hotter of a kiss than it should have been in front of all these people. There were wolf whistles and applause.

“Get it, Jack!” his brother, Jonathan, yelled.

“Cool it,” my fiancé snapped. I kissed him again.

“Happy New Year, Jack,” I whispered to him.

“Happy New Year, Chloe. I can’t imagine anyone else I’d want to spend the rest of my life with.”

EATING HER
Wedding
Cake



The
Frost
Brothers
5.7.15

A
SHORT
HOLIDAY
ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

This is a bonus short story about Jack and Chloe that takes place after *Eating Her Christmas Cookies* in which Chloe and Jack's dream wedding goes awry!

JACK

Jack

It was the middle of December, and despite the snow blowing outside, preparations were red hot inside Frost Tower for the wedding of the century. At least, that's what Chloe said. It was our wedding after all.

Not that the fancy wedding planners Chloe had hired were going to let us do it in the tower, though that would have been more convenient. And cheaper. Not that anyone asked me. Instead, we were holding it at the historic Spencer Hotel, which was being turned into a winter wonderland by the Weddings in the City planners. Unlimited budget. No expenses spared.

Chloe was calling the shots and I was a wise enough man to step aside and let her have at it. The end result? I hadn't seen much of her at all. I was looking forward to finally being married, if only because then I'd have my girlfriend, well wife, back.

Milo butted his huge furry head against my chest.

"Watch it, Milo!" Liam whistled to the husky. "That is very expensive scotch."

"Please." My older brother, Owen, snorted. "I know you stole that from Greg."

"Shhh!" Liam slurred drunkenly. "You say his name and he appears like the Krampus."

“I don’t think that’s how the legend goes...” Oliver, my younger brother, frowned.

“He’s finally old enough to drink and suddenly he’s an expert at everything,” Matt, my second youngest brother, remarked as he poured us all more drinks.

“Big words from someone who planned the lamest bachelor party ever.”

Oliver shoved him and Matt went toppling over on the couch, startling several of my brothers’ dogs who were snoozing on the Christmas-themed throw pillows and blankets Chloe had lovingly placed there.

“Shit I can’t believe I’m getting married.”

Jonathan shoved the bottle of scotch to my mouth. I took two swallows before I realized what was happening.

“Stop. Get off.”

“Don’t want you getting cold feet,” my middle brother said cheerfully as some of the liquor sloshed onto my shirt

“Dude!”

“Stop squabbling,” Owen barked. “Or I’m calling Belle.”

“Damn someone’s got his finger on the nuclear button.” Jonathan set the bottle back on the side table.

Owen stood up.

“Speech! Speech!” Matt cheered.

“Liam don’t let Jack drink anymore,” Owen warned. “He cannot be hungover at the wedding.”

“Boo!” Liam hissed.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning. I have to get home to my wife and child.”

“See ya, old man!”

“Fuck off, Oliver.”

“And I’m warning you,” my older brother said over his shoulder, “don’t do anything stupid between now and the

wedding.”

As soon as the front door of my penthouse slammed, Liam shot to his feet. “I’ve got a great idea. Let’s sneak down to The Grey Dove Bistro!”

“Fuck yeah!” Jonathan whooped, startling the dogs again.

“Why?” I asked.

He gave me a look. “I’m hungry.”

“You’re just drunk.”

“Cookies and cake soaks up scotch, right?”

Another full glass was shoved into my hand.

I thought about it for about half a second before deciding, yeah, his idea had a lot of merit.

Liam threw his arm over my shoulder. “I have the best ideas.”

“Not usually,” I slurred, leaning on him as we staggered into the elevator. “But maybe this time.”

Chloe’s bakery was closed, but as the owner of the building, I knew the code to get in. It took only a couple of tries, the numbers on the keypad swimming in and out of my vision, but eventually, I got the right combo. The door swung open to reveal a pristine space, heaping with treats to be sold in the morning.

THE BISTRO WAS Chloe’s pride and joy, and I wasn’t stupid enough or drunk enough to mess with the items for sale. But she always had extra cookies, muffins, and flakey rolled dough... uh... things. Chloe would know what they were officially called, but they were buttery and delicious, some with raspberry and chocolate in the middle.

“Hey, Milo,” Matt said, laughing. “When did you get in here? Where are your cousins?”

I turned to see my husky, Milo, had followed us all the way down. Had he gotten in the elevator with us? I couldn’t

remember. He was smart. Maybe he learned how to use the card reader. Anyway, he was sitting very close to the cake that I knew Chloe had spent the last few days slaving over, licking his chops.

An alarm bell sounded in my alcohol-soaked mind.

“Milo, no!” I yelled.

That was a mistake. The dog startled, whipping around, and his big, fluffy husky butt hit the table leg. The whole table wobbled dangerously, as did the multi-tier cake.

I’ll give it to my brothers: they had the reactions of superheroes and all leapt forward to try to stop the inevitable. Unfortunately, the perfect cake fell with a splat right on the floor.

They all stared in horror, first at the cake, then up at me, and then back at the cake again.

“Was that the wedding cake?” Matt asked in a barely audible whisper, cake dripping from his pants.

“There’s not going to be a wedding...” Liam whispered back. “It’s being downgraded to a funeral.”

It wasn’t going to be a funeral. It was going to be a public execution.

And if that wasn’t bad enough, from the prep room, I heard my soon-to-be wife’s voice. “Jack? Is that you?”

My mind went into panic mode, and all I could think was to hide this.

I quickly crossed the room, somehow keeping my gait steady, and through the next door.

Sure enough, Chloe was in the side room, wearing an apron, with flour on one cheek, and looking delectable enough to eat.

Seeing me, she looked up with a little pout on her face. “You better not be fooling with the groom’s cake. I just spent three days on it, and it’s finally done.”

Oh fuck. I hadn't destroyed the main wedding cake, but the groom's cake was bad enough. Chloe had made it herself.

"Of course not. Me and the boys came down to steal cookies," I said, then swooped in to distract her with a kiss.

"Are you sure? Is that icing I taste on your lips?" she teased.

"Only if the icing is scotch flavored."

"Hmm." She made a move as if to walk around me, probably to check to make sure there weren't any shenanigans afoot.

Since there were *absolutely* shenanigans, I struggled for a way to stop her.

Somebody up there loved me, because at that moment, the phone rang.

Chloe paused, then plucked the phone out of her pocket. "It's Ivy."

"The wedding planner?"

For some reason, that sent another burst of panic through me, almost as if worried there was wedding planner telepathy, and Ivy knew about my colossal screw-up.

Chloe answered the phone and started chatting rapidly to the planner.

From the brief, terse words exchanged, it seemed there was a problem with some of the banners in the hotel. Apparently, they were the wrong shade of blue.

Ivy could fix it, but she wanted Chloe's final approval on a secondary shade.

I closed my eyes and thanked heaven once again that Chloe was handling all the wedding prep, and not me.

Chloe quickly hung up the phone and then looked at me with a slight frown. "Looks like I'm going to be out all night dealing with the final details. Why did we choose the Spencer Hotel again?"

That was a joke. “Because you love the Spencer Hotel, and it’s gauche to have a wedding inside our own tower. So I’ve been told.”

“Ohhh, *our* own tower. I like the sound of that.”

WE KISSED AGAIN, and I started to lead her out. We had to go through the main room to the door. I did my best to position my body between Chloe’s vision and the table. Thankfully, she was distracted enough not to notice.

For their part, my friends looked on as if butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths. Even Milo was sitting pretty.

Trying to keep Chloe’s attention, I joked, “Why do we even bother hiring an expensive wedding planner if you have to handle all the details?”

She huffed. “I know, I know. But I need everything to be perfect for this wedding. It’s a branding opportunity for the bistro, after all. *The New York Times* is doing a big piece on it.” She let out a large sigh.

Shit. *The New York Times*.

This wasn’t the first I’d heard of the big article, but the scotch was threatening to come back up.

“It’s super stressful,” Chloe added, but then she looked at me, love in her eyes. “But at least I can count on my perfect groom.”

I hoped she didn’t see that I was sweating.

I kissed her again as I escorted her out the door. Then, once the door was closed behind her, I turned to my friends.

“We have to fix this.”

To their credit, they sprang into action.

“We need to call somebody,” Oliver said. “Maybe Holly, my wife... Or Morticia. Jonathan, your girlfriend knows how to bake, right? She can help salvage this.”

“That is a terrible idea,” Jonathan said. “Morticia will skin me alive for ruining the cake.”

“You didn’t ruin it; it was my dog,” I said, not willing to let any bit of hope slip through my fingers. “Can she help?”

“No, no, we should just fix the damn thing. Or make a new cake,” Jonathan said. “How hard can it be?”

I jumped on that. Why hadn’t I thought of it before? “Yeah, how hard could it be? We’re in the middle of a bakery with all the ingredients and tools... and machines? Is there a machine to make a cake? I mean collectively our net worth is what? Like, a small country’s worth? We can do this. We went to Harvard.”

“Didn’t Oliver almost flunk out?” Liam asked me.

“Think positive men!” I told him.

Immediately, we all set to work.

The groom’s cake was beyond saving, even after scraping all the scraps from the floor. We kept it anyway, just in case.

Someone went upstairs to grab the scotch to make the process a little easier.

Full disclosure, none of us had actually baked a cake before. Luckily, that’s what YouTube is for. There are plenty of tutorials on using a stand mixer. Unfortunately, the bakery only had an industrial-sized version.

But that’s pretty much the same, right? We just had to use fractions and shit to reduce the amount of flour and spices.

Unfortunately, the first batch didn’t go well. Not because of the mixer, but because we set the oven way too high. We were a little buzzed, and somebody got mixed up between Celsius and Fahrenheit... Or maybe Fahrenheit with Celsius? Anyway, the cake caught fire.

I don’t know how that happened. I think some of the scotch went into the mix.

But that was fine. We grabbed the rest of the ingredients and went up to the penthouse, figuring that a normal oven

would work better.

Finally, by six o'clock in the morning, we finally pulled out of the oven... a cake?

It looked incredibly lumpy somehow.

"I thought you knew how to make a cake," I told Oliver.

Oliver, by this time, looked half hungover. He shook his head, downing another shot. "I said I'd made pancakes."

"Does it even taste good?" Matt asked.

Jonathan shrugged and stuck a fork in it. The inside was goopy. He still tasted it, then threw the fork into the sink. "It's terrible."

Morosely, Liam covered up the hole the fork had made with icing that had the consistency of cement.

We all looked at each other. "Look, Costco will be opening in a couple of hours," Oliver said. "I'll go buy a new cake."

I sank to the floor. My suit was covered in frosting and flour.

"When Chloe sees the cake at the wedding reception, she's going to kill me, and then... she'll divorce me."

CHLOE

I was *so* stressed, I didn't know if it was the bad kind of stress or just regular stress. As the owner of The Grey Dove Bistro, I had to ensure everything was perfect for the wedding. After all, there was going to be a lot of press there, reporting on every mistake and misstep. So all the details needed to be run by me, even though I had a wedding designer. On top of running a business. And, you know, being the bride.

But that's what you sign up for when you're self-employed, when you're your own boss, right? Right.

I wasn't completely insane. Even though I needed to make sure that this wedding would go perfectly, I wasn't going to make my own wedding cake. That would be just a lot, considering the Frosts, the Svenssons, and the triple-digit guest count. But at the very least, I had set some time aside in my extremely busy day to make the groom's cake. Just to prove that I could.

And by 'some time,' we're talking three days.

So, I'm the first to admit that I have been a little absent recently. And I was a little worried that Jack was upset that I was using the wedding as a bit of a branding opportunity for my business. What if he thought I was shallow?

I tried to set the worry aside as I flitted around the hotel late that night, checking and rechecking decorations, rehearsing my vows, stressing if there was going to be enough food, and worrying about the seating chart. I couldn't

remember if my great aunt and uncle were divorced or if they were still married and just didn't like each other. Did they want to be at the same table? Would they consider it an insult if they weren't?

And on top of it all, a little worry nagged at the back of my mind that Jack was regretting asking me to marry him. After all, Jack was Jack... And me? I was just a bistro owner who might completely flub her own wedding.

I knew these worries were silly, but I couldn't completely brush them aside. The beautiful diamond engagement ring he had given me sat heavy on my finger.

Then, just after I caught a quick nap in the bride's suite, I was woken by a call from Brea, my wedding dressmaker.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, instead of doing the normal human thing such as saying hello.

"EVERYTHING'S FINE," Brea practically sang. "We just need one more fitting for your reception dress."

I almost groaned aloud, but to be honest, I needed to get out of this hotel, and Brea was just down the block. Most importantly, I *really* wanted to see that reception dress.

Thankfully, the last fitting went well. It was a beautiful mirror of my current wedding dress, cut short for comfort, and it was a little more revealing, too. After all, when I next wore this, the vows would have been said.

That's when Brea whipped out her real surprise.

I stared. I didn't remember ordering *that*.

"My gift for you," Brea said, wiggling the skimpy fabric between her fingers. "As you can see, there's not much to it."

That was the skimpiest lingerie I had ever seen. It looked more like straps with a couple bits of white floss in the middle to hold it together. I loved it.

Brea must've seen my grin because she handed it to me. "For your wedding night."

If I can wait that long, I thought.



THE SKY WAS MUTED pink and yellow with the winter sunrise as I headed back to the penthouse Jack and I shared, my pretty little secret wedding gift tucked in my bag.

That morning, I was hoping to catch Jack before the festivities started. I knew it was bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other so close to the wedding, but I really had been hoping to tell him how much I loved him and appreciated him.

Yes, my insecurities had been nagging at me.

Unfortunately, my soon-to-be-husband was nowhere to be found.

With a frown, I called his cell phone, but there was no answer. So, I sent a text. It stayed unread.

“He’s not going to leave me at the altar,” I told myself, taking deep breaths, trying not to panic. “Jack wouldn’t do that to me. He’s a good guy; he’ll be there.”

But where was he?

Not knowing what else to do, I packed the last of my things and went to the Spencer Hotel to get ready. Thankfully, all my bridesmaids were already there.

“You’re late,” Anastasia told me.

“I know, I know,” I said. I considered telling her that I had been waiting for Jack to give me a call and searching the penthouse for him one last time. But no dice.

Anastasia frowned at me, and I was worried she would know something was wrong. But then she lifted her hand and ran her fingers through my hair.

“Is that... Chloe, you have cake batter crusted in your hair.”

“I do?” My hand rose to my hair, but I wasn’t that surprised. I had waited until the last minute to make the groom’s cake.

“You do.” Maria came over and said firmly, “You need a shower.”

“Chloe, did you shave for your wedding night?” Nina piped up from the back.

With a swooping sensation, I realized that I had completely forgotten. “Oh no, my legs were going to be all spiky for my big night!”

“No problem,” Nina said, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves with a snap. “I used to be an esthetician in a former life.”



AFTER I WAS PRIMPED, plucked, and ready, I checked my phone. No missed calls, and no text waiting for me. Just complete silence from Jack.

Well, this won’t stand. If he was going to leave me at the altar, I needed to know now. I was not putting on Spanx if I didn’t have to.

I glanced over at my bridesmaids, who were deep in their mimosas and chatting amicably with each other. I still had a few hours until the wedding, and I hadn’t put on my dress yet. Snuggling on my robe, I snuck away from the bridal suite to go find my future husband.

The groom’s suite was two floors down. I pressed an ear to the door, and heard... nothing.

I had seen how Jack and the guys had been partying last night, and fully expected them to continue through the morning. But nothing? What if he had wandered away? He could be lying in a ditch somewhere. What if his brothers were trying to find him?

Now you're being silly, I thought. But where were they? Where was *he*?

I quickly opened the door, shut it, and dropped fully to my hands and knees, crawling behind the sofa. There was no one here. There was, however, a door that led to the suite next door. And, to my great relief, I heard shuffling, the soft sounds of someone walking around.

I STOOD, cracked the door open, and quickly closed it behind me, peeking back out the crack to make sure no one saw my escape.

“You know, it’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding,” Jack said.

I whipped around. Jack had his back to me, clearly just out of the shower, with a towel around his waist.

He was here! The relief was intoxicating.

He hadn’t run at all, and I felt a new rush of love for him, along with the return of my playfulness. “We can fix that.”

Stepping behind him, I untied the fabric belt around my robe and slipped it around his eyes, snugly tying it at the back.

I got a glimpse of the side of his face and saw his smile.

He was completely unresisting as I pushed him, still blindfolded, to the sofa. Then I opened my robe and climbed on top of him, letting skin slide against skin.

His fingers ran up and down the silky lengths of my thighs, and his towel bulged at the front, clearly showing his interest.

I straddled him just as one hand slid around and inward to my pussy.

I gasped, “Jack...”

“Mmm, that’s what I like to feel. Why don’t we use blindfolds more often? Oh wait, I love seeing you.”

He raised his free hand to the blindfold as his fingers did delicious things to me. Jack knew exactly how I loved to be

touched. He put the exact perfect circling, teasing pressure on my clit.

I moaned, desire throbbing through me.

“Tell me you brought a condom,” he said.

I froze, which was difficult to do because every desire screamed at me to press down into the building pleasure down below.

“You don’t have any with you?”

His lips turned into a frown. “No pockets.”

It didn’t mean we had to stop. We could have a lot of fun without having all the fun, but...

“WE’RE ABOUT TO GET MARRIED,” I said. “Why not just go ahead and jump start the family?”

Jack ripped his blindfold off. He didn’t even blink in the light. He just stared up at me, deliriously happy.

“Seriously?”

I leaned down and caught the edge of his ear in my teeth. “Give me a baby, Jack.”

With a deep groan of long-buried need, he surged up. I was already wet from the ministrations of his fingers. So when he rolled us over, reversing our positions on the couch, I hooked one leg around his waist. He slid home.

My own moan of pleasure turned into a half giggle.

“What’s so funny?” He grunted, starting to thrust.

“Nothing. Everything. You feel so good. I’m so happy. I love you.” It all came out of me and ended in a gasp as he hit that spot that always drove me a little crazy. It was even better without a condom between us.

Just Jack and me. Forever.

He leaned down for a kiss and I met him gladly, my arms around his shoulders. We broke apart, gasping as he sped up. I

matched his speed, welcoming him in, as deep inside as he could go.

He drove me up and up until I was clenching around him, holding on tight and burying my head against his shoulder so I didn't cry out my ecstasy. There had to be other people in the next room.

Then Jack spilled inside of me, and it was perfect.

We came down slowly, still in each other's arms.

Feeling more than ready to marry this man, I smiled dopily at him.

He matched it with his own goofy grin.

A grin that slowly fell away as something seemed to occur to him.

I wanted to chase whatever was bothering him away. Wedding nerves, maybe?

"See?" I said, kissing him again. "It's not bad luck to see the bride."

This close, I couldn't help but notice the way he flinched.

I FROWNED. Something was definitely up. "What is it?"

Jack looked flat-out guilty. "Well," he said, rolling off me, and I immediately missed his warm weight. "Actually... it might be bad luck."

Suddenly, I felt cold where I had been very warm. "What's wrong?"

"I... might have ruined the cake you spent the last three days making. I mean, Milo was the one who ruined the cake, but —"

"You what?" My voice rose in disbelief. "The groom's cake?! Jack! How could you?"

"Hey." He held up his hands as if in defense. "A few minutes ago, you wanted to have my baby."

I grabbed a pillow and hit him with it. Then, turning away, I pulled back on my underwear and my robe.

“Chloe, don’t be angry,” he started to say.

“Don’t be angry? *Don’t be angry?!*”

I whipped back towards him, ready to let him have it.

That’s when the door opened. Liam and Jonathan raced in, holding between them a truly massive sheet cake. A cake that I would know anywhere.

“You went to Costco?” I pointed a finger at them as if cursing them with a plague. “For a wedding cake?!”

The triumphant look fell off their faces upon seeing me. They both started to back away very slowly.

The door opened again, and Matt strode in with Holly and Morticia on his heels. I stood just off to the side, so I wasn’t right within their view.

Grimly, Holly said, “We did the best we could on the cake you guys made last night, but I don’t think it’s magazine-worthy.”

“You made a cake last night?” My voice came out in a squeak, and all eyes swung towards me.

Seeing me freak out, Holly and Morticia gasped and started forward. But before they could rush over to console me, Owen walked through the door.

“Holly told me about the cake disaster.” His arms were full of a second cake with the telltale Dairy Queen logo. A freaking ice cream cake! “I went out and got this. Do you think it will work?”

Let me repeat: an *ice cream* cake. It wasn’t a six-year old’s birthday! It was my wedding!

His daughter, Eve, toddled behind him. She was already dressed in her flower girl dress and tossed a clump of smashed rose petals in my direction. “Merry Christmas, everyone!” she called.

A cold wind blew through the room. A tall woman with her silvery white hair in a neat bun crossed her arms in the doorway.

“Ah, shit!” Jonathan cursed.

“Dude, what the hell? You called our sister?” Jack hissed at Oliver as he scurried into the room behind Belle Frost.

The ice queen surveyed the room. “Honestly it’s fucking amateur hour in here. Dairy Queen, Owen? *Costo*? Don’t worry, Chloe, thankfully I have a replacement cake.”

“You? You can’t cook.” Morticia peered at Belle from behind black bangs.

“No, but I can swipe a credit card at Alessio. They have very nice cake.”

“Yes, because they buy cakes from my rival!” I shrieked at the Frost siblings.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I ran off, pushing between Holly and Morticia, and ran out of the room.

The last thing I heard was Jack yelling, “So is the wedding still on?”

JACK

I couldn't blame Chloe for running out, and I knew I had to fix this. Or else I would be standing at the altar all by myself. And then probably begging for visitation to our hopefully soon to be baby.

Pushing past my unhelpful helpers, I made my way to the bridal suite.

The door was locked. When I banged on it, however, it cracked open. Anastasia's stern face glared out at me as if I had personally kicked her puppy down the road. "Can I help you?" Her voice was sickly sweet and terribly sarcastic.

"I need to speak to Chloe. I need to explain —"

"Don't you think you've done enough?"

"Chloe!" I called, looking over her, but my fiancée was nowhere to be seen.

"Jack," Anastasia said, "give her some space, and hope that she forgives you for this mess." Then she shut the door right in my face. I heard a little click as it locked, the final condemnation.

I gritted my teeth, but unless I was going to barge in there like a caveman and grab my woman, there wasn't much I could do. Turning, I walked back to the groom's suite.

The guys around me tried to offer their support, but it didn't really help.

I sadly got dressed for the big moment, all the while wondering if I had truly lost Chloe.

Jonathan offered me a little of the scotch, which I declined. I don't think I could ever enjoy the taste of scotch again without thinking of the cake Chloe had worked on for three days tipping off the table and onto the ground.

I wasn't hungover, though I sure felt like it. Somehow, my friends and brothers got me up to the altar. I looked around in a daze, then down by my suit, realizing that somehow, everything had been pressed and preened to perfection.

In fact the whole room was perfect, from the massive, yet tastefully elegant decorations to the scent of baked goods that I could smell in the air. Chloe had really gone all out.

This was her special day, and it hurt deep inside that I might have shattered it.

The music started, and we all turned to the door. It opened, and my niece toddled out, grinning as if she were the star of the show herself. She threw flowers willy-nilly, ecstatic as she came up the aisle. It culminated in her dumping out the rest of her basket just before my feet.

The next to come down the aisle was Milo, who was functioning as the ring bearer. He had a decorative collar in white and blue affixed to the top of his neck, crowned by two boxes.

The dog looked mildly bewildered at the room but, upon seeing me, trotted down the aisle and sat before me, just as if he had been trained.

I rested my hand on his head. "Good boy."

The music played...and played...

Where was Chloe?

CHLOE

“So... how bad is it?” Nina asked once I barricaded myself in the bridal suite and told my friends all about the groom’s cake disaster.

I let out a long breath, attempting to let my anger and anxiety flow out with it. It helped, but what helped even more was getting out of that madhouse, coming back to my suite, and having a few moments to think. I wouldn’t have normally melted down like that, except everything had come at me so fast...

“How bad?” I repeated.

“Yeah.” Nina looked at me with true concern in her eyes. “I mean, is this a spat, or do we need to postpone the ceremony for a couple of hours... or...” She trailed off. “Worse?”

“No! No!” I hurriedly said. “It’s not *that* bad. I mean, I’m annoyed, but... I know Jack wouldn’t have knocked over the cake on purpose. And...” I closed my eyes, remembering the chaos and everybody swooping in. It was pretty clear that he tried to fix things. *Badly*. I added the last word to myself with a mental snort.

“No,” I said again, standing up. “The show goes on, and I will just have a discussion with my *husband*,” I emphasized that last word, “after the ceremony.”

Nina smiled, and so did everybody else.

“Let’s get that dress on,” I said.

Things were pretty much picture-perfect after that. The wedding dress fit like a dream, and I had to admit that I had never looked better.

I was just getting the last of my makeup done, and the veil set straight when there was a knock at the door.

Morticia went to answer it. To my surprise, it was Sophie, who worked with Weddings in the City. She was the one who had baked my actual wedding cake.

Seeing her, my stomach swooped. “Don’t tell me there’s a problem with the main wedding cake too,” I said.

She laughed. “No, your bridesmaids texted me. All of them,” she added with an amused look in their direction. “And I just wanted to tell you not to buy an extra cake. We have a groom’s cake all ready to go, and it’s been delivered and set up.”

I stared at her, barely believing my ears. “Really? But *how*?”

“YOU’RE NOT the first bride who said she was going to make her own desserts,” she said with a wink.

I had made it, I wanted to say, but... She was right. I had stretched myself too thin. I shouldn’t have left it out on that table. I knew it had unsteady legs. If Milo had been able to knock it over... it had been a disaster waiting to happen. I had just been too rushed to think.

“Thank you,” I said with a laugh, then thought for a moment. “You know... We do have all those extra cakes. Apparently, the boys made one, and it turned out so *well* that they hurriedly shopped for a few more.”

The girls stared at me.

“You don’t want to use those other cakes too,” Maria said. “Won’t it ruin the theme of your perfect wedding?”

I grinned and twisted back and forth, letting the hem of my beautiful wedding dress sweep my feet. “I’m already having

the perfect wedding. Besides,” I added with a shrug, “I think that a personal, honest wedding is better than a perfect one.”



A SIGH SWEPT the room as the music changed and the doors opened to the airy chapel.

I felt like a fairy princess as I floated down the aisle to my soon-to-be husband in my castle. I’d spent over a year planning the perfect wedding, the carefully placed decorations, the curated music, the perfumed flower. But now I didn’t notice any of it. I was captured by Jack’s eyes, which were focused straight on mine, blue and crystal clear like an ancient fjord. Nothing else mattered, just us.

Jack’s loving gaze said everything as the train and veil swirled around me in gauzy lace. He took my hand as I stopped in front of him.

“I love you,” Jack whispered. “You’re more gorgeous than I could have ever imagined. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“I already said my vows earlier!” I winked. “And just Amazon Prime Now’s a bunch of pregnancy tests.”

Dana Holbrook, who was officiating, cleared her throat pointedly.

“I think we’re going off scripts, darling.” Jack smiled at me.

“Go big or go home!” I kissed him soundly on the mouth to cheers from the audience. “I don’t care. I love you, Jack! I’m so excited to marry you! This day is perfect because of my perfect groom!”

“Can we please get on with the wedding?” Dana scolded.

“Yes, just one more thing,” Jack added, “Even though I knew, from the moment I first tasted your Christmas cookies, that I had to make you mine. And you’d think that after all the time I spent in your bakery, that I’d be a better cook. Alas, all I

can offer you besides my undying love, anything your heart desires, and a big family, is that I promise never to ruin another cake of yours again.” His lip caught on his teeth as he grinned at me.

I couldn’t help it; I burst out laughing, and there was a titter from the audience, from those who were in the know.

“I’m not mad,” I assured him.

Jack scooped me up in his arms and kissed me.

“I love you more than anything, Chloe.”

Laughing, I returned it with all the love in my heart.

“I’m going to make you go back down the aisle and restart this whole wedding,” Dana warned.

“I mean it’s basically over already. Let’s eat!” Liam whooped. “First round’s on me!”

“The kids are hungry,” Gunnar called.

Eve was sitting on the floor with Dana’s niece, very carefully dismantling one of the oversized flower arrangements. Dana’s brother, Mark, stopped them before they could start eating the petals.

“Fine.” Dana threw up her hands. “By the power invested in me by the State of New York, I now pronounce you man and wife. I’d say kiss the bride but...”

Jack was already scooping me up in his arms, kissing me, on my nose, my cheek, and finally my mouth.

“What do you say, Mrs. Frost?” he asked me. “Ready for some wedding cake?”



AT THE RECEPTION, after thanking our guests, I took Jack’s hand and pulled him to the back of the room to the special table set up with him in mind.

It was a groom's cake table with all of the cakes: the bits of the smashed one, followed by Jack's cake, and the noble but rather plain Costco cake on display. There was even the one from Alessio. Behind them stood a big chalkboard sign detailing what had happened.

My husband looked at it for a moment, agape, then turned to me. "I thought you said you weren't mad."

I laughed. "I'm not. I think it's so sweet that you tried to fix the cake — and bake your own. It looked like it went well," I said, with a glance at the very sad, amateur-looking groom's cake.

"It was made with love," he said, "but... I wouldn't recommend tasting it. I think we mixed up the salt and sugar."

The groom's cake table was a hit overall, with plenty of people crowding around it and laughing at the sign. Someone had even decided to conduct an informal vote about which cake was the best. The winner was the ice cream cake, but I think people were only voting with a sense of irony.

I was even approached by a prim young lady who introduced herself as a reporter from *The New York Times*.

"I love your sense of humor and that groom's cake table," she said. "It's so whimsical! I could see that becoming the next trend, the hapless grooms baking a cake." She winked at me. "See how the other half likes it."

I laughed.

The rest of the night was a whirlwind. We made our toasts, had our first dance, and then the cake cutting. The real bridal cake was four tiers tall, ivory and pearl white, and utterly gorgeous. Little figurines of Jake and myself perched on top, holding hands.

Jack and I cut the first few pieces, playfully stealing little bits off each other's plates to the clapping of the crowd.

Then, for fun, I took my fork and stepped over to Jack's baked cake to take a little bite out of it. To my surprise, there were already some pieces missing. Taking a forkful, I chewed and chewed... and chewed.

There was something...not right about the cake. I couldn't tell if they had swapped out the salt and sugar, or what had happened. The taste could only be described as bad.

Jack handed me a napkin. "You can spit it out," he said.

I dutifully swallowed, heh! Then I kissed him.

"You taste much better than you bake!"

Holly and Owen are getting engaged!

TASTING HER Chocolate Cake



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

Holly and Owen are getting engaged...that is if they can survive Chocolate Cake Day first! This is a 7,000 word bonus short that follows *Tasting Her Christmas Cookies!*

HOLLY

There's a super-boring zone between Christmas and Valentine's Day during which January stretches on forever. Outside, it was grey, cold, and snowy. I was looking over the preliminary design for the restaurant, while Owen was sitting next to me, reviewing potential corporate acquisitions.

"This is the perfect time of year," Owen said happily.

We were sitting in front of the fireplace in his living room. Owen's husky puppy, Rudolph, now much bigger, was on the balcony to escape the heat. I was under a giant fluffy blanket because Owen had the windows wide open. It was a compromise: I got a roaring fire and he got an open window.

"Really? It's so long and boring and cold." I sighed.

"Yes. Perfect."

"I wish there was a big holiday in January," I said.

"Just invent a new holiday."

"That's dumb," I complained.

"There's probably a random holiday in January," Owen suggested. "Maybe you could elevate it."

I scrolled through a list I found on my phone. "There's a lot. We're definitely celebrating Something on a Stick Day in March."

Owen smirked. "Sounds like my kind of holiday."

I swatted him playfully. “I’m trying to make this a family-friendly holiday. Oooh, there’s Chocolate Cake Day on January twenty-seventh. We’re totally celebrating that!” I said, starting to make a list. “We can invite all the Svenssons.”

“We just had them all over,” Owen countered. “Surely once a year is enough.”

“Yes, and now it’s a new year, so we can invite all the Svenssons again. Cheer up, Owen! I’m going to bake more chocolate cake than you’ve ever seen in your life. All different kinds! We can have chocolate soufflés, chocolate lava cake, chocolate mousse cake, and chocolate cheesecake.”

“Do you want anything not chocolate?” Owen asked. “That sounds like a lot. The Svenssons will be pretty put out if we load their younger brothers with chocolate and caffeine.”

“Obviously I’m serving food too,” I scoffed. “You can’t come to one of my parties and just eat cake! I’m totally making a ton of dips, though. We’re not having a sit-down meal. You should have seen me when I was working at this pub on 31st Street. I made amazing dips! I had pizza dip and white pizza dip, spinach and artichoke dip, jalapeño dip, and taco dip, and barbecue pork dip.”

Owen leaned over and kissed me. “That sounds fantastic.”

“Oh, and crab dip. Forgot about that!”



FIONA AND MORTICIA were waiting for me in the lobby the next morning. I wanted their opinions on the design of the restaurant in the lobby.

“Did you settle on a name?” Morticia asked me.

“I was thinking the Sparrow and Thyme Bistro,” I said, taking the plans out of my bag and spreading them out on a table. The Christmas decorations had been taken down, and the lobby felt empty without them. I resolved to add some Valentine’s Day decorations.

“Not bad,” Morticia said. “I like it. It’s a little Victorian. I’ll make you a chic logo.”

“I’m a little worried about not having street frontage,” Fiona said, inspecting the plans.

“I think it will be fine; it will be like a little surprise. We’ll really hype it as a hidden gem on Instagram,” I assured her.

“We need Instagram-worthy foods,” Fiona said, pulling out her notebook. “I’m thinking a rotating list of signature drinks, along with some French bistro-inspired foods like omelets, savory tarts, and hot sandwiches.”

“I’m trying out some Instagram-worthy chocolate cake if you want to come by for a party. It’s Chocolate Cake Day in a few days! Owen has done a lot for me, and he works hard. I want to host a nice party for him where he can see his friends. Also, you know me. Any excuse for desserts!”

OWEN

“Are you paying attention?” Walker Svensson, my friend and COO, asked me, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

“Marginally,” I said.

“Repeat back to me what I just said,” he ordered.

I tried to concentrate on what he and Beck had just been talking about.

“You want more money for... something?” I said.

“Wrong. We’re asking you your opinion about moving to purchase that company that’s doing AI pattern recognition.”

“Oh, right, yeah. That’s fine.”

“What is going on with you? You need to get your head in the game,” said Beck, my CFO and Walker’s brother.

“He still has a Christmas hangover.” Walker snickered.

“I don’t have a Christmas hangover.” I was glad Christmas was over. Now we had reached the long stretch of winter. It was much colder, and I approved. Who knew? I might even need to start wearing a coat. All Holly’s talk of the party had given me the perfect idea. I started plotting in my head but then forced myself to concentrate on what Beck and Walker were discussing.

Walker turned to me. “What do you think, Owen?”

“I think I’m going to ask Holly to marry me.”

“Uh, okay, one, that was not the question. Two, What the hell? You’ve known her for two months.”

“That does seem early,” Beck said slowly.

“We’ll have a long engagement,” I said with a shrug. “Besides, it takes years to plan a wedding, or so I’ve heard. Additionally, I don’t want my little brother engaged before me. Jack would never let me live it down.”

“And I thought our brothers were competitive,” Walker said under his breath.

“What if she says no, it’s too early?” Beck asked. “She could see it as a big red flag.”

“I am confident in my decision,” I said. “It’s like Bitcoin. You all thought I was crazy. Now my net worth is ten figures.”



BUT WHAT IF they were right? I thought later that evening as I took Rudolph out for a walk. He had grown much bigger, but he still acted like a puppy.

Maybe Holly would feel we were moving too fast, that it would be strange for me to propose to her so quickly. We’d barely been living together for three weeks. But when I walked back through the front door, there she was, and I fell in love with her all over again.

“Drink?” she asked, placing a pitcher of warm cocktails on a tray with glasses and garnishes. I picked up the tray and followed her to the French doors that led out to the roof deck.

“You actually want to sit outside?” I asked as I placed the tray on the low teak table.

“I like the firepit outside,” she said, waving her hands over the flame. “I can’t wait for summer! I’m going to have a ton of plants growing out here. It’s going to look like a jungle!”

“So you’re planning on staying until the summer?” I asked, pouring the drinks.

Holly toasted me then took a sip. “Of course I am!” she said in shock. “Also, brace yourself, because we’re renovating this penthouse.”

“It’s not going to look weird, is it?”

“What’s wrong with making it look like the inside of Santa’s workshop?” she asked, eyes wide. “Morticia has several animatronic puppets that she has generously offered to gift us. One is a monkey that has tambourines. I can modify his costume to make it look like an elf.”

She must have seen the shock on my face, because she burst out laughing then started coughing.

“Some of that went down the wrong way,” she said, taking another sip of her cocktail. “I’m not seriously going to do the whole penthouse in a Christmas theme, just a few rooms.”

“A few rooms how?” I replied cautiously, trying not to scowl at my drink. I’d thought Christmas was over.

“I totally want it to look like a little winter wonderland,” Holly said, gesturing wildly to describe her vision. “There’s going to be a Christmas tree in every room. The bathroom is going to be like the inside of a Nordic sauna. My grandmother even had an antique rocking-horse reindeer, which is going front and center. It will be super cute when we have kids. I can take totally adorable pictures of them on it.”

I felt a rush of warmth and love for her. She was thinking about children. Our children. The children she and I would have together! I tried to stay composed and not propose to her with the curl of citrus peel.

“I’m sure they would be very nice pictures,” I said formally.

HOLLY

I wasn't sure about Owen's comments. What did he mean, was I planning on staying until the summer? Where else would I be? Was he tired of me? Tired of the baking? Tired of my stuff in his space? And then the comment about kids. He seemed very noncommittal.

"I'm not sure this is going to work," I confessed to Morticia. She was in a rented studio space painting a sample logo for my new restaurant.

"You said I could make it a little Gothic," she complained. "It's not like the sparrow is in death throes or anything."

"It's not that," I assured her. "It's Owen. I think he's tired of me."

"Tired of you? That man barely has a personality. You greatly increase the quality of his life," she retorted.

"Owen is great; he has his company, loves his family, he's dedicated to his business, participates in charity functions, and has close friends. What's not to love?"

Even as I said it, I wondered if maybe that was enough for him. Maybe he was worried that he would be distracted if he and I became more serious.

"Am I a distraction?"

Morticia's hand jerked. She peered at the canvas and sighed dramatically.

“Yes. Yes, you are. Now let me finish this logo. You need to have something for branding. You’re meeting with the interior designer soon. Plus you need to start hyping the restaurant on social media, and you have to have a kick-ass logo that will make people think this is the coolest restaurant ever. Besides, you said you were planning a party.”

“That’s right, I am.”

“So go do that and leave me to my creative genius.”



I WENT BACK to the Quantum Cyber tower and borrowed one of Owen’s cars. They had all been thoroughly detailed after the Christmas cake-fight incident. I took the SUV and drove to the grocery store.

I had some serious shopping to do. I needed a gazillion pounds of chocolate, for one thing. I added heavy cream, my weight in butter, more flour, cocoa powder—the good kind imported from the Netherlands.

I also bought what I needed for all the dips and snacks I was going to have to cut all the chocolaty sweetness. I stopped by the fish counter for smoked salmon—I made a mean salmon cream cheese dip. Next I perused the produce. The store had a variety of nice citrus fruits, along with tart fruits like berries. I also selected crisp vegetables to serve as the token healthy item. But of course I would make a tangy Greek yogurt dip to go with them.

After checking out, I loaded everything into the car. I couldn’t wait until I had my industrial ovens in my new restaurant. But until then, I would have to bake bread in Owen’s kitchen.

While driving back to the tower, I passed by the little boutique where Owen had taken me shopping for the gown. Though the party would be fun, I wanted to give Owen an extra-special present to show him that I cared about him and appreciated him.

I bit my lip, worrying about the food. It was cold, and I would be quick. I let the windows down on the SUV and climbed out, jogging inside the boutique. The salespeople greeted me.

I waved then said in a rush, “I need something super sexy!”

“Do you want to see what we have?”

“Just surprise me! I have food in the car.”

A woman pulled out an outfit and stuck it in my face. I barely looked at it and said, “Perfect.”

After paying, I grabbed the bag and ran back to the car. I didn’t want the fish to go bad.

After putting away the groceries, I collected Rudolph from the doggie daycare. I liked having the not-so-little husky around.

“We have a lot to do for the party,” I said to Rudolph when we were back in the penthouse kitchen. He wagged his tail at me and sniffed the refrigerator. “We are going to cook something amazing!”

OWEN

My mode of operation was to make a decision and then pursue it. I was going to marry Holly, and we were going to have several children—not as many as the Svensson brothers, but at least two, maybe three. But first I needed an engagement ring.

Holly: *I took Rudolph FYI. He's helping me bake.*

Owen: *Is he adding that extra flavor of dog hair?*

Holly: *Ha! No, I brushed him good beforehand.*

Owen: *Ginny's still mad at him. I think otherwise I'd take him to her. She has the magic touch on removing loose hair off of huskies according to Jack.*

Holly: *Maybe I can bribe her with dessert!*

It seemed Holly was occupied. Perfect. I was going ring shopping. I went to the garage to grab one of my cars. They'd been detailed, and they gleamed under the lights. Choosing a Porsche, I opened the door and noticed something glittered—a grain of sugar. Maybe I needed to have the cars detailed again. The interior still smelled faintly of icing.

There wasn't anyone in the boutique when I arrived. Of course, it was the middle of the afternoon, and the weather forecast included sleet.

“So glad to see you again, Mr. Frost,” the saleswoman said. She and her associate giggled.

“I need a ring,” I said determinedly. “Last time I was here, you mentioned you carried several options.”

“What kind of ring?” she asked. “I assume it’s for a special occasion?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s for an engagement.”

“Congratulations!”

“It’s for Holly, the woman who was in here the last time with me,” I clarified so they could find something that she would love.

“I hoped so, but you never know!” the associate said as she unlocked a glass cabinet. “Yesterday there was an older man in here buying an engagement present for a woman he met on one of those online dating sites. Hadn’t even known her a few weeks.”

“Er—” I decided to let them think Holly and I had been together longer than that. Was this a crazy stupid idea? It was a risk. But I was used to taking calculated risks and winning the big payout.

“We just had a ring come in that I think she would love,” she said, taking out a ruby-and-diamond ring. It glittered under the lights. The huge oval ruby was a deep red, flanked by two large diamonds. The three stones were outlined in smaller diamonds that continued to wrap around the band.

“I think she’d like this,” I said, inspecting the piece of jewelry. It felt like Christmas without me going out and buying a ring with a snowman or other kitschy character on it.

“We also have a wedding ring that goes with it,” the saleswoman added. “They were designed together.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Both?” she asked.

“Sure, why not.” If Holly didn’t want it as the wedding band, she could just wear the ring on another finger.

As I paid for the jewelry, I thought about how I was going to present the ring to her. Obviously I needed to make a big

production of it. The Chocolate Cake Day celebration tomorrow was perfect. However, I couldn't just get down on one knee and give it to her. I had to plan something that demonstrated that I knew her intimately and respected her as a unique individual.

What did Holly love? Cake. It would be perfect.

My phone beeped as I started the car.

Holly: *Gone to meet with Morticia.*

Holly: *Have to make sure she doesn't turn the restaurant theme into the house of horrors.*

Owen: *I'll see you when I get back.*

Holly: *Dinner is in the fridge.*

Holly: *I would say don't wait up, but I have a little tiny surprise for you *wink**

Perfect. She would be out, and I would bake a cake.

I stopped at the store on my way back. Obviously it would be chocolate. Could you bake a ring into cake? I looked up information on my phone while I wandered the aisles. It said to wrap the ring tightly in aluminum then put it in the cake batter. Easy enough.

We had tons of flour at home. But did we have chocolate? I wracked my brain, trying to remember what Holly used as I surveyed the aisle of a thousand different kinds of chocolate. Then I texted my younger brother.

Owen: *I need to bake a cake.*

Jack: *Que?*

Owen: *It's for Holly.*

Jack: *I don't think she wants to eat anything you can cook.*

Owen: *I'm proposing.*

Jack: *Kind of soon???*

Owen: *This is going to be the best decision I've ever made. But I need to make a cake.*

Jack: *I can ask Chloe to do it. She loves a sappy romantic gesture.*

Owen: *I have to do it. Otherwise it's not special.*

Jack: *Then I humbly offer my services. I live with a world-renowned baker. I've picked up a little something.*



“YOU SEVERELY OVERSOLD YOUR SKILLS,” I growled at Jack as I looked up at the batter all over the ceiling.

“My company made this mixer,” he complained. “It is definitely not supposed to do that.”

“Sounds like operator error,” I replied as some of the batter dripped down, narrowly missing my shoulder.

I made Jack clean the ceiling while I made another batch of chocolate cake batter. For the proposal cake, I was taking the easy route—just a small, plain chocolate cupcake with chocolate frosting. I put one of the little silver liners in the muffin pan and scooped the cupcake batter into it. Then I gently poked the foil-wrapped ring into the batter and put the muffin tin in the oven.

“Now to make the frosting,” I said, pulling out the eggbeaters. The fire alarm blared.

“Dude, what the hell!” Jack yelled as we raced to the oven. The cupcake looked half raw, but the empty muffin tins were smoking.

“Shit!” I cursed, pulling the pan out of the oven and setting it on the stove.

“Fail!” Jack said.

“Shut up,” I retorted, fishing the ring out of the batter. It was unharmed by the ordeal.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he texted on his phone.

“Asking Chloe what happened.” His phone rang.

“What are you two up to?” Chloe asked, voice suspicious through the phone speaker.

“Just testing out some stuff,” I said.

“Stuff?”

“Yeah,” I said, “stuff.”

“Well, for the ‘stuff’ you’re doing, don’t just put an empty muffin tin in the oven. You need to fill the empty cups with water.”

“You’re the smartest person I know, Chloe,” Jack said. “Love you.”

“Love you!”

“Okay, water,” I said, moving to fill the empty tins.

“You should start over,” Jack suggested. “That one might taste smoky.”

After dumping the smoky cupcake, I popped in a new liner, added batter, hid the ring, filled the cups with water, and slid the pan into the oven.

I was making the chocolate buttercream frosting when the fire alarm went off again.

“Shit!” There was a fire in the oven.

“You need to go buy a cupcake!” Jack yelled at me as I took the whole pan out and dumped it in the sink. Some of the batter had overflowed.

“You’re an idiot! You put too much in,” Jack complained as I used a metal spatula to scrape the blackened chocolate batter out of the oven.

“Attempt three,” I said, armed with a new muffin tin. Put in the paper, fill with batter, but not too much! Add the ring, water in the empty tins. I stood in front of the oven.

“It can’t go wrong if I watch it,” I said.

The cupcake rose beautifully. I carefully removed it from the oven and let it cool then frosted it.

“Not going to be winning any contests,” Jack said as we looked at the cupcake. “But it will do for a proposal.”

“Should I add sprinkles?”

“Nah,” Jack said. “Leave it *au naturel*.”

I hid the iced cupcake in a Tupperware container and tucked it into a cabinet that was out of the way in the large kitchen. I’d never seen Holly go into it. She shouldn’t find the surprise.

Jack poured us each a generous glass of whisky.

“To my soon-to-be-married big brother,” he said, clinking our glasses together. “Also, that was incredibly stressful.”

“I’ll say.”

I drank another glass after he left, hoping that my plan didn’t spectacularly fail.

HOLLY

The penthouse was dark when I came in. All the windows were open, and a freezing breeze flowed through the open kitchen and living area.

I wondered where Owen was; I still had my surprise for him. He wasn't in the bedroom, so I quickly pulled out the bag I had gotten from the boutique and took it with me into the large master bath.

I laughed when I pulled the skimpy lingerie out of the bag. It was a sexy winter dominatrix outfit, I assumed, based on the snowflake-studded collar and the riding crop the outfit came with.

“This is so extra!” I giggled, studying the lingerie. “Guess I should have actually looked at it carefully before buying it.”

There were little sheer panties that had a lace-up opening at the crotch, and the outfit also included a white corset with a bra that was really just a series of white leather straps.

I was really proud of myself for being able to put it on; all the straps were a little complicated. But I did look hot, I decided when I looked in the mirror. To complete the look, I dug a pair of silver platform heels out of the closet and added some shimmery silver eyeliner. Go big or go home! And there was something big I definitely wanted.

I strutted around the penthouse looking for Owen. He wasn't in his office. He wasn't in the library. Yes, his condo had a library. Nuts, right? I finally found him in the den.

“Want a drink, Holly?” he asked, putting down the newspaper he was reading and turning toward me. His tie and jacket were off. He was barefoot, and his shirt was unbuttoned. His eyes practically bugged out of his head when he saw me.

“Surprise!” I said, striking a sexy pose.

He looked me up and down. I shivered. Owen looked as if he could eat me up right about now.

“I can’t even tell what you’re wearing, just that I really like it,” he said. He stalked over to me, tipped my head back, and kissed me. I moaned as he caressed my body through the thin, soft lace. He took off his shirt, and I greedily ran my hands over the ripples of muscles on his chest.

“Honestly, I think I could just stand here and stare at you all night.”

I smacked him lightly on the chest with the riding crop. “Don’t you dare. You better fuck me with that big huge cock,” I said, unzipping his pants and palming the hard bulge in his boxer briefs.

He grabbed the leather strap that crisscrossed my boobs and dragged me to him, crushing his mouth to mine.

I moaned as Owen nuzzled me, his breath a hot trail to the mounds of my breasts, which were pushed high in the corset. He carefully undid it, letting the fabric fall to the ground, then he kissed my tits. My nipples were hard, and the sensation of his mouth was making me wet. I whimpered as his hand moved between my legs. I spread them for him, and I felt him smile against me when he realized the ribbon was the only thing between him and my pussy. Owen pulled at the thin ribbon at the crotch, letting it fall to the floor.

“Very convenient,” he said in the deep voice that always made me want to do naughty things.

Owen knelt in front of me, tongue darting out to lightly flick my clit. I whimpered, needing more. I grabbed the back of his head, and he chuckled, grabbing my thighs. Spreading my legs, he licked my pussy lightly again.

I smacked him on the back with the riding crop.

He cursed. "That's dangerous to do when I'm down here," he said, his voice slightly muffled.

"I didn't mean to hit that hard," I said then shrieked as he stood up, turned me around, and pushed me over the side of the couch. My ass was in the air, and my back was arched because of the high heels.

"You gonna punish me?" I purred, feeling weirdly aroused from the whole thing.

"Absolutely," he said. He pulled my panties down, threw them to the floor, and then stroked my aching pussy.

"I want you to punish me," I moaned.

Owen grabbed the riding crop, trailing it down my back then teasing my pussy with it. I whimpered, needing him.

"Hit me," I pleaded.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," I breathed. Owen hit me lightly with the riding crop across my bare ass. I whimpered.

"Again."

He hit me again, slightly harder.

"I want your cock," I moaned, tossing my head back.

"I'm still punishing you first," he said, tossing the riding crop in front of me. "Better hold on."

My fingers grasped at the couch as Owen pressed his face into my pussy, licking me, his tongue stroking expertly across the swollen, hot flesh.

"I need you," I whimpered as he flicked my clit with his tongue. I ground back against him. He growled and held my hips steady. I moaned helplessly as he licked, me bringing me almost to the edge. Then he stopped.

I swore.

Owen bent over me, grabbing my tits, pinching and teasing a nipple as he rolled on a condom. Then he grabbed my hips

and thrust into me, his huge cock filling me, giving me everything I was craving.

I cried out as he slid that huge cock out of me then thrust back in, my tits bouncing with the force. He didn't touch my clit, which was probably a good thing, because I was about to snow globe all over his cock. I moaned loudly as he fucked me, keeping me right on the edge, teasing me, driving me crazy.

"I need you to fuck me harder," I pleaded as he thrust into me again with his hard cock. I welcomed every inch of him, whimpering as he buried himself in me.

He tangled a large hand in my hair, tipping my head back. I arched into him as he fucked me hard, jackhammering into me, turning me into a pleading, moaning mess. I felt my body tighten, and I panted as he kept me right on the edge. Again and again, Owen drove his thick cock into my aching pussy as I pleaded for him to make me come.

His hand moved from my hip to my clit, stroking me hard, then I was gone. I came in a screaming jumble of ohmygods and cursing. Owen kissed my neck as he thrust into me a few more times, drawing out my orgasm then finishing in me.

"I love you, Holly," he whispered in my ear.

"I love you, too, Owen."



OWEN LEFT for work early the next morning. After kissing him goodbye, I finished cooking. I had to make all the dips and finish baking the bread. I had made the various chocolate cakes the night before. Because they needed to be served hot, I would make the lava cakes at the last minute. Though the fridge was packed, I was still worried that there wasn't going to be enough food—particularly enough cake.

"We need cupcakes," I said aloud, face-palming. "That's what I didn't make. You can't have Chocolate Cake Day without cupcakes."

The bread was in the oven. We still had a few more hours until the party. I had enough time to quickly whip up a batch of chocolate cupcakes with chocolate buttercream frosting. There's nothing sexier than a huge tower of cupcakes.

Morticia called me as I lined the muffin tins and spooned in the batter.

"I have Fiona on the line," she said. "We need to talk about the bistro's menu. She wants me to do a sample."

We discussed the menu while the cupcakes baked. Fiona was giving me a rundown of what she thought the boxed lunch menu should be.

"It needs to be Instagram-worthy," I said, "like those Japanese bento boxes but with more food, because this is America and we eat too much."

The timer dinged and I pulled out the cupcakes and laid them out to cool.

"Are you baking while we're trying to have a business meeting?" Fiona said.

"I have the Chocolate Cake Day party. I'm making cupcakes," I replied, checking the cupcakes to see if they were cool enough to frost. "We should serve flourless chocolate cake at the bistro. I made some for the party," I said as I started smearing icing on the dark chocolate cupcakes. They looked pretty, though a little rustic.

"We also need to serve quiche," Fiona said. "I think Owen's workers would like that."

"They need to be huge pieces—like, you should get a quarter of a quiche. I hate it when restaurants don't give you enough food."

Speaking of eating too much, somehow I had already moved way too much baking gear into Owen's kitchen. I couldn't find my fancy tiered cupcake stand. As I chatted with Fiona and Morticia, I opened cupboard after cupboard, looking for it.

“I want to do paninis too,” I said as I reached the last row of cabinets. “Really big ones. Owen said that a lot of his employees complained about the fact that all the nearby lunch places skimped on food.”

Rudolph padded into the kitchen and rose on his hind legs to sniff the cupcakes. I ran back to shoo him away then returned to my hunt in the cupboards.

“Ah, found it!” I said. I took out two of the pieces of the multitiered glass platter and set them on the counter. I took out the next batch of cupcakes from the oven then went to retrieve the rest of the platter pieces.

“Geez, I’m losing my mind,” I told my friends. “Can you believe I put a cupcake in here for some reason? I definitely need to stop multitasking.” I had even put it in its own special Tupperware container. Clearly I needed to pay more attention. I shook my head then placed the lost cupcake on the platter with its siblings.

OWEN

The cupcake was missing.

“What the fuck!” I muttered. I was back from work. The guests were coming in an hour. I had a big proposal planned. This was supposed to be one of the most important days of my life, and it was already in the toilet.

Somehow the cupcake with the very pricy engagement ring was gone. I had hidden it in the cupboard yesterday, and now it was not there.

I texted my brother.

Owen: *Emergency. Lost the cupcake.*

Jack: *Maybe Rudolph ate it.*

I looked down at the dog. Holly had had him groomed, and he was sporting a big bow around his neck.

“You and I will no longer be friends if you ate that ring,” I warned the dog.

“I have a lot of the desserts in the other room,” Holly said, scurrying into the kitchen to take a large platter of crab dip out of the oven. “Can you take them out and arrange them on the dining room table please?”

I went into the other room and found an abundant display of chocolate desserts of various types. Front and center? A huge tiered platter of chocolate cupcakes with chocolate buttercream frosting.

Shit.

“It’s fine,” I pep-talked myself. “There’s only a handful of them.” Then I looked to an adjacent side table and saw another hundred identical chocolate cupcakes.

Fuck. How was I going to search all of them?

Holly was preoccupied, so I snuck a toothpick from the kitchen and started gently poking it into each cupcake.

“Owen!” she called.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I carried the tiered glass platter and another tray of cupcakes into the main entertaining space.

“Can you go take the spinach-and-artichoke dip out of the oven, please? Also put out the ice for drinks,” she asked, gesturing to the kitchen.

“Sure.”

This wasn’t good. I needed to search the rest of the cupcakes. This proposal was not going according to plan.

The doorbell buzzed.

“Come on in!” Holly yelled.

“It’s just us,” Jack called out as Milo ran inside.

“Hi!” Chloe greeted us. She hugged Holly and looked over her shoulder at me with a questioning look. I subtly shook my head and drew a finger over my throat.

“Are you sure Rudolph didn’t eat it?” Jack said under his breath as Chloe helped Holly arrange the rest of the food.

“I don’t know. He doesn’t seem sick or ninety thousand dollars more expensive.” We looked at the dog.

“He looks a little pukey,” Jack said.

“Holly made other cupcakes,” I whispered to my brother. “I think it’s in there.”

The doorbell rang again. My younger brother Jonathan sauntered in with several of the Svenssons who were partners in his hedge fund.

“Hey, bro!” he said. “Big day, huh!” The Svenssons snickered.

So everyone knew, and they were all going to witness my failure.

“Thanks for coming and celebrating this auspicious holiday with us!” Holly said, hugging them.

“I’m not going to miss Chocolate Cake Day,” Jonathan declared. “Can I start, please?”

“Wait for everyone else,” Belle yelled at him, pushing her way through the growing crowd.

“Don’t eat the cupcake,” I hissed out of the corner of my mouth to my brother.

“How about some of this delicious dip?” he said loudly. I gave him a thumbs-up.

“Belle,” I whispered to my sister, “can you distract Holly? I need to test the cupcakes.”

“For poison?”

“He lost the ring,” Jack hissed. “It’s in one of those.” He gestured to the sea of chocolate cupcakes.

“Whoa, boy,” Belle said, squaring her shoulders. “Holly, I never did see what you did with all your Christmas stuff!”

“Oh my goodness! Let me show you!”

My big sister had come to my rescue again! I grabbed another toothpick, but before Holly and Belle could leave the room, the doorbell rang furiously. Someone on the other side yelled, “Stop it!”

“The kids are here!” Holly said as she ran to the door. “They’re going to love this!”

I hastily poked three more cupcakes. Nothing.

The Svensson brothers tumbled in. “Cake! Cake!” the little kids chanted.

“I have real food too,” Holly assured Hunter and Greg. “We even have veggie platters!”

“Did you hear that?” Mace Svensson said to his younger brothers. “You need to eat some healthy food, not just cake.”

His girlfriend, Josie, took pictures of the table. “This is so pretty!”

“This is my new favorite holiday!” Archer, Mace’s twin said, grabbing a cupcake.

“Don’t eat that!” I said, snatching the cupcake out of Archer’s hand.

“He can have it if he wants to,” Holly said reproachfully, taking the cupcake back from me.

I watched Archer unwrap it and take a huge bite. I winced, expecting to hear a *clink*.

HOLLY

“Owen’s being really weird,” I said to Morticia.

The party was in full swing. The dips were a hit; I had made quadruple amounts of the recipies. The cakes were flying off the table. Morticia was helping me prep the lava cakes for the big finale.

“I thought being weird was part of his charm,” she said.

“No, he’s being cagey. Do you think he’s going to break up with me?”

“I still have the baseball bat if he does,” she promised.

“I don’t think I can take it if he breaks up with me,” I said, wringing my hands.

“Stop it,” she said, slapping my hands. She stuffed a spoonful of chocolate lava cake batter into my mouth. “Eat that. Feel better?”

I nodded. “Probably going to contract salmonella, but life’s too short not to eat raw batter.”

I surveyed the spread of food. Most of the cupcakes were gone. I was doubly glad I had made them.

“Still want more chocolate?” I called out. “I’m getting ready to start the lava cake.”

Owen was prowling around the room, watching everyone carefully.

“What is his problem? Is he policing the food?” I wondered aloud.

“You can’t have kids if he’s going to be territorial about food. You can’t have a food-aggressive man in the house,” Morticia said sagely as she slid the lava cakes into the oven.

I went to clear a space on the table for lava cake. I scooped up a chip full of some of the spinach-and-artichoke dip as well. I was jittery from too much sugar and caffeine.

Davy, the youngest Svensson brother, waved to me when he saw me. He was solemnly eating a cupcake, one hand glued to his older brother Garrett’s leg. Garrett looked down.

“Davy, you have frosting everywhere. That better not be on my pants.”

“Here,” I said, handing him the wet rag I was carrying around.

“He’s probably had enough cupcakes,” Penny, Garrett’s girlfriend said, trying to grab the cupcake from Davy.

“No!” he shrieked.

I was regretting the sheer amount of sugar I’d given all the kids. They were running around the penthouse like wild monkeys, playing tag with the dogs.

Garrett tried to snatch the cupcake, but Davy stuffed the whole thing into his mouth, chewing defiantly, cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk’s.

“Well, that’s the last of the cupcakes anyway,” I said as Garrett looked down with disgust and Penny tried not to laugh.

Owen looked sick.

“You can’t be the type of dad who doesn’t let their kids have any sugar!” I said to Owen, exasperated. “That’s no way to live. Also, if you keep them from sugar, it just makes them go crazy when they actually do have it. Honestly, I don’t know what’s gotten into you. You’ve been tense all evening.”

Morticia came over to stand behind me for moral support. Too bad she didn’t have the bat.

“It’s not that,” Owen said, looking slightly pale. “Holly, I have a confession to make. I really screwed up.”

The music stopped comically.

“Sorry!” one of the younger Svensson brothers said, holding up a broken cable. “I didn’t mean to do that! I’ll fix it just a sec.”

“What did you do?” I asked Owen. Had he cheated on me? Was he breaking up with me? My stomach churned. I regretted everything I’d eaten that evening.

“Ouch!” Davy cried, goopy half-chewed cupcake oozing out of his mouth.

“Davy, stop it,” Garrett reprimanded, wiping his brother’s face with the rag. Davy used that moment to spit all the contents of his mouth into Garrett’s hand.

“Apologies,” Garrett said. “He was raised in a polygamist cult in the middle of the desert. He’s basically an animal.”

“Still better than Archer,” Hunter remarked.

“Hey!” Archer protested around a mouthful of flourless chocolate cake.

“That is true.” Garrett peered at the mess in the rag.

“I think you forgot a frosting bag tip,” he said. We peered at the metal thing in his hand.

Owen fist-pumped the air, and Jack, Jonathan, and Chloe cheered. Jack slapped Owen on the back.

“I’m confused,” I said.

“And I’m relieved,” he said, taking the metal thing out of the chewed-up cupcake.

Morticia looked horrified. I was a little grossed out.

“We can just toss it,” I said. “It’s not important.”

“But it is,” Owen said.

Penny pulled a handkerchief out of Garrett’s suit pocket and handed it to Owen. He cleaned off the metal thing and unwrapped it.

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed, staring at the ring. It glittered in the firelight.

“Holly,” Owen said, sinking to one knee, “I swear I had this planned better, but at least no one ate it. Now, before I tempt fate anymore, will you please marry me?”

“Yes!” I shrieked, jumping up and down.

Owen slid the ring onto my finger. It was a huge ruby surrounded by sparkling diamonds. I teared up.

“It’s like Christmas! You *are* the perfect man for me!”

He stood and hoisted me up, swinging me around and kissing me while everyone cheered.

“I even baked it in a chocolate cupcake,” he explained, setting me down, “but Davy got to it first.”

“You were lucky,” Garrett said. “If Archer had taken it, he eats so fast he wouldn’t have even noticed the ring.”

“I helped!” Davy said proudly. Owen patted him on the head.

“I love you so much, Owen! I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you,” I gushed.

“I love you, Holly, and I want to spend every day with you. Especially and including Christmas,” Owen said, smiling happily at me.

“Celebration time!” I called out.

Jack started handing out champagne.

“Lava cake should be done,” Morticia said. “Anybody up for more chocolate?”

We all looked around. No one was all that enthusiastic.

“Are you a little chocolated out?” Owen asked with a smile and leaned down and kissed me. “Say it isn’t so!”

“I mean sort of, but I never say no to chocolate cake!”

IT'S CHRISTMAS, BABY!

SYNOPSIS

This is a bonus short story about Owen and Holly that takes place after *Tasting Her Chocolate Cake*.

OWEN

I swayed back and forth, trying to calm a fussy baby in my arms all the while I held a phone against my ear and tried to calm down my CFO. Beck Svensson was in Japan working on a potential buyout. I would have gone myself, but I wasn't leaving my baby.

"It can't be that bad," I said flatly.

"It is," Beck Svensson insisted. "They gave me nothing in the meeting, Owen. I know they're going to give us a ton of push back on the numbers."

"They're playing hardball," I assured him. In my arms, my three-month-old daughter, Eve, hiccupped and started crying.

Beck chuckled

"I guess she's a morning person just like her Dad," he remarked.

"Of course. It's four o'clock in the morning—we're getting a late start."

"Also," Beck said before hanging up, "Greg's apparently in a foul mood, so if he calls you just let it go to voicemail."

"Don't I always?"

After hanging up, I jiggled Eve in my arms. "You're getting all the good business tips aren't you?"

In response, Eve crinkled up her face and screamed, her fists flailing. I shushed her.

“You’ll wake up your mom.”

“Owen?”

I turned. Holly had come in, wearing one of my Quantum Cyber T-shirts she loved to wear to bed. She had stolen it from my closet because she claimed it smelled like me.

I loved it when she wore it.

Most women could not pull off a shirt the size of the tent, but it just highlighted the way her milky legs disappeared under the hem. The two peaks of her nipples brushed the front of the shirt.

Swallowing, I turned and shifted Eve onto my shoulder.

“She’s fine; I just got done giving her a bottle for the night. She’s just getting fussy because she’s tired.”

“She’s not the only one,” Holly said, walking up to us.

I smiled. “Fussy or tired?”

She considered me and bent to coo at the crying baby.

Watching her, I wondered for the hundredth if Holly was unhappy in our marriage.

I had been doing my best, trying to man up with all the baby stuff and give her a break as much as possible. After all, Holly had done the heavy lifting for the first nine months. But we were new parents and no matter how many books and YouTube videos we watched, we still made errors.

I felt like one of the errors was with my relationship with my own wife.

Holly never said anything — and she wasn’t one to hold back — but I got the feeling...something wasn’t right between the two of us.

Holly screwed up her lips to make kissy noises, and I could see the instant resemblance between her and her daughter.

Eve settled back from a scream into a hiccupping cry.

“That’s my girl! She’s just practicing for later.” Holly stretched her arms and took the baby from me. She gazed up at me with a winning smile. “She’s going to be a powerful billionaire one day and make all the boys cry.”

Lifting up on her toes, she dotted a kiss on my cheek. “I have Eve right now. You want to go in early for work?”

Since when did she want me out of the house?

Before I could reply, she turned away.

There was definitely something eating at my wife. Damned if I could not figure out what it was.



I SHOWERED and got dressed to the sounds of Holly thumping around the kitchen. The faint smell of molasses cookies in the air told me she was likely making a batch of her Christmas best. Perhaps even one of her grandmother’s recipes.

It was nearly five o’clock in the morning, and a few months out from Christmas, but Holly, a self-proclaimed Christmas fanatic, believed it was never too early to start planning for the holidays.

I strode out of the kitchen, fastening the buttons on my cuffs, and stopped dead in my tracks.

Eve had settled and was napping in a portable bassinet on the counter. Holly had still not changed from her overlarge T-shirt and was stretching on her tiptoes to a spice rack nearly out of her reach. The hem of the shirt rode high, exposing the swell of her ass.

I gulped and my dick made a twitch of interest.

I must have made a sound because Holly turned, smiling ruefully at me. “Well, you do clean up nice.”

With a smile in reply, I crossed the kitchen and grabbed the allspice she had been reaching for. “Isn’t there a step stool around here?”

“Why do I need a step stool when I have you around?” She had not moved out of my path. In fact, she crowded closer, running the flat of her hands up the length of my shirt where she paused to straighten my collar.

She tilted her chin up, looking coquettish. “Why don’t you take a seat? I’ll whip you up something... tasty.”

My throat went dry. I knew she couldn’t have meant the innuendo, but my hardening cock was not listening. “Can’t. Beck’s out of the country, and he’s a micromanager on a good day. He’s probably whipped up a whole wasp nest in the office, and I...”

Holly looked at me, kissable lips slightly parted, and my words fled. It took every bit of self-control to push the all-spice into her hands and turn away. I strode behind the island counter on the pretense of checking the diaper bag and took the opportunity to adjust my very tight pants on the sly.

My wife just looked at me, an inscrutable expression on her face. She had a white streak across her forehead as if she had brushed a piece of hair back while her fingers had been covered in flour.

“Eve’s all packed?” I asked.

She frowned. “I’m going to be here all day. I can take care of her. You don’t have to take her into the office with you.”

“She’s no trouble.” I reached down to tickle under my daughter’s chin. She yawned, eyes still closed, and blew a bubble of spit.

Oh yeah, she was going to be such trouble when she grew up. Just like her Mom.

I grabbed the baby bag in one hand, the bassinet under the other, and with a wave, turned to walk out the door.

Holly had already turned away to check her latest batch of cookies. She didn’t bother to wave back.



“Distracted” was the word of the day. And no, it wasn’t the gurgling baby girl playing with blocks on the floor of my office. It was my raging case of blue balls thanks to Holly.

I sighed and massaged the bridge of my nose.

No, that was unfair. It wasn’t Holly’s fault. It was just... life. I was the one who refused to touch her after we’d found out she was pregnant with Eve. The thought of possibly hurting the baby growing inside of her was unbearable. And then, of course, Holly had to heal from the birth.

Holly had done a wonderful job bringing her into the world. I loved my daughter more than life itself. The sleepless nights and constant new parent anxiety were nothing. I wouldn’t trade away any of it.

But the lack of sex was starting to drive me up the wall.

I sighed down at my desk. “What am I going to do?”

“Not have calls with Beck if you’re going to whip him into a frenzy.”

I glanced up, startled to see my COO Walker Svensson had walked into my office. I hadn’t even seen him come in.

“Walker,” I said dryly.

“Morning, Owen.” Walker crouched to say hello to Eve, who was laid out with her blocks on the floor. She was still working on the whole ‘rolling over’ thing, but I think she was close.

Walker glanced up. “You look like...” He shot a glance at my daughter and grinned, changing his word to something more baby-friendly, “garbage. Though after dealing with Beck, I’m not surprised. He flipped out and fired three people, and then I had to go and unfire them.”

“I was already up with Eve. She’s an early riser like me.” I rubbed my face and thought for a second. “I’m worried about Holly.”

Walker raised his eyebrows, and, after nudging a block to Eve for her to drool all over, stood. “Oh?”

“Things...haven’t been the same since she had Eve. I don’t think it’s postpartum, but I know my wife and something’s not right.”

What if she wants to leave me?

The thought was too unbearable to say aloud.

Walker raised his eyebrows. “And what has she had to say about it?”

“Uh...”

He rolled his eyes. “Seriously?”

I gestured around the office. “I’ve been busy. She’s been equally swamped testing out recipes for her own work—we kind of have a new baby to raise and no sleep—“

“And neither of you have sat down to have an adult conversation in months,” Walker finished, dryly. “Here’s a better question: How long has it been since you two had sex?”

I shot a scandalized look at him and then at my daughter, who was currently trying to gum a wooden block half the size of her face.

My expression must have spoken volumes. Walker gave me a shit-eating grin.

“Well, the way I see it, you have two choices.”

“I swear to God, if one of them is divorce—“

He waved it away. “Nah. Either you can man up, act like an adult and talk to your own wife...or alternately, you can walk around the house in increasingly skimpy outfits. See where that gets you.”

“Thanks, Walker,” I said, dry. “That helps.”

“Hey, you want good advice, get a therapist.” He pointed at me. “No more unsupervised conversations with Beck. He needs a delicate touch.”

I sighed.

He left and I looked down at my daughter who was making grunting sounds, kicking her feet in the air.

“What do you say, Eve? Should I have a big-boy conversation with your Mommy?”

Eve cooed in reply.

“No, you’re right; let’s not burden her.”

HOLLY

To say that I had been super excited to be a mom was an understatement. Aside from some normal morning sickness, my pregnancy had been easy. The birth had not exactly been fun, but a lot of the horror stories I'd read had not come to pass.

The best thing? My baby girl had been born right on Christmas Eve. It was as if all the stars had aligned.

I had read that it's not usual for dads to take a while to bond with their children, and that they could be less involved with all the dirty work of taking care of a baby.

Well, it seemed Owen never read that particular article. From the moment Eve was born, he had been smitten. In fact, I had to shove him out of the way a time or two so *I* could get a chance to take care of Eve.

The man was running himself ragged. I had decided to take a few months off for maternity leave, and yet he was the one who woke the second Eve gave a cry at night. All that on top of his very demanding full-time job. I don't know how he found the energy.

I had the perfect partner, a beautiful healthy baby girl...

...And I felt like screaming out of frustration.

After Owen left for the office, I made short work of the cookies and transferred them into a frilly box. They were pumpkin-spice molasses. Even though we were closer to

Easter than to fall, it was never too early to get a start on the back-to-school season.

Even Morticia should like them—they would probably remind her of Halloween.

“What are you doing here?” Morticia asked flatly as I strode into the cafe an hour later, a box of cookies in hand.

I flashed her a smile.

“Hello to you, too.” I took a moment to glance around the cafe. By the number of people sitting at the tables, they were between the breakfast and lunch rushes. Everything seemed to be in order.

At that moment, Fiona came out from the kitchen with a tray of lemon squares. Her eyes widened as she saw me.

“Holly! You’re back!” Her eyebrows furrowed. “Wait, what are you doing back?”

“She isn’t back,” Morticia said, “She is supposed to be taking a six-month maternity leave. A much needed maternity leave.”

I shrugged and maneuvered my way around the counter to put the cookies down. “I had the idea for a new recipe, and I couldn’t help myself. Besides, Owen is taking care of Eve right now.”

Morticia peered into the box. “Did you decorate those cookies like bats?”

“It’s Halloween themed,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed. “Spill: What’s wrong?”

“Who says something needs to be wrong?” I asked.

“The only reason you decorate for Halloween is because it’s that much closer to Christmas. Either something’s got you really upset, or you’ve been switched out with a pod person.”

I tried to laugh it off, but even Fiona was looking at me with worry in her eyes.

“Nothing is wrong!” I insisted. “Eve is doing great. Owen has her sitting in his office and using her as an excuse to charm all his investors. He says she’s going to run the company someday.”

“And... that’s bad?” Fiona asked. “Morticia is right. Why do you have a sad face on?”

“I do not have a sad face! It’s just...” I bit my lip, glanced around to make sure there were no customers within hearing range, and decided to spill. “Owen and I haven’t had sex since my baby bump started showing. I know he’s attracted to me, but he didn’t want any chance of hurting the baby, even though I told him it was fine, but Eve’s been born for three months, and nada.”

“That man has an iron will,” Morticia commented.

“Well, I don’t,” I snapped. Then, almost against my will, my real fear bubbled out, “I’m afraid... What if he wants to get rid of me?”

Fiona gasped. “Owen? No. Never.”

Even dour Morticia shook her head. “No way. That idiot is head over heels for you.” She sighed, “I bet he’s having some man-crisis reconciling you as a mother and also the woman he wants to bend over the nearest couch.”

Fiona cackled and I managed a watery smile.

“You think so?”

“I know so!” Fiona said, “Morticia, can you beg Emma or Lilith to watch the café? Since Owen has Eve for the day—”

“Like he does every day,” I cut in.

“Let’s have a super feminine, fun girl’s day!”

Morticia made a face.

“Ignore her,” Fiona said. “We can stop at a lingerie shop. You can get a super sexy outfit for tonight—something to blow his socks off.”

“I’d like to blow his socks off,” I muttered.

Morticia sighed, looking put upon. “Nothing pink and no feathers.”



THE CROTCHLESS RED teddy lingerie I picked up at the shop was super sexy, cute...and it itched. Eh, still worth it.

I tried not to wiggle as I slid into a little raincoat I'd picked up the winter before. I tightened the cinch around my waist and looked myself up and down in the mirror. It was a little weird to be wearing a coat indoors, but hopefully the surprise would make up for it.

As if on cue, the elevator dinged. Owen and Eve were on their way up to the penthouse from the office.

I met them as the door swooshed open, a greeting on my lips.

Owen shushed me before I could get out the first word and tilted the portable bassinet downward. Eve was sleeping, looking like a little rosy-cheeked angel.

As happy as I was not to have to deal with a fussy baby, I felt let down as Owen walked past me to Eve's nursery. I waited just outside the door as he transferred her into her cradle, and stepped aside as he carefully came out and shut the door with exaggerated care. Finally, my husband turned to me.

“Hey, Holly.” He eyed me up and down. “Are we expecting bad weather in the apartment?”

“No, I just went out shopping today.”

“Oh? What did you get?” The question was polite, but I could already see his attention drifting.

With a flourish, I untied the coat and flung it open.

I had the pleasure of watching Owen's eyes nearly bug out from his head. And a good thing, too. I'd had to squeeze into this little red teddy dress with the candy-cane white trim. It had been last on the rack thanks to the Christmas season being

over. There were even two lace pasties ‘jingle bells’ tastefully over my nips.

Oh, who was I kidding? Nothing about this was tasteful. It was glorious.

“You like what you see?” I asked playfully.

His eyes darkened. “You know I do.” He reached forward to draw me in.

This had been exactly what I wanted, but his reply had unexpectedly uncovered deep-seeded frustration.

“Do I?”

He stilled, sensing the danger in my tone. Smart man.

“Holly, what’s wrong?”

I turned away. “It’s...” But my throat closed over the full explanation. I shook my head.

His own tone took on a frustrated edge. “I’m trying so hard—I’m doing as much as I can to take care of Eve. I’ve even been trying to teach her some computer programming fundamentals using your face as an incentive.”

My lips parted. “You have?”

“Damn.” He dragged a hand down his face. “Never mind, that was meant to be a surprise.” He focused again on me. “I love you, Holly, and I want you to be happy...but you seem unhappy. Am I wrong?”

“I’m not unhappy,” I said, adding, “I’m just really horny. You don’t touch me anymore, and—”

I stopped as he pulled me into a hungry kiss. His lips over mine—it was as if my blood was on fire. Then he pulled away just as abruptly, his fingers tight on my waist.

“I thought...you were pregnant, and I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m not pregnant anymore,” I hissed, catching his bottom lip with my teeth. “And people fuck while pregnant all the time.”

“I know.”

“It’s been three months since Eve was born.” My next nip on his lip was not gentle.

“I didn’t want to rush you. I thought you were healing?” Owen sucked in a deep breath and pulled away to look down at me. “I think we should have had an adult conversation about this.”

“Screw the adult conversation,” I snarled. “I want adult playtime.”

“I missed you,” he huffed, bending to press kisses down my neck.

“I’ve been here all this time.”

“And I’ve not been the most mature person.”

“Can I get that in writing?”

His response was to slide his hands down my back and grab my ass, pushing our bodies flush. Then he picked me up and carried me the few steps to our own bedroom.

Letting out a shaky, “Yes...” I wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck.

The world shifted under me again as we toppled down on the mattress. He crawled over me, kissing me like a man starving. I returned it, just as eager.

I ripped at his shirt, uncaring about the state of the buttons. He wasn’t focused on getting naked, though. All his attention was on me.

Dipping his head, he nudged one of the silly jingle-bell pasties aside and mouthed my nipple. The rough fabric added a teasing edge. I groaned.

His hands—oh, I loved those hands—slipped between my thighs. I opened wider for him and moaned in delight as a finger slid against my clit.

I was so glad I chose crotchless lingerie. It had been too long, and I could not bear to wait for a second more.

“Owen, Oh god...don’t stop...”

His voice was a dark growl, and he slid his hand down, fingers plunging into my wet heat. “Not gonna stop. Gonna fuck you in this lacy getup. Gonna...paint it white.”

His fingers moved rough and insistent inside me. I felt my inner walls clench, a warning my climax was on the horizon.

Yeah, it had been way too long since I’d had any relief.

I arched my neck, panting, fighting it, but it was like trying to stop an onrushing train.

“Owen, I’m going to...”

“You’ll go again,” he said in a dark promise. His gaze met my own. “I have a lot to make up for.”

I let go and climaxed, shaking in my husband’s arms. He stroked me through it.

He watched me come, open-mouthed, his pupils blown. I had barely got my breath back before his mouth crashed over mine again.

His tongue lit a fire anew through me. It took only moments for him to shed the rest of his clothing and roll a condom on.

Then, crawling over me again, he knocked my legs apart, and his thick cock pushed home.

I clutched at him, trying to draw him in closer, deeper. Needing all he would give me and more.

“Yes, Owen, fuck me... Fuck me hard.”

In the back of my mind, I knew I was being loud, but I did not care. Owen made a rumbling groan that tingled through my body as he moved. Hard, desperate strokes that took everything I could give to him and more.

I needed this. We both did. The ridiculously expensive mattress shook in time with his thrusts.

I cried out again, moaning out my pleasure as he took me to the top again. I came again, his name on my lips.

He gripped me with bruising strength as he came hard in sharp pants.

We cuddled together for a few minutes in the afterglow, his fingers curling in my hair.

I rolled over to him and gave him a cheeky grin. “About that adult conversation...”

Owen smiled back fondly. “I vote more sex and more communication in general?”

“Communication during sex works for me, too,” I said, eyeing him. I wasn’t up for another round just yet, but perhaps after he caught his breath...

A distinct wailing echoed through the penthouse.

Owen and I looked at each other and shared a smile.

A few minutes and some hastily thrown on clothes later, Owen was cuddling Eve.

I couldn’t help myself. I grabbed up phone and snapped a few pictures. He looked up, eyebrows raised.

“I wanted to immortalize the moment,” I said with a grin. “After all, I managed to snag the hottest dad ever.”

“Me? When you’re the one still in that lingerie?” He leaned forward, and his breath brushed against my lips. “You’re the all-star MILF in this relationship.”

We sealed that with a kiss, Eve, our perfect Christmas baby, between us.

Jonathan & Morticia celebrate Valentine's Day

FROSTING HER Cake Pop



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

In which Jonathan and Morticia celebrate Valentine's Day!

This 4,300 word bonus short story is free to mailing list subscribers!

MORTICIA

“**Y**ou can’t tell me you’re also one of those people that goes all out for Valentine’s Day,” I remarked to Jonathan as we walked down the street. It was February and freezing cold. Jonathan wasn’t even wearing a jacket, though Cindy Lou Who was decked out in a hot-pink coat and little cat-sized booties. Salem was roughing it in a Halloween-themed sweater.

“You can’t judge me,” he retorted. “It’s nine months until Halloween, and you’re already preparing.”

“Yes,” I said, “nine months, so it’s practically here already. Besides, it is a major, legitimate holiday, unlike Valentine’s Day, which is basically Amazon Prime Day masquerading as a real holiday.”

“Please,” Jonathan said. “I’m going to wine and dine you. Rose petals, an opera serenade, chocolates shaped like sex organs, the works!”

I made a face. “That’s not romantic.”

“For someone who says she doesn’t like Valentine’s Day, you seem like you’re already setting expectations.”

“How is not wanting a life-sized solid-chocolate dildo setting unreasonable expectations?” I countered.

“Are you kidding me?” Jonathan said. “That’s a hot item.” He checked his watch. “We better head back. Don’t want to be late for naked yoga.”



YES, naked yoga. Thirty minutes later, I stood out in the cleared courtyard of one of the industrial buildings. Dorothy had insisted that as one of my first duties as the head of the Hamilton Yards Art Foundation, I make the naked yoga sessions more official.

I had replied that part of that meant that people had to be at least modestly clothed.

She had told me that I needed to be out there, then, to inspect.

And that was why I was outside in February, shivering in a two-piece swimsuit on a yoga mat that had already frozen to the ground.

Dorothy waltzed to the front of the class. She was wearing pasties on her boobs and a skimpy thong bottom. Everything else proudly hung free.

“Breathe in,” she instructed the crowd. “Let the cold air fill your lungs—we’re trying to stave off inflammation, and we were all out drinking last night—and exhale.”

I winced as my back popped.

“Valentine’s Day is coming up, ladies, and I know you all want to impress your men! Let’s firm up those thighs and those vaginal cavities. Also, don’t forget, thanks to our sponsor today, Bath and Body Twerks, they have provided a free Valentine’s Day gift for everyone. Don’t forget to take yours! Now, everyone give me a garland pose!”



MY THIGHS WERE BURNING after the lesson. I staggered across the property to my office. I had set up temporary shop in another converted shipping container.

My intern was waiting there for me. “Hi!” Arlo Svensson chirped. “I have your tea, Supreme Mistress of the World.” The tween carefully set the steaming cup down on my desk.

Apparently shit had gone down over Christmas at the Svensson estate, and it had ended with Hunter shipping a kid to Manhattan every couple of weeks to live with—that is, annoy—Greg and work at his firm. Greg had told me he would write me a big, fat check if I took the kids in. They made tea and answered my phone while I cosplayed Miranda Priestly.

“Madam,” Arlo said seriously, “your significant other has requested your presence at a Valentine’s Day event tomorrow evening. I have penciled it in on your calendar.”

“Ugh, Valentine’s Day.” I leaned back in my chair.

“Shall I send out a sardonic tweet for you?”

I smirked. I had been training my interns well. Now that I was on the fourth iteration, I had it down pat.

“Not today,” I said loftily.

As much as I did not like standing out in the freezing cold, I did feel invigorated after the half-naked yoga sessions.

I worked on my strategic plan for art-themed events in the complex through the afternoon. It still got dark around four thirty, and as the shadows lengthened, I started thinking about packing up.

At five, the door opened, sending the wind howling in to scatter my papers. Arlo raced to pick them up.

“I need a vestibule,” I complained.

Jonathan bounded in, scooping me up and kissing me.

“Ew!” Arlo gagged, covering his face.

Carl followed Jonathan. “Ew!” Carl mimicked Arlo. “It’s a child.” He rushed at his little brother, and the two tussled. “Same time tomorrow?” Carl asked me.

“You may go,” I told Arlo with a wave of my hand.

Jonathan smirked. “You’re really enjoying your interns.”

“I am the queen of my own fiefdom.”

Jonathan was thoughtful. “You’re surprisingly good with kids.”

I felt self-conscious. We hadn’t really had a serious talk about THE FUTURE. I hadn’t even officially moved into Jonathan’s condo. I stayed over a lot, but it still felt like his space. Officially, I was living at Emma’s tiny apartment, sleeping on my yoga mat on the floor. But Jonathan’s bed was much more comfortable.

He was looking at me softly.

“I guess I should go back to Emma’s,” I said, feeling awkward.

“Did you all have plans?” he asked.

“Er, no,” I said, “but I should do laundry.” I waved a hand vaguely.

“You can do laundry at my place,” Jonathan offered. “In fact,” he continued, “don’t you think it’s time to just go ahead and move in?”

“I don’t know. That seems like a lot,” I said. “It’s such a big step. We should, you know, really talk about it.”

“Sure,” he said lightly. “No worries. I just don’t want you sleeping in your office like a Hobbit!”

JONATHAN

Morticia had been really weirded out by my suggestion that she move in with me. I didn't see what the big deal was. She practically lived there already. It felt so right and relaxing to be around her, like we were meant to be. But maybe she didn't feel the same way.

First, she hadn't seemed excited about my Valentine's Day plans. Then she didn't want to move in with me. And that was going to be a real problem, because I had just found the perfect house. I had a whole reveal planned. Was my big Valentine's Day plan about to implode?

Morticia didn't seem to be picking up on my internal turmoil as we walked into my condo. I needed to know if I should table the surprise or not. Maybe I should save the house for her birthday and just do something quiet for Valentine's Day.

She unpacked her bag, taking out a bright-pink gift sack.

I glared at it. "Who sent that to you?"

"Jealous?" she teased. "Maybe I have a secret admirer."

"You better not," I growled playfully, wrapping my arms around her. "I'm the only man for you."

"Oh, I don't know," Morticia purred. "I think this gift bag might contain something that can give you a run for your money."

I relaxed slightly when I saw the Bath and Body Twerks logo on the bag when she turned it around. Then I tensed for a

different reason as she pulled out a vibrator and slowly untied the bow. She turned it on, and it buzzed.

“Oh, and look at that; it’s already charged.”

“Give me that.” I swiped at it.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “You were jealous and aggressive and hurt its feelings.” She laughed and swept over to the couch while I tried not to combust.

She was eyeballing me the whole time as she sexily reclined on the couch. Her gaze was enough to get me hard, but I wasn’t budging. I wanted to see what she was planning.

Morticia didn’t seem to be deterred. She put on a little striptease for me, shimmying out of her shirt and jeans until she was in nothing but her underwear.

The temptation to join her was growing very strong, but I crossed my arms, ready to stand my ground.

She ran that vibrating dildo down her body, tickling the outside of her panties, flashing me a slightly orgasmic glare. She shivered a bit as she glided the toy up and down her body before rolling it up to her chest. She let it tickle her nipples before she unhooked her bra and unveiled her breasts.

The vibration of the toy against her tits made her nipples pebble hard. It was enough to make a man fantasize about suckling on them. And I knew I could do better than a plastic dick powered by a pair of double As.

She kept those big dark eyes pointed at me as if she was yearning for me to give her what she really wanted. But she had started the teasing game. I smirked as I watched the show.

The toy led the way toward her panties, buzzing around the outside again, poking at her pussy, teasing me with the knowledge that it could have been me touching her instead. Her fingers slid into her panties to rub herself. Morticia moaned playfully, and likely overly theatrically, to tempt me.

I hated that it was somehow working.

She danced her panties off, now fully naked and flaunting her curves in front of me. The vibrator caught my eyes, and

they followed it down as she poked at herself. She slid one finger inside herself, then two fingers...then three. She stopped there, as any more might get too kinky for what was meant to be a huge game of temptation.

The dildo rubbed against her pussy, teasing her clit. She exhaled at the contact, teasing her clit a bit more before going down to her slit. She mocked being about to penetrate herself with it, running it around her folds but never truly entering herself.

“It’s going to be my cock in you,” I growled.

She laughed.

My dumbass had been had. In a hasty rush that hadn’t consumed me since I was an awkward teenager, I threw off my T-shirt, kicked off my pants, and scrambled for the condom in my pocket. Morticia was more than happy to wait for me to get my act together.

Then I was on her. She reached down and ran a hand along my thick cock.

I didn’t care. I needed her. She was my temptress, my weakness, and I needed to enjoy her to the absolute fullest. My cock throbbed for her, and I threw that vibrator against the wall. She didn’t need it. She had me.

I slid into her, feeling her perfect pussy squeeze all around me, everything so damned wonderful at that moment. She cried out as I took her, my thick, hard cock filling her. I increased the pace, rocking in and out of her. Her legs closed around me, my arms around her, as I took her again and again, feeling all of her bare body against mine, the anticipation growing.

I loved everything about her—the feeling of her body beneath my hands, the way she looked at me, her cunning and brilliance, just fucking everything. All those things came to a head when I was inside her, when it was all this close.

She was mine.

I needed to claim her. Take her. Enjoy her.

Her fingernails clawed down my back as she cried out and moaned for me—she was close, and that pushed me to the edge.

Almost simultaneously, we hit our heights together, our grips on one another tightening, our bliss soaring.

Fuck.

I loved her. More than anything in the world.

I couldn't lose her.

MORTICIA

Even though the sex had been amazing, Jonathan didn't cuddle around me that night as we slept like he normally did.

You blew it, my mind taunted. Blew it, because of course someone like you can't just act like a normal, decent person and keep a man. You have to run everyone off with your bad attitude.

He's probably already decided he's going to break up with you. Watch him do it after Valentine's Day.

After not being able to sleep, I finally got up and went into the kitchen to make Jonathan a surprise Valentine's Day breakfast complete with heart-shaped waffles. I had it all ready to go when he got out of the shower.

"Oh!" He seemed shocked when he saw the breakfast. "Morticia, I have an early meeting," he said. "I didn't realize..."

"No, it's okay," I chirped, feeling crushed inside. "I should have asked. I can make you a to-go box."

"I'm running late," he said, giving me a quick kiss. "Meeting with the Svenssons—you know how they are."

Fuck.



“WHERE’S YOUR INTERN?” Emma asked me the next afternoon. She and Lilith had come over to my office to eat the mound of breakfast food I had made.

“He went back to Harrogate,” I said. “They’re having a big Valentine’s Day festival.”

“You two aren’t going to the Valentine’s Day festival?” Emma asked.

“October is my month,” I said.

“The Valentine’s Day festival consists of people standing around in the cold, eating frozen chocolate hearts,” Lilith said with a grimace. “Besides, you must have something big planned with Jonathan.”

I made a face. I had been feeling bad all day about it. “He did; he was really excited, then I shot him down,” I admitted.

“Ouch.”

“You have to start going with the flow more,” Emma said gently. “You know, loosen up.”

“I tried to make it up to him, you know,” I said defensively.

Emma and Lilith made loud porno sounds.

“Okay, okay, yes, we all know what that means,” I said irritably.

“You should have just let him treat you and pamper you,” Emma told me. “You knew he was going to be really into Valentine’s Day.”

“I know, and he looked like a kicked puppy,” I said. “I felt like a bitch. Then he asked me to move in with him, and I said no, and then I felt like a bigger bitch.”

Emma made a face.

“Ugh, I should have said yes!” I said, slapping myself on the forehead. “I can’t keep living in your apartment, can I?”

“I mean, it’s just like having a sleepover,” Emma said slowly.

“I’ve been there for months,” I told her. “I’m sorry. I’ve been taking advantage of you.”

“No, no, take your time.”

“Wait, you’re still living with Emma?” Lilith said to me, incredulous. “I thought you lived with Jonathan.”

“She’s over there enough that it doesn’t matter,” Emma said in my defense.

“Bitch,” Lilith declared, “you have a nice place to live. You need to get your shit and get out of Emma’s house.”

“I will, I will. But what if I blew my chance?” I fretted.

“Just put your best self forward,” Emma told me.

“No,” Lilith insisted. “You need to throw a big Valentine’s Day after-party. Show him that you’re all in on Valentine’s Day. Surprise him! Balloons, cake, alcohol, family, cats in cute outfits. The works!”

I chewed on my lip and looked at the clock. “I don’t know if I can. The day’s almost over.”

“You have to,” Lilith said sagely. “Nothing says ‘I love you’ like a surprise party.”

JONATHAN

Carl was waiting in the conference room when I skidded in.

“Did we get it?” I asked him.

“Good morning,” Carl said in an exaggerated tone. “So nice to see you, Carl. Here, Carl, I brought you some of the delicious-looking Valentine’s Day breakfast that my girlfriend made. Oh wait, you didn’t.”

“I didn’t get any either,” I said irritably. “Because I was coming to see you.”

“Bidding has started.” He pointed to the Sotheby’s auction on the computer. He tapped a button, and it displayed on the large presentation screen at the front of the conference room.

“Why aren’t you bidding?” I asked as I studied the screen. The numbers kept ticking up. “This is the perfect house,” I reminded Carl. “It’s a historic Victorian house from the 1870s. It has the original wood trim, and it comes with a lot of original furniture.”

“It’s also a money pit,” Carl warned. “That’s why the bids aren’t that high. I’m waiting until the last minute to jump in with our bid.”

I sat on pins and needles, watching the price go up and up. What if I didn’t win the bidding?

Maybe that would be for the best.

“I don’t think Morticia wants to move in with me.”

“*What?*” Carl said in shock. “Then why are we trying to buy this house?”

I shrugged unhappily. “Maybe we should table it.”

“Shit!” Carl said as the computer dinged. “The algorithm I set up already placed our bid. Maybe someone else will put in a higher bid.”

The timer ticked. Our bid stayed there.

“Dude,” Carl said, “this is a lot of house. If Morticia is about to dump you, this is going to end badly for you. I was doing some research, and the house needed an estimated eight million dollars’ worth of restoration. This is on top of the five million the previous owner spent redoing the gas lighting.”

“Oh shit.”

The timer kept running down, and still, no one else bid.

“Fuck, this is the worst Valentine’s Day ever,” I groaned, resting my head in my hands.

Carl frowned. “Didn’t you say that one Valentine’s Day, you tried to give your teacher a snake that you had found in the yard?”

“Oh yeah, that did not go over well either.”

The timer buzzed.

“Congrats, and my condolences,” Carl said as the screen flashed information about taking payment and the fraud charges that would result if I did not send payment. “You are now the proud homeowner of a large Victorian row house with a haunted attic and a garden infested with poisonous weeds.”

“Great.” I slumped over and thunked my head against the table. “Should I go for it or call the whole Valentine’s Day surprise off?”

“If I’m not mistaken, you already booked the caterers, so to cancel, you’d be out the money, and they still wouldn’t give you the food. At least now if Morticia doesn’t show up, you and I have a nice meal.”



THE CATERERS and the decorator met me at the Victorian house later after the money had been transferred, papers signed, and keys delivered. Both seemed apprehensive as I unlocked the heavy wooden door with a creak.

“I’m not sure if the oven works,” I warned.

“I have my own heating equipment,” the caterer said grimly, glaring at the very old kitchen.

The decorator rallied and began making notes as a cleaning crew showed up to start wiping up the dust.

“I’m having them concentrate on the foyer,” the decorator told me.

“And the kitchen!” the caterer yelled.

I tried to plan my big speech to Morticia to convince her that we did, in fact, need to not only move in together but plan the rest of our lives together.

“This is my moonshot,” I pep talked myself. I paced, trying to stay out of the way of the people setting up moody lighting, sheer drapes, and a table set for two.

It was dark by the time everything was finished. The smell of the food wafted through the house. Everything looked perfect. The gaslighting in the house still worked, and the lamps burned cheerfully.

Now I just had to bring Morticia to the house. I wrote and rewrote the text so that it was worded in a way that would bring her to me immediately.

Jonathan: *Can you come see me? I need to talk to you about something.*

I sent her a pin of my location. Then I waited.

MORTICIA

I had no idea what Jonathan wanted to talk to me about. The text sounded serious. I spun scenarios in my head as I finished crafting the invitation text for the Valentine's Day after-party.

"Do you think anyone's going to show up last minute?"

"Those of us who are single will happily be there," Emma assured me.

I attached a location pin to the invitation. We would meet at the bar adjacent to the distillery. I figured that way, people could get whatever drinks they wanted.

"I better go see what Jonathan wants," I said.

"If he does break up with you," Emma told me, "then the party can be a pity party for you."

"Also," Lilith added, "I bet one of the Svensson brothers would be the perfect rebound!"



MY STOMACH CHURNED as I showed up at the location of the pin Jonathan had sent me. It was a beautiful old Victorian house. I almost came apart when I noticed that the lights framing the doorway were real gaslights!

"Morticia!" Jonathan said, throwing open the front door. "You came!"

“Wow!” I gushed, taking off my coat as I stepped into the grand foyer. “What is this place? Oh my god, look! All the gaslights! This is amazing! Do you know how unique this is?”

“Yeah, and expensive,” he said under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing. You hungry?”

“Starving.” I hadn’t been able to eat much of the breakfast I had made because I had been so stressed. “But first, what did you need to talk to me about that’s so important?”

Jonathan threw open the double French doors that let into an ornate dining room. The table was set for two. There were tasteful Valentine’s Day decorations around.

“This is amazing!” I told him, trying not to freak out. I had a party planned! People were going to be showing up in an hour. Jonathan was supposed to be there.

“I thought I would surprise you,” he said as he held out the seat for me.

I’ll just get through dinner; then we can go to the party. Maybe no one will show up.

But my phone was already blowing up with confirmations. Half the Svensson clan was going to be there.

The chef brought out the first course.

“I wanted to have an intimate Valentine’s Day with you, Morticia,” Jonathan said. “To tell you how much I loved you and appreciated having you in my life.”

My phone kept going off. I was starting to sweat. All those gaslights.

Sure is warm in here...

Jonathan looked sad. “Do you not want to be here?”

“No. I mean yes! Of course I want to be here!” I said desperately. I took a bite of the fried cheese appetizer that was soaked in spicy honey. “This is amazing!”

I itched to grab my phone.

“You can answer it,” Jonathan said, face unreadable.

“It’s not that!” I said in a rush. “I felt so bad for not being into Valentine’s Day that I planned a surprise Valentine’s Day party for you! But I think that we’re not going to make it.” I held up the menu. “This looks intense.”

Jonathan visibly relaxed and then burst out laughing.

“And here I was worried I had overdone it on Valentine’s Day.”

“I mean, I didn’t have a lot of décor planned,” I said. “Just food and booze.”

The phone went off. I grabbed it to silence it but clapped a hand over my mouth in shock when I saw the picture. “Never mind. I think some of the Svenssons are bringing their own, *ahem*, creative decorations.”

Jonathan grinned.

“Oh no,” I said, scrolling through the group text. “Now Dorothy is on board too. Geez. Your Valentine’s Day plan is way more wholesome than my plan.”

Jonathan grabbed my hand. “I love you,” he said sincerely.

“I love you, too,” I told him, turning off my phone. I would deal with that shit show later. It honestly sounded like they weren’t going to miss us anyway. “And I do want to move in with you.”

“You do?” Jonathan was ecstatic. He stood up and ran around the table in excitement then waltzed us through the house and into the foyer. “This house is going to be amazing,” he said. “You’re going to love it here.”

“Here?” I squawked.

“Yep!” he said. “I bought this! We are proud homeowners.”

“Geez, this must have cost a fortune.”

“Actually,” Jonathan said, “they were practically giving it away. The place just eats money.”

“But it’s so historic!”

“Yep. It’s a special snowflake.”

The chef coughed delicately from the doorway to the dining room. “The oysters are out on the table.”

I laughed. “Guess we better eat up. I’ve been told oysters are an aphrodisiac.”

A gong sounded.

“What was that?”

We looked to the front door. Through the window, we saw a number of faces, including Dorothy, Emma, Lilith, and several Svensson brothers. I opened the door, and they piled in.

“We came early to help set up!” Dorothy said, waving in the Svenssons, who were carrying several crates. “We bought out your booze supply at the bar,” she continued as the Svenssons marveled at the gaslights—*my* gaslights.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “How did you even know I was here? Why did you move the party?”

“This is the pin you sent out!” Lilith said in exasperation. “I tried to tell Dorothy that it was a mistake, but she insisted that you knew your own mind, so here we are.”

“Oh!” one of the Svenssons exclaimed. “You have oysters!”

“That’s my romantic Valentine’s Day dinner,” I informed them as they grabbed several.

“Oh shit,” Wilder said. Jonathan laughed.

“Ugh, sorry I ruined your plans,” I apologized.

“You didn’t,” he said happily. “My only plan was to spend Valentine’s Day with you.”

He kissed me hard as the doorbell rang again with more partiers.

“Now,” he announced. “Who wants to toast Morticia’s and my new house?” He bent down and whispered in my ear,

“FYI, it’s haunted.”

“You really do know me well!” I kissed him happily. “I can’t wait to move in with you!”

Matt and Merrie celebrate a new kind of holiday!

LICKING HER
Christmas
Valentine



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

In which Matt and Merrie celebrate Valentine's Day!

MERRIE

“I just don’t understand why you need a Christmas tree in February,” Matt complained as I directed him to straighten out the tree in the corner of my shop.

“Who doesn’t have a February Christmas tree?”

“When you said it was going to be a holiday-themed shop,” Matt said as I held up various ornaments, trying to decide which would be best, “I thought you meant it would be about that holiday, not that holiday plus Christmas.”

“You can never have too much Christmas,” I replied. “Besides, it’s snowing outside. That means it’s basically still the Christmas season.”

Matt shook his head. “It’s two weeks until Valentine’s Day.”

“Yes, the Christmas Valentine’s Day season.” I took a sip of my raspberry mocha latte topped with whipped cream and pink and red sprinkles.

“You know,” Matt mused as I handed him a tree topper to crown the tree, “I always wondered how people in small towns in Hallmark movies made money outside of the holidays.”

“They have rich boyfriends who subsidize their Christmas habits,” I said with a grimace.

Matt fastened the pink heart to the top of the tree then kissed me.

“You have been bringing in an obscene amount of revenue from cookies,” he reminded me. “I’m hardly subsidizing you.”

“I still love and appreciate you,” I said, blowing him a kiss. He gave me a much steamier one in return.

“Though,” he added as I handed him a strand of pink lights, “I might have to start charging for off-season Christmas decorating.”

“Oooh, I hope the price isn’t too stiff!” I ran my hand down his zipper.

He smiled wryly and wrapped an arm around me. “It’s a very stiff price.”

“I’m not sure whether I’m going to be able to pay that,” I joked as his hand came up to cup my breast. “But I’ll give it my best shot. Just keep a running tab for me!”

I plugged in the strand of lights then pulled out my phone and snapped a picture of him wrapping the lights around the tree.

“You’re more perfect than a Christmas card!”

“Are we going to have Christmas references all year?”

“You think this is bad?” I said, waving around a pink fluffy garland. “Wait until you see Christmas St. Patrick’s Day!”



MY SHOP HAD a steady stream of business. I had been concerned when Matt handed me my money back after Christmas and told me I could use the shop as long as I wanted. He even offered to pay for more upgrades. I declined because I had been concerned that after the Christmas hype no one would want to buy cookies

How wrong I had been.

The small town of Harrogate had a steady stream of festivals throughout the year, and tourists would visit my shop to buy cookies and hot chocolate.

When the latest customer left, I went back to take another look at my Christmas tree. To justify the price of my cookies, I had made another Christmas ornament purchase, this time Valentine's Day themed.

I had purchased several large hearts made from various gradients of pink and red flowers. Then I arranged and rearranged them on the tree. As I moved one of the hearts up higher on the large Christmas Valentine's tree, a cat paw reached out and swiped at me.

"Louis," I scolded the cat. But the furry head that poked out of the tree did not look like Olivia's cat.

I snapped a picture and texted my friend.

Merrie: Is this yours?

Olivia: That is certainly not my cat.

Five minutes later, my friend was in my shop with a tin of cat food.

We inspected the tree. The kitten puffed up and hissed at us.

"Here kitty, kitty," Olivia cajoled as I climbed a step stool.

"Do you think someone lost a cat?" I asked.

"I didn't see anything posted on the Facebook group," Olivia said.

The black and white kitten smelled the tinned salmon and started purring. He hopped onto my shoulder, and I gently set him down on the ground.

"He's got a little heart on his head," I cooed. Olivia and I petted the kitten as he scarfed down the snack.

I took out my phone to snap a picture and tell all my Instagram followers that I'd just got a new little baby, but then I paused.

I probably shouldn't make a unilateral decision on a new pet. I was in a real relationship now, and I should act like it.

"Do you think Matt's going to let you keep him?" Olivia asked.

I chewed on my lip.

"I've already dumped a reindeer on him. He may not want another animal."

The kitten meowed.

"But I can't leave him all alone!"

"You could give him to your mom."

I wrinkled my nose.

"He's not going to survive around all those uncultured feral cats." I stroked the tip of the kitten's nose. He rubbed his head against my palm.

No, he definitely wasn't feral.

"It's going to be hard to find a family for him," Olivia reminded me. "A lot of people dump their Christmas pets around this time. Your mom's been all over town trying to get people to adopt abandoned cats. Maybe he's an unwanted Christmas present."

I felt like crying. "Poor little guy! What am I going to do if Matt won't let me keep him?"

MATT

“It’s basically just another Christmas market,” I remarked as Merrie and I walked through the crowded festival. “It’s literally the same trash cans, but now they have hearts on them.”

“You never heard of the legend of the Valentine’s Day elf?” Merrie said with a smirk.

“The what?”

She snickered. “The elves work for the great One-Eyed Heart in the sky, making chocolate and growing flowers for all the happy couples on earth.”

“That sounds horrifying.”

She laughed.

“Valentine’s grog!” a stall owner yelled.

“Two, please,” Merrie said. The steaming cups had happy dancing hearts on them.

“Raffle! Get your Valentine’s raffle ticket,” Dave yelled.

“Like I said, literally the same.”

“No way,” Merrie protested as she sipped her drink. “Instead of an ice-skating rink, there’s a flower market.”

“I heard a rumor that the raffle item is a snow globe,” I said flatly.

“Now that is probably left over from Christmas,” she conceded.

“I suppose you want a raffle ticket?” I asked her, fishing out my wallet.

“Uh, no,” she said, “I actually have to get back to the shop. You know, more baking to do. See you tonight.”

She ran off back toward her shop.

I watched her go.

Merrie had been spending a lot of time at her shop the last few weeks.

I knew she was gearing up for the Valentine’s festival. I had hoped that once she realized that she was going to be just as successful during Valentine’s as she was during Christmas, she would calm down. But tonight, she seemed even more worked up.

Is she tired of me? I wondered as I headed back to my office. I didn’t want to go home without Merrie.

Maybe after the excitement of Christmas wore off, she realized she made a mistake.

“I thought you were spending time with Merrie?” Eli asked, looking up from where he was banging a ping-pong ball off the office wall.

I grabbed it.

“She’s busy,” I said, my tone bitter.

“She’s running a business,” Eli reminded me.

“I know,” I snapped and opened my laptop.

“But...” Eli prodded.

“She’s being really cagey,” I said, rubbing my hands over my face. “We were barely in the Valentine’s market for half an hour before she said she had to go back.”

“Maybe she needs to hire some staff,” Eli suggested. “She could expand upstairs to that empty space. She could use the downstairs area as a retail space and a café and upstairs for the kitchen.”

“I offered, but she didn’t want to.”

“Maybe just go talk to her about it again,” Eli said. “If she’s concerned about the money, we could also tell her we want to use the space to do tastings. People seem really concerned that the vegetables and fruit our farms are growing aren’t as good as the stuff from a traditional farm. It’s kind of a pain to drive them all the way out into the countryside. Might be good to have a place to do demonstrations.”

“That actually sounds like a rational and well-thought-out answer,” I said begrudgingly.

“I have my moments,” my friend replied cheerfully.

I closed my laptop. “I’ll go talk to her right now.”



MERRIE WAS NOT hard at work baking when I arrived at her shop. Instead, she was sitting on the counter, phone in hand, intently talking to someone.

“Matt can’t find out about you,” she said earnestly. “Yes, I know. You’re just so adorable I just want to kiss every inch of you.”

The fuck?

I didn’t dare to breathe.

“We just have to wait and hope he doesn’t find out,” she said.

So that was why she wanted to leave.

MERRIE

Even though I felt guilty for ditching Matt at the festival, I was glad I had come back early to the shop. In half an hour the kitten had toppled the tree over, broken three ornaments, and annihilated a bag of sugar.

“Matt is not going to let me keep you if you keep destroying stuff,” I scolded the kitten. Then I kissed the little black heart on his forehead.

Gosh, I was turning into my mother.

The kitten meowed at me. It was the smallest, cutest meow you ever heard.

“Ugh, you’re so adorable!”

What was I going to do with the kitten tonight? Could I sneak him into Matt’s condo? Maybe if I waited for him to go to bed, I could hide the kitten in the laundry room.

In the meantime, I needed to come up with a way to convince Matt to let me keep the kitten.

“Time to go shopping,” I said.



SINCE A VALENTINE’S Day festival was going on, several stalls selling very sexy lingerie were out. I picked a little lacy number that I hoped I would actually fit in.

My New Year's resolution to stop snacking so much had lasted all of one day when I received my first subscription box of Japanese snacks Matt had given me for Christmas.

Pro tip: Hello Kitty cookies filled with chocolate are amazeballs.

The condo was dark when I snuck in that evening.

Matt was on the phone in his study. I crept down the hall to the laundry room and put down a towel, some water, and a tin of salmon for the kitten behind the dryer and out of sight.

"You just need to hang tight," I told the cat as I hastily stripped off to change into the lingerie. "I'm going to make it so we're together forever."

I quickly googled articles on how to turn your man into Jell-O in bed. The kitten finished with his food and meowed.

"My handsome baby," I cooed at him, praying that he stayed put. "I'll bring you some more tasty things to eat. But first, Mama's going to get Matt a little hot and bothered—"

The lights flicked on, and I shrieked. Matt was standing in the doorway, furious.

"In our house, Merrie?" My boyfriend was livid.

Ah, shit. Guess he didn't want a cat after all.

"I can explain," I begged, waving my arms around. The lingerie was in fact too small, and my boobs threatened to spill out of the lacy, ruffly bra.

Matt advanced on me. "I can't believe you. After everything, you would betray me like that."

Geez, it's just a cat. Get a grip.

I put my hands on my hips. "I think you're overreacting there a little bit, buddy. We can find another solution."

"I'm not overreacting," Matt roared. "You're having phone sex with some guy in our house. I feel like in this situation I am. *Very. Calm.*"

Um, what?

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you literally are.” He gestured to my outfit.

I looked down.

Kringle was in the doorway, whining and wagging his tail.

“Oh, ohhh, I see,” I said, pointing at my phone. “No, see, that wasn’t what was going on here at all. I wasn’t cheating on you. I was just going to use sex to convince you to let me keep the kitten I found in my Valentine’s Day Christmas tree.”

As if on cue, the kitten hopped out from behind the dryer, saw Kringle, and decided he had found a new best friend.

Matt froze, expression unreadable. “You what?”

“I guess I did something crazy and manipulative and not how a decent girlfriend should act.” Embarrassed, I grabbed my coat. “I need to go get some baking done.”

MATT

“**M**errie has a kitten?” I said aloud.

The front door slammed.

I looked down at the kitten that was attacking Kringle’s tail playfully.

The kitten meowed at me and went after my shoelace.

I picked up the little cat. He had a heart on his head.

“Fuck it, Merrie.”

Had she been concerned I wouldn’t keep the cat?

“You hungry?” I asked him.

The kitten meowed and jumped on my shoulder. I took him into the kitchen and opened a can of imported Portuguese sardines. I poured off the oil and set them on one of the plates with the Valentine’s Day china Merrie had found at a thrift store.

“Kringle, you’re babysitting,” I told the dog. “I need to find Merrie.”

She was in her shop baking cookies, wearing her coat, boots, and the sexy lingerie when I rapped on the door.

She looked at me, and her face reddened.

“We’re closed.” She pointed at the sign on the door.

“Merrie, I’m sorry,” I said through the glass.

She stomped over to the door, a grimace on her face.

“I’m sorry, Matt,” she said, unlocking the door.

I stepped inside the cozy shop.

“I didn’t want to get rid of the kitten, and I wasn’t sure whether you would want him.”

She looked down at her boots.

“I never should have thought you would be talking to some other man.” I slid my hands inside her coat, feeling her warm soft skin.

“There’s no cock I want more than yours wrapped up under my Valentine’s Day Christmas tree,” she said with a crooked smile.

“I think you would want it unwrapped,” I countered, sliding the coat off her shoulders and letting it pool on the floor.

“So long as it has a bow!” she joked.

I tipped up her chin and kissed her.

I couldn’t get enough of this woman. As I kissed her, I crowded her up against the shop counter. She gave a little jolt as her behind hit, and then she broke the kiss to grin wickedly up at me. *“Oh,”* she said. *“I remember being in this position before.”*

My mind blanked because I had had Merrie in so many ways since we first met that it was hard for me to pin one down. Then again, the first time was always memorable, and the setting sparked my memory.

Now I grinned down at her. *“I remember those dirty little noises you made as I got you off with just my hand,”* I said.

She pouted at me. *“I did not make dirty little noises.”*

“You did, and I loved them,” I said, pressing up close to her so she could feel the length of my interest poking into her belly.

“I remember being annoyed because somebody didn’t give me his cock when I was practically panting for it...”

“How can I make it up to you?” I asked, knowing, but wanting to hear her ask for it anyway.

I should have known better. Merrie didn't ask. She demanded, and she was always full of great ideas. “I want your cock, and I want it from behind,” she said. “Something for me to think back on during my long hours in the shop.”

“I can do that,” I murmured, and she opened her mouth to quip something back at me — honestly, we could go all night like this, but I wanted her pussy. I spun her around.

She made a little squeaking sound in surprise but got with the program almost immediately as I crowded up behind her again, pressing my cock to her ass.

My hand wrapped around her torso to cup one of her tits through her ruffled bra as I kissed her neck. My other went up her thighs to yank down her panties.

Merrie groaned in anticipation, stepping out of her panties and then spreading her legs wide for me.

She was making it easy for me, but I wanted to play just a little bit. One hand cupped her ass, taking a firm handful and squeezing hard, while the other played with her tits.

Her breath caught, and I knew that she was getting wet for me.

“You like that?” I asked, huskily.

“You know what I like,” she said.

That, I did.

Abandoning her ass, I reached to my own fly, unzipped, and drew out my cock.

I was fully hard and ready for her.

“Are you going to play with that thing or are you going to do something with it?” she asked and stuck her tongue out.

“You know what I want to do with it,” I said, and my hand reluctantly abandoned her tits to press her down between the shoulder blades.

She went willingly, head down, ass up, holding onto the counter for leverage. Good girl.

Of course she was hot and wet for me. I took a moment to roll on a condom and then pressed in, feeling her wet hot pussy welcome me.

My first thrust took me in, and my second sent me all the way home. Merrie moaned, loud and lewd, her hands tightening on the edge of the countertop until her knuckles turned white.

I gripped her hips and pulled her back toward me right onto my cock as I rocked in and out of her, building up a rhythm that we both loved.

“God...I can never get enough of you...” I muttered, only half-aware that I was speaking. My mind was full of lust, full of the sensation of the woman that I loved clenching around me and moaning under the ministrations of my cock.

As usual, Merrie drove me crazy in all the best ways.

She moaned and clenched again, her inner muscles practically shivering as I picked up speed and pace and pounded in and out of her. We were both racing toward completion, but I wanted to give her that little extra edge.

I reached around to the front of her pussy, rubbing over her clit.

Her pussy clamped down on me, and she came with a sweet cry that sounded like bells.

I lasted for only seconds more before I, too, was spilling inside of her.

She snorted as I wrapped her in my arms.

“I love you, Merrie.”

“I love you, Matt. And I can’t believe you’d think there’s any man I would want other than you.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “That kitten is pretty cute.”

MERRIE

I winced as the sunlight reflected off the bright pink and purple metallic streamers that hung from the lamp posts.

Matt put on his sunglasses.

“Merrie was not prepared for the Valentine’s Day festival,” he told the kitten. He put a little hat on the kitten’s head to shade him.

“You look so cute, Cupid,” I cooed at the cat.

“His name is not Cupid; I’m calling him Hades.”

“He’s a Valentine’s Day cat,” I protested as we walked through the crowd to the stage where the day’s raffle was about to be announced.

“I hope it’s chocolate,” I said as we found a seat. I set our Valentine’s Day pizza, which was shaped like a heart, on the table.

I handed Matt a slice, and he took a bite while trying to keep the kitten from stealing a piece of pepperoni. Then I tore off a piece of crust for Kringle.

“Let me see my cat godson,” Eli yelled, coming over to our table. He stole a piece of pizza then tickled the kitten under the chin.

“And what did you two decide?”

“We’re keeping the cat,” I told him.

“No,” Eli said, “about the café and catering kitchen expansion.”

“I can’t run a whole café,” I protested.

“You need staff,” Matt said gently.

“I don’t want your handouts,” I said stubbornly. Now that the New Year had started, though, Olivia was busy with her architecture work and wasn’t as available to help decorate cookies.

“I never see you, and I miss you,” Matt said, taking my hands. “I want to spend more time with you.”

“And we’re going to use the space occasionally to do demonstrations for the food we grow in the vertical farms,” Eli added. “So, it’s not just all on you.”

“I’ll have to see whether I can even find someone to hire,” I said. But as I thought about it, it would be nice to have a little café area. We could serve holiday-themed sandwiches and french fries.

Might be nice to have your own fried-food emporium.

“I have a number of little siblings who need jobs,” Eli said.

“Or you could hire your mom and great-aunt Bettina,” Matt suggested.

“Um, no, I—”

“Jingleball!” my mom exclaimed, rushing through the crowd.

She zeroed in on the kitten. “What a cutie! And Dottie told me you’re opening a cat café.”

“No. No I am not.”

Beside me, Matt held back a laugh.

“Now, Merrie, you need to be a friend of the cats. We have a new family of feral kittens that need socialization,” my mom said.

“Mom, Matt doesn’t want a bunch of cats in his building.”

Matt shrugged. "I didn't really have the time to try to find a new tenant anyway for the top two floors."

"See?" Mom said.

I kicked him under the table, and he smirked.

"We have a raffle winner," Dave's voice boomed over the speaker. "Number 4387, please come claim your prize."

"That's me," I said, though I was more excited to end the cat café conversation than to actually win.

When I climbed up the steps to the stage, Dave handed me an oversized plaster Christmas elf wearing a Valentine's Day sweater.

"Merry Valentine's Day," he said. "God help me, I'm still on the raffle committee."

"Uh..." I looked at the elf.

"This was left over from the Christmas raffle," Dave said. "And I want it out of my house."

Matt and Eli were snickering when I walked back to the table and set the gnome down next to the pizza.

"You are not bringing that home," Matt told me.

The kitten puffed up and hissed at the plaster elf. My mom fed the cat a piece of pepperoni.

I looked at the elf and frowned. "I'm going to give it away to the next person who buys a cookie. People like free stuff."

"That sounds like a terrible Christmas Valentine's," Matt stated.

"Really?" I kissed him, "I should dress you up in a little elf outfit, and you can be my Christmas Valentine!"

GRINCH
Please!



A
SHORT
HOLIDAY
ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

It's Christmas again and there might be an extra special surprise for Noelle...if she can survive the holiday!

NOELLE

The diamond ring sparkled on my finger. No, not that finger—on my right hand. I'd kept the giant snowflake diamond ring.

Sure, some girls might think wearing that ring would remind them of a time in their relationship they didn't fondly remember.

But my family had survived by being frugal. I canned my own food, shopped at thrift stores, and reused an item until it couldn't be reused anymore, at which point it was to be set with loving care in a large pile of similar items, just in case it might be useful one day.

My momma did not raise me to throw out a very pricy diamond ring. That thing would be with me on my deathbed, along with all the charging cables I couldn't get rid of...

I straightened the last wreath in the window of the brand-new Wynter Retreat Lodge, Restaurant, and Spa that was opening just in time for the Christmas season.

"Happy Black Friday." I waved to Elsa, who was back in town from visiting her brothers.

"Okay, so check this out. I have been trying a new recipe for spiked hot chocolate," she said, thrusting a thermos at me.

I took a sip. "Wow, that is strong."

"Right? Your mom was saying she wanted a signature drink to serve at the restaurant."

“This will certainly put everyone in a festive spirit.”

“The place is looking great,” Elsa marveled.

The lodge was built to look like a log cabin constructed from huge heavy timbers—but upscale, of course. We were trying to attract people from Manhattan to come have glam winter weekends in the woods. Huge glass windows let in as much of the winter daylight as possible. A fire burned merrily in the two stone fireplaces that flanked either end of the large great room. They were big enough for me to stand in.

Gran was stirring a big pot of spiked cider in one of the fireplaces.

“Oh, Elsa,” my mother called, hurrying through the lodge.

This was her baby, her dream. But now that it was almost a reality—well, I had inherited my anxious tendencies honestly.

My mom gave Elsa a big hug. “You’re so sweet. You didn’t have to come. I know you and Noelle have to work. You’re so busy with your company. Oh, I baked pinwheel cookies for your employees.”

“I thought these were for the opening?” I said as my mother shoved a huge box of cookies at me.

“I don’t think anyone’s coming,” she said, dropping her voice.

“Um, Mom, the entire freaking town is going to be on your doorstep tomorrow. Don’t you worry.”

“That’s just the grand opening party.” My mother waved me away. “But I have barely gotten any interest. We’re not going to have any customers.”

“Noelle said you guys were all booked up.” Elsa reached in the box for a cookie.

“Who knows if they’re going to show up?” my mother said dramatically. “That app Noelle made says that up to fifty percent of people don’t show up to claim a hotel booking, so you should overbook. But I haven’t been able to overbook that much.”

I frowned. “My app said that?” The app was designed to support small businesses and trawl the internet for facts and tidbits related to the app owner’s industry. But those were just meant to be factoids. You weren’t supposed to base real business decisions on the pop-ups.

“It’s going to be fine, Mom,” I assured her. “But stop overbooking people. This isn’t a Marriott with four hundred rooms. You only have twenty-five.”

“I have thirty rooms booked for tomorrow,” she said.

“Oh my god.” I started freaking out. “What if everyone shows up?”

“Your app said they wouldn’t,” my mother shrieked.

“Let’s all just remain calm,” my brother said.

“Oh, look at him. Doesn’t he look handsome in his uniform?” my mother called.

My brother was the bellhop. Carrying suitcases up and down stairs and driving the van to the train station to pick up guests worked well with his video gaming schedule.

He saluted me.

“Merry Christmas!” He snagged a cookie out of the box. “Gran, hit me up!”

Gran sloshed a generous helping of cider into his mug.

“Guests aren’t arriving until tomorrow. Guests aren’t arriving until tomorrow,” my mother muttered to herself.

“Jimmy, the door,” Azalea yelled to my brother from the front desk.

Yep, this was a family affair. Well, for everyone except me.

“Bet you’re glad this isn’t your Christmas circus,” Elsa whispered to me and passed me a cookie.

Because I had a real company. And I lived with Oliver in his very nice house. Without my family.

Even though I, too, was living out my dream, a part of me wished I was still under one roof with my family, working at

the lodge.

The top half of a very large Christmas tree slowly maneuvered into the great hall, guided by my father and Oliver.

“Is that what he had you come over here to do?” I asked Oliver. “Dad, Oliver is busy. You said you wanted him to look at your electrical system, not do manual labor.”

My father gave me a sheepish smile. “Just wanted to include him in the Christmas traditions.”

I smiled at Oliver and mouthed, *Sorry*.

He gave me a strained smile and leaned over to plant a sadly chaste kiss on me. Then he turned his attention to trying to rotate the fifteen-foot-tall Christmas tree so that it stood proudly in the double height space.

My shoulders slumped.

“Did something happen with one of his siblings?” Elsa asked me in a low voice. “I thought he loved Christmas. He should be hopped up on those Yuletide vibes.”

I stuffed a cookie in my mouth.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “He’s been a little cold the last few weeks. Whenever I ask him, he just says he’s dealing with a lot, what with trying to do the cleanup at the old country expo site and dealing with the railroad and the Department of Defense. But he’s still cheery with Max.”

The corgi raced around the living room, giving kisses to my nieces and nephews.

Dove, now that she didn’t have to be the de facto babysitter or live full-time in a crowded house with my sister, had a much more generous and easygoing personality.

“Why don’t you do couples counseling?”

“I don’t want to rock the boat,” I admitted to Elsa. “I have to keep the peace for Dove. She’s finally starting to act like a human being and not a feral parrot.”

“Maybe that’s why Oliver is so cold.”

I shook my head. “He was always nice to Dove, and she worships the ground he walks on. The only person he’s weird with is me. Maybe he’s waiting until after Christmas to break up with me.”

“No way.” Elsa shook her head.

“That’s what some guys do. They think it’s easier because then they don’t have the guilt of ruining their girlfriend’s or wife’s holiday.”

I didn’t know if I could keep it together over the entire month of December with the possibility of a New Year’s resolution breakup hanging over my head.

“Do you think he’s cheating?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted bitterly. “He’s been cagey with his phone lately, but maybe I’m paranoid and seeing things that aren’t there. I have on occasion been known to do that.”

“When was the last time you, you know?”

“Not lately.” I dropped my voice. “I ordered a sexy outfit to, you know, try to add a little spice to the Christmas punch, so to speak. Problem is that Dove’s still on Thanksgiving break ’til Monday, and she has been clingy lately.”

“Leave it to your best-friend cousin,” Elsa promised. “I will get her out of the house, then you can remind him who has the best tits this side of the Hudson River.”

I gave her a small smile.

I wasn’t sure.

But I had to do something. Otherwise, this was my last Christmas with Oliver.

OLIVER

“Are you serious?” I hissed to Noelle’s father, flabbergasted he could do such a thing.

“I’m just so excited you’re proposing tomorrow.”

Noelle’s mom was jumping up and down.

“Dove,” I began.

“You didn’t tell me!” she cried. I shushed her.

“If you had told me first, I would have kept it secret. This man became a grandfather before age thirty. He completely failed the marshmallow test. You can’t entrust him with your secrets.”

“She’s right,” James said solemnly. “You never should have told me. Guilty as charged.”

“This is so exciting. We can have a grand opening and an engagement party,” Sarah gushed.

“I’ll make a sign,” James said.

“A sign for what?” Azalea, Noelle’s sister, asked, scowling as she stuck her head into the small manager’s office.

Dove went cold when she saw her mom.

When Noelle had moved Dove in, I was happy to have her. But I had sort of thought that with some space, Azalea might start missing her eldest daughter and make moves to repair the relationship. But she missed therapy appointments, wouldn’t do FaceTime calls, and hadn’t even given the girl a birthday

present. I didn't want to judge, because she'd had her as a young teenager, but still.

You of all people should know that sometimes you just can't repair the damage to the parent-child relationship and it's best for everyone to go their separate ways.

"You need to help Grandma decorate the tree," Azalea said sharply to Dove, "and stop making all that noise."

"You're never around. I don't have to listen to you." Dove was defiant.

"Dove, let me just talk to your mother. Then I'll come out and help you decorate. How about that?"

Azalea crossed her arms as we waited for the rest of the family to leave the office.

"So, either Noelle's pregnant or you're getting engaged—or both, I take it," she said, tone surly.

"Door number two," I replied.

"Huh. Guess you want to evict Dove now so you can have your own children. You better talk to my mother because I don't have room for her in the place I'm renting."

"No, no," I assured her. "The house is Dove's home too. I have no intention of kicking her out. In fact," I said, hoping Azalea would receive my request well, "I wanted to ask you if I could adopt Dove. Well, Noelle and me. If you would be okay with that. Eventually," I added because Azalea's expression was dark.

"So you think I'm a bad mother?" she shot at me.

Yes.

"Of course not," I said smoothly, slipping into the tone I used to deal with particularly irate investors.

"Yes you do," Azalea hissed. "Do you know how much I sacrificed to have that girl? I got pregnant at fourteen, and her father just ran out. Went back to fucking Denmark or wherever the hell he was from. Goddamn foreign exchange students. You think I wanted her?"

No, which is why I offered to adopt her.

“All she did was cry. And my mom would make me come rock her. I had to miss parties. I didn’t go to prom. I couldn’t find a decent man after that, and it was all because of Dove. She ruined my life. She owes me.”

Damn.

“Forget I said anything,” I told her. “I was just floating an idea. I thought it might make things easier for you.”

“Easier for Dove, you mean,” Azalea said darkly. “She made me miserable. She doesn’t get to be happy.”

“We can just continue on as normal.”



“YIKES,” Tristan said as we drove down the snowy country road out to the expo site. “And I thought my mom was fucked up.”

“This whole situation is fucked.”

“Did her dad tell you he wasn’t going to bless your proposal?” Tristan asked.

“Exactly the opposite. He was so excited he told the rest of her family, and they all decided the proposal was happening tomorrow, at the grand opening.”

Tristan started snickering.

“This is a crisis; it’s not funny,” I snapped.

“Just tell them you were planning on proposing on Christmas morning.”

“They will spill the secret long before then. I wanted this to be a surprise. It has to be perfect to make up for the last proposal disaster,” I said.

“You don’t have the ring,” he reminded me.

I planned events well in advance. It was my thing.

The ring was supposed to be here weeks ago, but the local artisan I'd hired to make it was running late.

"She swears she's going to get it to me by the end of the day," I told Tristan.

"Noelle's going to love the design," he assured me.

"Who knows what the ring even looks like at this point? This is why I wanted to have it in hand at least six weeks before, just in case it was terrible and I needed to postpone."

The artisan was a highly creative person and had sent me a steady barrage of text messages with cryptic pictures, scrawled sketches, and design-change whims over the last few weeks. I had no idea what the ring would look like.

"She can't not love it. It's got a huge diamond on it that you specifically sourced for her. Just get everyone drunk beforehand, and it will go perfectly."

But it wouldn't go at all if I didn't have the ring.

NOELLE

After waving off Elsa, Dove, and Max later that afternoon to go explore the Christmas market, I paced around the living room, waiting for my sexy surprise shipment to show up.

In a nod to my Christmas-loathing past, I'd ordered a sexy Grinch costume. I'd also made Oliver a roast beef with cheesy mashed potatoes, green beans, and lots of gravy and a cranberry loaf ring.

But first, we were going to get a little workout in.

"He's probably just stressed," I told myself as I paced around in front of the Christmas tree my dad had dropped off with me earlier. "You're being paranoid and crazy."

But I couldn't get over how he kept hiding his phone from me whenever it went off. What was the reasonable explanation for that?

"Give him a good orgasm and a nice meal, and he'll forget all about whoever he's having an affair with... Oh my god, he's having an affair." I started hyperventilating.

The doorbell rang, shocking me out of the oncoming hysterics.

"I need a signature," the harried postal worker said, handing me a stack of Christmas catalogs and mail along with a very large box.

"Merry Christmas," I called and shut the door. Then I headed up to the master bedroom. There was a very large

mirror in the master closet. I quickly stripped off my clothes and tried on the outfit.

I had taken to wearing a thong, just in case Oliver decided he was in the mood. Then I could whip off my clothes and be like, “Ass and titties!” But he hadn’t, and so I suffered with the butt floss.

“He won’t be thinking about anything but sex when I surprise him with this,” I said gleefully. It had been a while for me, and I was practically drooling thinking about his cock.

But my hoo-ha shriveled up and died when I lifted the sexy outfit out of the box.

“What in the fuck is this?” I shrieked. I pawed through the packing paper in the box, hoping this was a joke, that they had accidentally put someone else’s order in with mine.

“This doesn’t look like the picture on the website at all,” I said in shock.

It was a Grinch costume, and I supposed someone might have thought it was sexy. It was literally a sexy Grinch costume. Like, it was the fur suit and pot belly of a Grinch with a bra and panties sewn on.

I slipped it on and took a few photos to show Elsa.

Elsa: Um, WTF is that?

Elsa: Did you kill a deer?

Elsa: Holy shit, are you preggo?

Noelle: It came preloaded with a foam pot belly.

Noelle: WTF am I supposed to do now???

Noelle: This was supposed to be my plan to win Oliver back and rekindle our Christmas romance.

Noelle: I look like a Christmas serial killer.

Elsa: Did it come with the creepy long fingers?

It did, in fact. And a giant candy cane whip. I slipped on the gloves and did a few sexy poses in the mirror for Elsa.

“Looking sexy,” I told my reflection, then stripped off the suit and stood there in my thong.

What the hell was I going to do now?

“Noelle?” Oliver’s deep voice called from the bedroom.

Santa’s balls.

I hid the green furry suit in the box and hastily stuffed it behind the suitcases in the closet.

“I, um...” I said, walking out and surreptitiously setting my phone down on the dresser. “Merry Christmas?”

“What were you—”

I did a little jig, shaking my breasts for him and capturing his attention and ideally making him forget about asking me what I was doing in the closet.

“Hey, Noelle,” he said, following the bouncing tits.

I did a little strut over to the bed, shaking my ass too. We would have to pivot from the original plan.

I bounced off the mattress, looking his way, spreading my legs. I licked my finger and ran it down my form, heaving my breasts out. My finger came down to my thong and ran it over to the perimeter.

His attention on me was rock solid. I had an absolutely captive audience.

“Why don’t you take off that suit and join me over here?”

I rubbed myself a bit. It was enough to get the fire really roaring down there, even if it was nowhere near as good as Oliver’s touch.

I blew him a kiss, watching as his eyes widened and he was riveted by each and every little thing I was doing.

I wasn’t really much of a performer, but I needed him to still want me, still love me.

His shirt was off, revealing those washboard abs and broad chest I wanted to rake my nails down.

I threw my ass back toward him, feeling it jiggle for him. “We’re doing something a little bit different tonight, Oliver. Spice it up.” I winked at him. “I want you to come down my chimney, Oliver.”

I threw my other Amazon order on the bed: Christmas-themed lube.

Oliver cursed as he stripped off the rest of his clothes. Then he was beside me on the bed. His touch ignited my body with warmth, and his hands went up and down my curves.

He kissed me hard, his large hands kneading my tits then slipping down and stroking my dripping wet pussy. I was half-gone already thinking about him inside me.

He positioned me on the bed, spreading my legs. He pulled the lacy thong down and tossed it on the floor.

Then his mouth was on my pussy, teasing me, licking me into a frenzy.

“I want your cock,” I begged as his tongue twirled around my clit.

He inserted two fingers in my opening, stroking me while he licked me.

Before I knew it, I was coming. Like I said, it had been a while.

It wasn’t enough, though.

“Fuck me,” I panted.

His cock throbbed against my ass cheeks as he positioned himself behind me on all fours.

The cap popped off the lube. Then he was spreading my ass with one hand and inserting two fingers in me. I moaned at the sensation, my thighs trembling from desire.

He teased me with his cock for a moment then slowly pushed in. I gasped as I tightened around his thick cock.

Oliver held me tight as he let me adjust to his girth, giving me a moment. But this was not my first time, and I knew what I liked.

“Take me,” I begged in a throaty voice.

He pulled out then pushed in again. I let out a low moan. Then, he started to fuck me. His cock slid out of my ass and in, the weird yet pleasant symphony of sensations hitting me and overrunning me with bliss. I panted, but as long as I didn’t feel pain, he didn’t stop. At a steady, solid pace, he kept up the pressure, stroke after stroke of him fucking my ass.

As I moaned for him, Oliver became bolder, taking me faster. I rubbed my ass against him, begging him to go deeper, faster. His arms wrapped around me as he took me from behind, holding my breasts, pinching the nipples, driving me crazy.

One hand gripped my hip tightly, and the other trailed over my curves, sliding between my legs, rubbing my aching clit. It wasn’t long until I was lost in him, screaming to him, utter orgasm wracking my body and making itself all I could feel.

That was all he needed to crest over the edge, filling me with his hot come.

“God,” I gasped, “that was so fucking hot.”

He pressed sloppy kisses along my jaw. Being in his arms felt right, like how it used to be.

“I love you,” he murmured.

“I love you too.”

Maybe sex does cure all ills.

I felt in love and connected.

Until his phone chimed.

He rolled over, clearly blocking me from view with his body.

I felt heartbroken.

He was cheating.

“I have to go,” he said, not looking at me.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and quickly dressed.

Oliver didn’t even give me a kiss goodbye.

“I made dinner,” I said to the empty room.



I SAT HAVING a pity picnic in front of the unlit fireplace, alternating between stuffing myself with mashed potatoes and bourbon.

“This is why I hate Christmas.” I sniffled to myself.

A shadowy figure appeared in the window.

I peered blearily, set down my whiskey, and stumbled over there.

“Are you the Ghost of Christmas Past?” I asked when I opened it.

“Get it together. It’s still November,” Azalea snapped at me.

“Come inside,” I slurred, grabbing at her.

“Stop it. Are you drunk? It’s not even seven o’clock. I’m telling Mom,” my sister huffed.

“Nooooo!”

“God, and people think I’m a bad mother.”

I hiccupped. “You’re not a bad mother. I mean, sometimes you are, but there’s worse out there. You have a job, and Kayleigh gets smiley faces in daycare.”

Azalea had a pained look on her face. “I’m okay with the littles, but I’m a terrible mother to Dove. She hates me.”

The words sobered me up.

“No she doesn’t,” I said. “She’s just disappointed.”

Azalea looked upset. “I can’t be her mom. I never could. You, Mom, and Gran did more for her than I ever did. I can’t even pretend to be one of those hardworking single moms who were forced to neglect their kid because they were out working three jobs. That wasn’t me.”

“There’s always tomorrow,” I said. “You can always do better.”

“She’s what, twelve? I think the ship is quickly sailing. I just...” She crossed her arms. “I never wanted her. I didn’t want to be a mother.”

“Then why...”

“I got caught up in it. I thought it would make me special. I was getting all this attention. Everyone wanted to talk to me in school. The principal, even the Danish consul, came and talked to me. I was famous. People were throwing me baby showers. It was like I was about to join this exclusive club. And then the baby showed up and after a month, people just weren’t interested anymore. Then I was just a failure. The teen-mom daughter of a teen mom. Dove cried all the time. She didn’t even like me.”

“She was a baby. They cry.”

“All I could think about when I saw her was how much she had ruined my life,” Azalea said, tears filling her eyes.

I looked at her through the open window, an invisible barrier between us. My heart ached for my sister.

“And you,” she continued, looking away, “you always judged me, rubbing your success in my face. It was so aggravating how much you and Dove connected. How much she liked you over me. I kept going after men who I thought would be able to take care of me, give me a nice life and a nice house, be a good father for Dove, but they were all complete shit.”

“Guys suck,” I said sympathetically.

“Not Oliver.”

“No,” I told her bitterly, “he sucks too.”

“God, you are so spoiled and entitled. Grow up. He’s perfect. You get everything you want, then you complain about it.”

“No I don’t,” I argued.

“Yes you do,” Azalea yelled. “It’s not fair. Everyone likes you more than me. You’re better than me. I’m a failure, and all of you hate me. Especially you. You hate what I did to Dove.”

“Azalea.” I stuck my head out of the window, the winter wind stinging my eyes. “I don’t hate you. You’re my big sister. We’re family. I will always be in your corner. Always. I love you. Anyone gives you trouble or talks shit about you, I will personally go over to their house and set their Christmas tree on fire.”

Azalea gave me a small smile.

I made grabbing motions with my hands. She stepped up to me, and I gave her a big hug.

“I know you had a long way to climb, and I respect you for it.” I put my hands on her shoulders. “Don’t sell yourself short. You’re the manager at the greatest boutique lodge, restaurant, and spa in the state of New York. And you make a mean jar of jam.”

She rolled her eyes. “Mom’s been cooking nonstop for the past week. I don’t know what we’re going to do with all the food.”

“Have a kickass party!” I whooped.

Azalea and I grinned at each other.

“Do you want to adopt her?” she asked abruptly.

“Who?”

“Dove, moron. Do you want to be her mom? I mean, you basically have been.”

“I can take care of her if you don’t want to,” I said carefully.

“No.” She shook her head. “Are you yearning to be her mother?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I love her. She’s the Rudolph to my Santa.”

“Okay,” Azalea said, jaw set. “You can be who she needs better than I can. I’m sure you can get a fancy-pants lawyer to figure it all out.”

She turned abruptly. “See you tomorrow.”

I stood in the window with my nose numb, not quite processing what had just happened.

“Azalea,” I called, “do you want some Christmas cookies?”

But my sister had already disappeared into the snowy darkness.

OLIVER

I took a deep breath once I was outside in the cold winter evening.

Why was I even wasting my time getting this ring?

Noelle had been taking pictures in the closet. She was sending them to someone. She must have been, based on how guilty she was acting when she exited the closet. Clearly, she was hiding something from me.

She was probably going to send them to you, the rational part of my brain said.

Except I had heard the noise the phone made when it sent a text message.

The message hadn't gone to me.

My fists clenched as I thought about our lovemaking earlier.

She felt so right. So perfect.

I loved her so much.

But did she love me?

Maybe I needed to call off the proposal.

At least until I figured out who she was sending those photos to.



THE JEWELRY ARTISAN was an older woman with crazy curly hair interwoven with feathers and beads.

Celestia was dancing and humming to herself when I approached the park bench. The light was low, though her face was lit up by a burning bunch of sage.

My eyes watered.

“Come in,” she said, wafting the smoke at me. “Come into my shop.”

I stepped up to the park bench.

You wanted to hire someone local, because Noelle would appreciate money staying in her community, I reminded myself. Though I wished I had just gone with a high-end Parisian designer like my brother had done with his girlfriend’s engagement ring.

“So, how does the ring look?” I asked.

The artist ignored me and continued to sway. “Do you hear the spirits? The closer we get to the winter solstice, the brighter their voices.”

I literally did not have the patience.

“Yes, they sound lovely. I’m sure you’re busy, and I don’t want to keep you. Would you like cash for the remainder of the balance or credit card?”

“My preferred method of payment is silver ingots blessed by a Celtic goddess.”

“I have a silver credit card,” I offered, thumbing through my wallet.

She pressed her hands together and took out her phone. “Close enough.”

I waited impatiently while she tried and failed to get the card reader to work.

“I can take a look if you want,” I said delicately.

“All this modern technology,” Celestia said dramatically and flopped down on the bench.

I swiped the card, and the payment went through.

“Success,” I said.

She was asleep on the bench.

“Ma’am?”

She snored.

“Ma’am, the ring?”

She woke up with a start. “It’s the spirits.”

“*The ring.*”

“The ring...” She pulled a small wooden box out of her pocket and presented it to me with a curtsy. “For your lovely bride.”

Finally.

I opened the box... and tried to keep the horror off my face when I saw what was inside.

“This...” I said slowly, “was not what we originally discussed.”

I couldn’t propose to Noelle with this ring. It was hideous.

The original design had been a large diamond in the center surrounded by an even dusting of rubies and emeralds on the band.

This new ring design was lopsided, with the bear-cut diamond sitting on jutting pieces of silver, not at all the delicate swirls I had imagined. The emerald and rubies looked like they had been clumped on.

“I was moved by my intuition,” the artisan said as she danced away into the night. “You’re welcome.”

“What the fuck? I cannot propose to Noelle with this,” I said as I trudged back toward the Christmas market. I didn’t know what I was looking for.

I needed another ring.

As if I could find a five-million-dollar diamond in a small-town Christmas market.

“Just go home,” I told myself. “If she’s sending pictures to someone else, maybe this is a sign from the universe that you need to rethink your plans for spending the rest of your life with Noelle.”

NOELLE

“We’re overbooked!” my mother whisper-screamed when she saw me.

She dragged me down a side hallway into the manager’s office.

“I told her not to overbook,” Azalea said accusingly, “but Mom said you told her to.”

“I didn’t.”

“The app said it,” my mom insisted. “Now everyone is here.”

“We’re going to have to pay to have people moved to another hotel,” Azalea snapped at me, arms crossed. “This is your fault. You need to pay for it. Mom’s business shouldn’t have to pay for your mistakes.”

Fuck my life.

“Sure,” I said, “fine.”

Who cared about guests when the love of your life was cheating on you?

“Let’s just make sure there isn’t anyone super important that we absolutely cannot boot.” I scanned the guest list then relaxed. Four of the rooms were booked for Oliver’s siblings.

“These people are going.” I circled the Frosts’ names.

“You can’t kick them out. They’re family.” My mother was scandalized.

“Uh, yes I can,” I said, scowling at the Frost name. “Especially if they’re that cheater’s family. They can go live in his cheating fucking house.”

Then I burst into tears.

My mom and sister looked at me like I was insane.

My mother squirmed.

“Don’t you dare,” Azalea said to her.

Azalea marched outside and came back in with a fistful of snow, which she stuffed down the back of my dress.

I screamed.

“Get it together,” she scolded me. “We have half the town showing up in fifteen minutes, not to mention our guests. You cannot come apart.”

“My life is over,” I wailed.

Azalea pinched my arm.

“Ow.” I rubbed it.

“Go deal with the Frosts,” she ordered. “Then make sure Dad isn’t giving away free Christmas trees to people. Jimmy’s supposed to be picking up the first round of guests at the train station. Mom, all your food needs to be out on the tables. Go water down whatever alcoholic grog Gran has bubbling in the fireplace. We’re not running a charity here. Speeches are at five, then two more hours of revelry, then everyone needs to be out. This isn’t a frat house. We want our guests to feel comfortable. Don’t fuck this up,” Azalea warned us.

I saluted. “Yes, ma’am.”



EVERYONE WAS LAUGHING and having a wonderful time at the party as I meandered through the guests. My mom was aglow as all her friends and neighbors congratulated her on the beautiful building and the amazing food.

Elsa's older brothers had come in for the grand opening. They were all huddled on the opposite side of the yard, glaring daggers at the Frost brothers.

Nothing like Christmas to bring the drama.

I was back to my bartending roots, passing out drinks.

Oliver was with his family. His brothers were whispering angrily to him and pointing in my general vicinity.

Fuckers.

I had ignored him when I'd told his siblings that we were overbooked and asked if they could pretty please stay at their brother's house.

In my defense, Oliver hadn't been exactly warm and inviting to me either.

I didn't know what to do. I was supposed to adopt Dove, but now we might be kicked out of Oliver's house. It had been her home for the last year. For the first time in her life, she'd had her own room. I didn't know what it would do to her to have to pack up and leave.

"No sexy outfit?"

I almost spilled the drinks in surprise.

"Oh," I said when I saw Oliver.

He seemed crushed by my lackluster response.

"This is supposed to be a classy establishment."

His jaw clenched. He looked away then turned back to me.

"Then what were you taking photos of?" he asked in a rush. "I heard you when I went into the bedroom. You were taking pictures and texting someone and—"

My face felt hot.

"Nothing," I sputtered.

"And now you're lying to me," he growled. "Just tell me who he is."

This motherfucker.

“I’m not lying,” I screeched then lowered my voice. “I’m not a cheater.”

“Then who were you texting?”

Did I want to be right, or did I want to utterly humiliate myself?

Please. I was a middle child. I lived to win.

I whipped out my phone, scrolled to the text message to Elsa, and slapped the phone in his hand.

Oliver made a horrified face.

“Is this for the pageant?” he asked finally.

“What pageant?”

“The town is having a new annual pageant about how you stole Christmas and burned down the town.” A smile played around his mouth.

“First off, mister, it was one fucking tree and some garland. And,” I amended, “a bench and a gazebo. But that gazebo was haunted anyway, so who cares? Thirdly—”

“That’s not a word.”

“Third-fucking-ly. None of that is enough material for a Christmas pageant. I bought this for you to surprise you because you seemed stressed, and I thought this would help you, you know, blow off some steam.”

“You wanted me to have sex with you in that?” Oliver asked, looking like he wanted to be anywhere but here having this conversation.

“God, no. Especially not since you’re texting some other woman and sneaking off and—”

The microphone screeched.

I crossed my arms, and we turned to face the stage.

My dad was so excited he was bouncing up and down like a five-year-old.

“Thank you,” he said in a rush.

Olivier stood next to me, jaw clenched again.

“My lovely wife, Sarah,” my dad said, beaming at my mom, “is the best hostess, best cook, and best mother in town. She has poured her heart and soul into letting her light of creativity and hospitality shine in Harrogate. This beautiful building is a reflection of her creativity, grace, and ambition. I love you so much, honey. Congratulations.”

My mom hugged him.

My dad still looked like he was about to pop. He stood next to Mom, grinning maniacally as she began to thank the architects, contractors, and townspeople.

When my mother finished her speech, my dad practically screamed out, “Noelle’s getting engaged.”

“It’s supposed to be a surprise, James,” my mother said through gritted teeth.

“I know, and I tried to keep it a surprise, but I’m just so excited.”

“Well, come up and do your proposal, Oliver.” My mom motioned to him.

“I’m not marrying you if you’re cheating on me,” I said stubbornly.

“I wasn’t cheating on you,” Oliver yelled. “I was trying to buy you a ring.”

“Oh. But I already have one.” I held up my hand.

“I’m not proposing to you with that,” he scoffed.

“Propose, propose, propose!” the crowd chanted drunkenly.

“Here,” Oliver said, handing me his phone.

There were like a thousand messages between him and the jeweler.

“Oh. Oh! This is a pretty ring,” I said. “Oops! I guess I wasn’t supposed to see that. I’m sorry my parents ruined the surprise, and I’m sorry I was ungrateful.”

“I wanted to make it special for you. It was supposed to be on Christmas Eve,” he admitted.

“I like early Christmas presents.”

Oliver winced. “The ring does not look like that picture, so I need to find you a new one.”

“Propose!”

“Ask her to marry you!” the crowd called.

“I’ll love whatever you pick out,” I assured him. “Even if it’s made out of cookies. Actually, especially if it’s made out of cookies. But seriously.” I gazed up at him. “I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I don’t care about the ring. I just want you. Will you marry me, Oliver?”

He gazed at me adoringly. Then he pulled out a box and got down on one knee.

“Noelle, when you first dumped elf vomit all over me, you said you hated Christmas. But it’s clear that you’re no grinch. You deeply value your community, your relationship with your family, and your friends. You make your town a better place, and you make me a better man. Christmas only comes once a year, but I want to spend every Christmas with you.”

He smirked.

“Also, you’re the only woman I know that can make a green furry suit look damn sexy.” He grinned. “Will you marry me, Noelle, and do me the honor of being my wife?”

He took my hand and slid an enormous ring on it.

His smile looked a little pained as I held the ring up to the light.

“Oh my gosh!” I started laughing and crying.

“I can find you a different one.”

I leaned down and kissed him.

“It’s the scene from *The Grinch!*” I said in excitement. “This is the mountain. This is Whoville. The diamond is all the snow. This is so cool. How did you even come up with this

design?” I slipped it off to admire it more closely. “And it’s even engraved with a quote from the story. I love it! It’s perfect.”

“Come up for pictures,” my dad called. “Free Christmas trees for—”

“No,” Azalea barked, as Oliver helped me up onto the steps of the lodge.

My sister was there, waiting with her hands on Dove’s shoulders.

“Oliver has one more big announcement,” she said to my father.

“Another announcement?” The microphone screeched.

I was confused.

Azalea and Oliver exchanged a look. Oliver took the microphone.

“Dove,” he said, “since Noelle and I are getting married, I wanted to ask if you’d like to be part of the family too. Officially.”

Dove’s mouth dropped open.

I started crying.

Thank you, I mouthed to Azalea.

She nodded.

Dove ran into my arms, and I hugged her to me.

“I love you so much, Dove, and I love you too,” I said to Oliver.

My fiancé hugged us.

“Best Christmas ever,” Dove said happily.

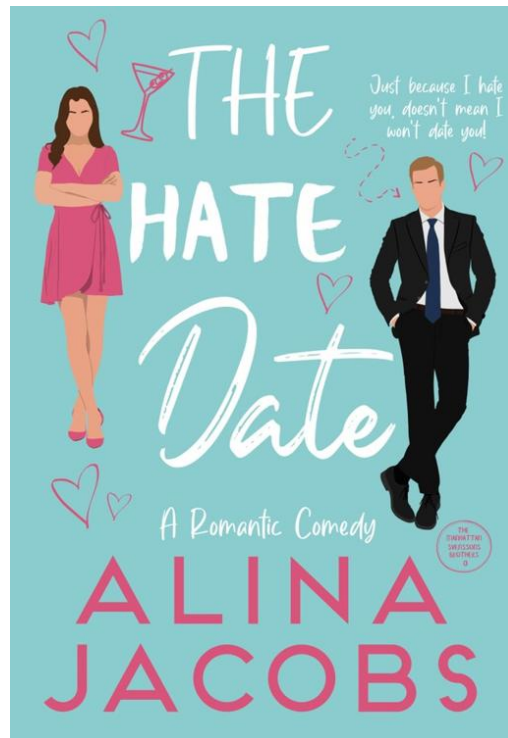
“Totally the best Christmas ever.”

“Spike that eggnog!” Gran called. “Drinks are on Oliver.” She dumped several bottles of rum into a giant vat of eggnog.

“Oh Lord. They’re never going to leave.”

“Merry Christmas to all,” Gran called, “and to all a good
'nog!”

BELLE'S STORY



SYNOPSIS

Guys six feet and over have it made in the dating game.

Girls? Not so much.

Most guys stay far the hell away from tall girls.

The ones who don't? You're getting the real bottom of the barrel dates:

The guy with the height fetish who kept trying to touch my feet.

The dude with mommy issues who burst into tears and cried on my shoulder.

The alphahole billionaire who needs a whole separate town car for his ego.

At first glance (an upward glance because he was TALL!) Greg Svensson seemed perfect.

Six-feet-five of solid muscle with washboard abs and a tower with his name on it, Greg was a guy my parents would actually begrudgingly admire.

I had our future all planned out.

Until he opened his mouth.

It was hate at first sight.

The only thing we have in common is that we're both tall.

He wears bespoke suits.

I wear flats with holes in them.

He runs a big shot investment firm.

I'm trying to start my own company with only bubble gum and circus peanuts.

He likes to show up at my horrible dates and ruin them.

I...pretended I hated when he did that but secretly was thrilled even though it was a little young adult fiction.

Don't judge!

Six-foot tall beggars can't be choosers.

Besides, just because I hate him doesn't mean I won't date him!

This is a prequel to the new Manhattan Svensson brother series. This enemies-to-lovers romantic comedy complete with all the sexy hotness on a six-foot-five stick, a heroine who is your new best friend, and all the laugh-out-loud moments that will make you choke on your wine!

BELLE

My mom always told me to tell guys I was five feet twelve and not six feet tall.

“You don’t want to scare them off!” she would remind me. “Men don’t want tall girls.”

But it wasn’t like lying about being six feet tall made me *not* six feet tall. I wasn’t just taller than most men—I towered over them.

The worst thing about being tall was the comments, and not just from the guys I had dated who would stare at me over drinks, flinching at every motion I made as if they were afraid I was about to sprout up another five inches in front of them.

No, it was also the all-too-common “How’s the weather up there?” (Still raining, just like it is five inches below my head). Or the random “You should be a model!” (No, Karen, I shouldn’t because I like to eat my weight in fettuccine alfredo). Or the always obnoxious “OMG, how did you get so tall?” (Blame my parents; I sure did.)

My five-foot-nine mom would always sigh when she looked up at me and say, “I don’t understand why you’re so tall.”

Really, *Dr.* Diana Frost? Despite your two PhDs, you have failed to grasp the rudimentary concept that tall person plus tall person makes tall person—tall boys *and tall girls*. My mom had probably thought that her family was going to be like one of those sibling groups in the romance novels I would sneak at night, in which the whole puppy pound of brothers

was big and tall, and the one lone sister was short and petite, and her brothers all looked after her and were protective of her.

Ha! I wish!

My brothers were the worst. They were more of a feral cat colony than a basket of puppies—stealing my stuff, fighting, and complaining.

It had been a good thing I was tall. Too busy with their careers to raise six children and too concerned about what the neighbors would say to hire a nanny, my parents left yours truly to single-handedly raise their five very tall, very large, sons. And I hadn't done it because I was sugar and spice and everything nice. I had ruled with an iron fist.

You definitely wanted to be tall and strong when wrestling down a smelly five-foot-eight fourth grader who wouldn't stop playing video games to come eat dinner, or when shot-putting a six-foot-one high school senior's hockey skates at him when he left them in the hallway for the twentieth time.

Sigh. *Praying hands.*

I had been more of a mother to my five younger brothers than our own mother had been. I didn't resent them—after all, I was their big sister. I would always rescue my brothers. That was my thing. Because what else was a six-foot woman to be except for the rescuer?

She definitely wasn't the princess.

I tried to channel that badass rescuer energy as I jogged in the cold along the Hudson River side of Manhattan Island.

I am a warrior. I am a boss.

Except that I hated running. I would much rather be in bed with a book and a bowl of popcorn with Turtle Tracks ice cream at the ready.

As I huffed down the concrete running path, I watched the water. The city had spent the last few years cleaning it up. Now, in warmer weather, people would be swimming, scuba diving, kayaking, and doing other water sports in the river. Not

that the sheltered New York urbanites could handle their newfound water sports access. Just last summer, I saved a kid who had been drowning.

In fact...

I peered at the water. Something human-shaped bobbed up and down about a hundred feet out. His head was back, eyes closed, head and shoulders going under the water for a brief moment then back up.

“Hey!” I yelled, cupping my hands around my mouth, “You okay?”

The man wearing the black diving suit didn’t respond. I looked around. There wasn’t anyone else in the linear park. It was New Year’s Day and freezing cold.

The cold didn’t bother me. Which was great because clearly that diver needed to be rescued.

I shrugged off my thin long-sleeved shirt, capri running pants, and tennis shoes then dove into the water. Shards of ice pricked my skin as I swam toward the drowning man.

There were times—well, most times—when I hated being the tallest girl, especially since my height hadn’t come with model thinness. I was no Princess Diana. I was built like a pioneer woman or a medieval lady knight.

But now I was glad to have my strength. The man was large, and if I were any smaller, I might not be able to drag him to shore.

Once I was a few feet away, I submerged myself in the water to come up under him—the proper technique for rescuing a drowning person—and grabbed him under the armpits.

He started writhing.

Sometimes during a rescue, drowning people panic and try to climb on top of the rescuer. A good pop on the sternum usually stuns them enough to get them to stop.

“Fuck!” the man roared when I used my knuckles to dig into the bone of his breastplate. It was also through a good bit

of solid muscle, which I couldn't fixate on because the diver turned on me in the water, furious.

"Are you fucking out of your mind? Where did you come from?" Gray eyes the color of the winter sky glared at me. "Why are you attacking me?"

"I'm rescuing you!" I sputtered, treading water. "You were drowning!"

"No, I'm not!" he declared.

"Your face was half submerged in the water," I argued.

He held up a breathing regulator.

"Ah. That explains the wet suit. And," I peered at him, "the oxygen tanks. You know those are really supposed to be yellow, but I guess that doesn't match the whole dark, mysterious merman prince aesthetic you have going on here."

"Did you call me a mermaid?" my not-rescue growled.

"Merman," I corrected. "But a prince. Like in a fantasy novel? You know, king of the watery shadow realm, the dashing man from the deep. But not any tentacles or anything like that." Shit. *Stop talking!* "Er...well, all that to say, I thought you needed saving. However, I was sorely misinformed."

I blew out a breath and ended up spraying the merman in the face with the water that was dripping from the wet hair plastered to my head.

The merman grimaced and wiped at his face.

"Sorry about that!" I reached out to brush off his face. Though mostly hidden by the black diving caul, his brow and nose were strong under my palm. I jerked my hand back.

It's sad because this is the most action you've had in the last eighteen months.

"Have a great day and enjoy this beautiful weather!" I croaked at him.

As I pivoted in the water, a man cleared his throat to my right. So as not to completely embarrass myself, I turned my

yelp of surprise into a curse.

The new diver from the deep laughed, then several more men wearing black diving suits surfaced around me, all gray-eyed and strong jawed, though they seemed infinitely more amused than my non-drowning rescue.

“Did you make a friend?” one of the divers joked to the merman.

“Did you find my watch?” the mysterious merman shot back.

“I feel like since we’re all brothers, you should forgive and forget.”

The merman lunged at his brother in the water so quickly it was almost preternatural.

Dayum, he really is a prince of the shadow realm.

“I don’t ever forgive and forget,” the merman warned. “I will hold a grudge until the entire planet is a wasteland.”

Then the merman let out a long, suffering sigh. “I will escort you to shore, ma’am.”

“Bro, this will be the first date you’ve been on in years!” one of his brothers said with a laugh.

Merman turned on him, giving a slight flash of teeth. “And this is going to be your last day on Earth if you don’t find my watch, Liam.”

His brothers sighed and sank back down into the cold depths.

“I don’t need an escort,” I told the merman, feeling foolish.

“The water is freezing,” he said, deep voice bouncing over the choppy waves. “You could pass out and drown, and then I will be blamed, and it will be a horrible inconvenience.”

“It’s cool and refreshing,” I retorted.

“You aren’t even shivering,” he protested, following me as I did the breaststroke back to shore. “That means you’re probably in the early stages of hypothermia.”

“It takes a lot to make me cold,” I said stubbornly. “This is nothing. I went swimming in Antarctica once. I petted a penguin. It was really cute.”

Not as cute as you, Merman!

Shut up, brain!

But the prince of the shadow realm persisted in swimming silently next to me. Which was a problem because I was wearing... not much. Not to mention that I hadn't put on my nice underwear when I had left for my run—not that I owned any. The underwear I had on, I'd owned since high school. It had bunnies on it and holes in some inopportune places. And just because I didn't mind the cold didn't mean that my nipples didn't show it.

I paused at the metal pipes drilled into the side of the concrete embankment that served as a rudimentary ladder.

“Okay, so you showed me back,” I said, starting to panic. I did not need him to see my terrible taste in undergarments.

“Do you need help?” Merman asked. Water droplets clung to his eyelashes.

I wished I could see his whole face.

I wish I could see the rest of him.

That thought did not help the nipple situation.

I blinked at him.

“Getting out?” He motioned.

“Nope,” I said, continuing to tread water. I was annoyed to see he did it a lot easier than me. “Seriously, frog prince, you can leave.”

“Ma'am, I think the cold has affected you more than you think,” he said, jaw tense. “Let me take off my flippers and—”

“Cheater,” I muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“You have flippers. That's cheating!” I said loudly.

His mouth fell open. “Cheating at what?”

“Swimming. Treading water.”

“Are you going to get out, or am I going to have to drag you out?” he demanded.

“Don’t touch me!” I shrieked.

“Then get out of the river on your own accord.”

I continued to tread water. “Maybe I want to stay in a little longer.”

The merman moved, the flippers giving him an unfair advantage, and grabbed me around the waist, his strong arms half hauling me out of the water.

I grabbed for a rung of the pipe ladder.

“Where are your clothes?” he said in horror.

“I was performing a rescue!” I yelled as I inelegantly hauled myself the few feet out of the water to land on the concrete walkway like a beached whale. “Time was of the essence.”

“I fucking hate New York City,” the diver said, shaking his head. “It’s full of lunatics.”

“Right back atcha, bud,” I said as the river water dripped down my face.

GREG

I hated most things. I hated networking mixers, price stickers on books that leave a residue when you remove them, and all the stupid names for the coffees at Starbucks. I also hated most people. If I didn't actively remind myself that I loved my brothers, I'd probably hate them, too, especially when they chewed noisily.

"It is not lunchtime," I snapped at Liam when I walked into my office to find my five brothers. "And people who lost my two-million-dollar, one-of-a-kind Patek Phillippe watch in the Hudson River then failed to find it should especially not be eating in my conference room in my tower at a time that is not a designated mealtime."

Liam stuffed the remaining quarter of his bagel sandwich in his mouth, jaw working furiously.

"I'm not eating," he said, bits of lettuce flying out of his mouth.

I'm going to have an aneurysm. Or a stroke. Or kill my brother.

"You should have taken that hot blonde girl on a date," Walker said.

"Did you get her number?" Carl drawled as I set my bag down.

I gave him my best glare. He gulped and sat up straighter.

"Care to try that again?" I asked.

“I have your coffee, boss,” Carl mumbled.

“Why do we have to have a meeting on New Year’s Day?” Beck complained.

“You could have stayed home in Harrogate,” I reminded him, taking my seat at the head of the conference table. “In fact, you can go back there right now. Archer bought all our younger brothers ten thousand dollars’ worth of fireworks for Christmas, and I’m sure you could be of use supervising the ensuing shit show.”

“Hard pass! I don’t really want to babysit,” Liam said, leaning back in his chair and wiping the back of his mouth with his hand.

I loved my brothers. I really did. But, my god, they drove me crazy. It wasn’t just their bad attitudes, lack of attention to things I considered important, or their terrible ideas, but also the fact that there were so goddamn many of them.

A by-product of a polygamist cult-leader father and his many wives, I had numerous half brothers, most of whom ran feral in the quaint small town of Harrogate a few hours away. My half brother Hunter did absolutely nothing to corral them, forcing me to trek out there on a biweekly basis just to keep some semblance of order.

The adults currently sitting around the table were my full brothers. Beck, the second oldest after me, was emotionally on a hair trigger and had inherited our father’s explosive temper. Mike, the third oldest, would lie to my face that he was going to do something then turn around and just not do it. Walker, next in line, was capable of following directions when he felt like it, which was not often. Then came Liam, who back talked and considered himself creative. Sitting next to me was the youngest, Carl, who had no goddamn sense, and it was a miracle he could make it through the day.

“I would have thought you were on a date with the half-naked girl you pulled out of the water instead of sitting in this boring meeting,” Liam said.

“Walker can track her down,” Mike said with a snicker.

“No,” I said. “Walker is supposed to be working on the collaboration with Svensson PharmaTech, not playing internet stalker matchmaker.”

“Funny you should mention matchmaking,” Liam said, sitting up. “I have your speed-date ticket here.”

“You must have lost your mind if you think I am going on a speed date,” I said flatly.

“But you have to.” Beck gave me a slight smirk. “That’s the only way to run into Martin Shaw.”

“I’ve been monitoring his social media,” Walker added, “just like you ordered. He’s big into dating right now.”

“No.”

“But we haven’t been able to score a meeting with him,” Mike reminded me. “I have several new hotels for Greyson Hotel Group to build. I need him to invest his fund in the building costs. We can’t just sit around waiting for him to finally decide to stop yacht shopping and to schedule a meeting with us. Everyone in Manhattan is going after his account. We need an in.”

“If you don’t, some other firm is going to swoop in and nab his investment,” Beck said.

“I’ll do it if you don’t want to,” Carl offered.

“Absolutely not,” I barked. “Liam, send me those tickets. I’ll have that contract signed this time next week.”

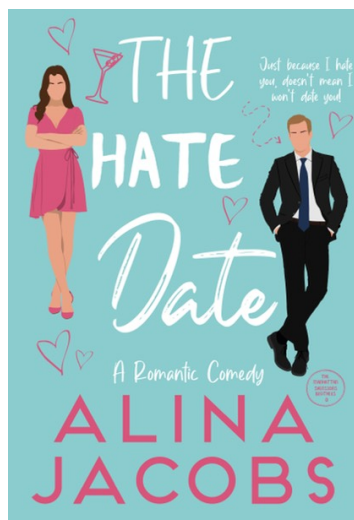
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GOOD ELF GONE WRONG SNEAK PEAK

Want more holiday romance? Read *Good Elf Gone Wrong*!



SYNOPSIS

When you catch your fiancé cheating on you with your sister on Christmas Eve, it's time to torch down the North Pole.

I've always been the good girl—the anti Scrooge—the one who sacrifices for her guests, bakes cookies for her neighbors, and stays late after a party to clean up.

I don't mind. I like being on the nice list.

I kept smiling when I caught my fiancé coming down my sister's chimney on Christmas Eve.

I gave polite congratulations when they got engaged on Christmas morning.

And I even offered to help decorate for their holiday wedding despite the fact that was supposed to be *my* dream wedding.

But when my sister cuts up our great-grandmother's one-hundred-year-old wedding dress and turns it into a skank show, even though that was the dress I was going to wear on *my* wedding day?

Well, this elf is torching down the North Pole.

And what better way to get revenge than giving those cheaters a taste of their own medicine?

This good elf is bringing the bad boy home for Christmas.

Hudson is a six-foot-five, coldhearted, tattooed bad elf with a perpetual sneer and washboard abs.

He's exactly my sister's type.

And he's going to help me nuke her wedding from orbit on the night before Christmas.

What he is not supposed to do is grab my ass in the kitchen while I bake gingerbread.

Or crawl in my bed half naked.

And he's definitely not supposed to smirk and tell me to commit to our fake relationship right before he goes down on me.

Guess there's a reason the good elves stay far away from the bad.

Good elves of Christmas unite! We're ogling the tattooed chests of shirtless bad boys, baking massive amounts of cookies, drinking all the wine, and trying to survive recently divorced grandmothers who have a pathological obsession with our love lives. This standalone holiday romantic comedy has all the Christmas cheer you can fit in your stocking and a happily ever after, guaranteed!

PROLOGUE

“**S**anta, baby, don’t come down my chimney. I want you to go through the back door.”

What in the fresh Christmas hell?

I almost dropped the Christmas-morning cinnamon rolls that I had left to proof in the oven. I glanced at the clock. It was 11:48 on the night before Christmas, and my freshly divorced grandmother was watching holiday-themed porn in the living room.

“Why can’t she watch Hallmark movies like normal grandmothers?” I complained under my breath.

My parents’ house was large, and Granny Murray had the TV volume in the living room turned way up on account of her hearing aids. The woman who was getting her Christmas present early was moaning loudly, accompanied by a rhythmic *slap slap* noise.

I wiped my hands. The rest of my large family was already asleep, dreaming of the big day tomorrow.

“*Yeah, Santa! Give me your huge cock,*” the porn star gasped.

I ground my teeth. Christmas was my absolute favorite holiday, and a big part of that was because it was wholesome. The yuletide season took me back to a time when things were simple, when my grandmother would host lovely Christmas dinners and not porno viewings. Now Gran was ruining it by

“making up for lost time after a waste of a marriage,” as she put it.

“She’s probably triggered that you’re having the wedding of your dreams with the man of your dreams tomorrow. Cut her some slack.” I tried to talk myself off the ledge as I walked quickly through the historic house.

The sex noises echoed through the decorated hallways. Granny Murray was going to wake up everyone, and I needed people well rested on Christmas, and not just for opening presents. My dream wedding was happening in fifteen hours, and it was going to be a packed day. I’d been planning my holiday wedding since I was a little girl, and nothing was going to ruin it for me.

Strangely, when I walked into the living room, Granny Murray was nowhere to be found. The room was dark, the TV off, the only light coming from the Christmas tree in front of one of the large windows.

The porno noises were loud and clear, though.

I peered in the dimly lit room. Was it a smart speaker? Was my little brother playing a prank on me?

“Oh, Santa!” a woman cried.

My mouth fell open.

“Kelly?” I whispered in confusion as I looked down.

My sister didn’t hear me because she was getting her jolly holiday on with some guy who was half hidden by the oversized Douglas fir.

My face burned, and I stepped back, balling my hands up in fists.

“Hit me harder, Santa!”

My sister was going to wake up my mother, who would freak out, though probably on me for allowing my sister to bring some random guy into the house.

Ever since we were children, I had been blamed for my sister’s mistakes. Kelly was the problem child—spilling juice

all over the floor, coloring on the walls, sneaking out for parties, and bringing home strange men who had trashed the house and stolen my stuff. My parents had never done anything about it except tut-tut and ask me to keep a closer eye on Kelly and be a better role model for my little sister.

As if my sister could change.

This, however, was a bridge too far. It was Christmas Eve, for goodness' sake!

I straightened up. Well, not too much. I was in my Christmas PJs and braless. Things were a bit saggy, but I was going to be a married woman tomorrow, gosh darn it, and Kelly could not ruin Christmas or my wedding with her hookups.

“Kelly,” I said in my best eldest sister voice, not that Kelly had ever paid it any mind. “You cannot bring strange men here, especially not on Christmas.”

My sister responded by begging for her hookup to work her clit.

Said hookup was wearing a Santa hat that bobbed as he grunted rhythmically. He was partially blocked by the Christmas tree, but I could make out the slight pouch of his stomach as he increased the pace. His Rudolph boxers, custom embroidered, were down his pasty thighs. Come to think of it, those boxers looked an awful lot like the ones I'd made for James last Christmas ...

“What the—”

“Fuuuuckkk!” My curse words were drowned out by James's orgasm. My fiancé groaned as he emptied his load in my sister. Yeah, no condom apparently, because we were putting all our faith in St. Nick this Christmas Eve.

“You—you're—” I stammered.

“Oh my god,” my sister slurred as she orgasmed with a performative scream. “Oh my god, that was *sooooo gooooooood*, James!”

Her fur-lined Santa hat drooped over her head. She balanced on one arm to brush it and her hair back while my fiancé grunted.

“Damn. You’re a better fuck than your sister,” James wheezed as he grabbed my sister’s ass. “You always give me a hell of a workout.”

Kelly laughed drunkenly. Then she peered at me blearily in the soft, colorful light from the Christmas tree.

“Oh, fuck, Gracie. I thought you were asleep,” my sister slurred as she tried to use the Christmas tree to pull herself upright. She tugged at her party outfit, a skimpy, glittery, wine-red dress, because of course she skipped out on the family Christmas Eve dinner to go to a club.

I stood there feeling like I was about to puke up all the Christmas cookies and milk I’d consumed earlier that evening. My mouth opened and closed.

“You always go to bed early. Why are you awake?” Kelly demanded.

“I had to check on the cinnamon rolls,” I finally whispered.

James poked his head out around the Christmas tree. “Shit.”

“Yeah, shit, James.” My chin wobbled.

I couldn’t process what I had seen, didn’t want to believe it, didn’t want to believe that my fiancé was just having sex with my own sister underneath the Christmas tree.

“This isn’t what it looks like, muffin,” he said defensively, using the pet name I secretly hated because he always liked to poke my stomach when he said it. He reached out a finger for my midsection. I slapped his hand away.

“I always made sure you had a home-cooked meal when you came back from work even though I was working too,” I warbled, the tears making the lights on the Christmas tree blur and spin. “I clean the apartment, take your clothes to the dry cleaners, and hem your pants.” The words were coming out in

ugly, heaving gasps. “I don’t understand how you could do this to me, James. I love you.”

That was a lie. I did understand how he could cheat on me.

It was because of my sister.

Men always found her sexier, prettier, more exciting than me. Shoot, it wasn’t just men—family, friends, even random retail workers—everyone flocked to my extroverted, pretty sister. She was my dad’s favorite. Even though she ruined my stuff and had slept with my last two boyfriends and now my fiancé, I was expected to turn the other cheek, be the bigger person.

“You promised you liked me better than her,” I cried to James, the words sounding small and petulant.

“Maybe if you weren’t so boring and stuck-up, Gracie, you’d keep a man.” My sister rolled her eyes.

“I am not stuck-up,” I yelled at my sister. “You just ruin everything.”

“I’m still going to marry you,” James said, sounding annoyed as he pulled on his pants and tucked his shirt back in. “Don’t worry.”

I shuddered. He didn’t even wash off his penis.

Then I had a horrible thought.

“You don’t have sex with Kelly then come to bed with me, do you?”

“You’re such a nag,” James complained.

“Do you even shower after?” I screeched.

“Hell no,” my sister scoffed, fumbling around for her clutch and pulling out a makeup compact. “He goes straight to sleep. He likes to smell me on him. Don’t you, big boy?” She reached behind her to squeeze James’s Christmas package.

My breath was coming out in hysterical gasps.

There were footsteps on the stairs. My family was awake.

The part of me that liked to pretend that everything was A-OK and under control just wanted to sweep my sister and fiancé off to bed and tell my parents we had only been enjoying a late-night Christmas movie and bonding.

I am supposed to get married tomorrow. Isn't it best to just pretend that this is all a bad dream?

“Who’s having sex?” Granny Murray asked with way too much energy for someone in her eighties. “It smells like a strip club in here.”

“*Mom,*” my mother, Bethany, scolded.

My mom wrapped her robe around herself then peered at me. “Why are you down here with no clothes on, Gracie? What is all this commotion, you three?”

My dad patted me on the arm then saw my sister and rushed to give her a hug. “You’re back, Kelly! I was so worried about you, out late at night.”

My brother yawned. “Gracie, is the casserole ready? I’m starving.”

“The breakfast casserole is for brunch. I can heat up some leftovers for you,” I offered, my voice sounding far away.

Just keep the peace.

I was the eldest daughter. When the boat started to rock, I steadied it. I was the mature one, the third parent, the good child who made it all worth it.

“Did you check on those cinnamon rolls?” my mom asked. “The dough’s not getting too big, is it? It could overflow in the oven.”

You make one mistake when you’re eight ...

“Whose underwear is this?” Granny Murray asked, using a candy cane to pick up a pair of lacy black panties.

There were more footsteps on the stairs. My aunts and cousins were piling into the living room.

My cousin Dakota gave me a worried look. “Why are you crying, Gracie?”

You can still have your dream wedding, I reminded myself, trying to keep it together.

But James was no longer my dream groom.

“Gracie, are these yours?” Granny Murray waved the panties in my face.

“They’re too small to be hers. Those are Kelly’s,” my cousin Connie said loudly.

Several of my female cousins gasped.

“Gracie,” James warned.

“And I would be careful, Gran,” I said, my voice taking on a shrill tone. “Those panties are a biohazard and soaked with James’s fresh, hot cum.”

My brother made a gagging noise. One of my aunts clapped her hands over my younger cousin’s ears.

“Gracie,” my mother scolded. “Why are you borrowing Kelly’s underwear? You received a lot of nice pairs at your bridal shower.”

Are you freaking ...

St. Nick save me.

“Kelly and James were fucking under the Christmas tree,” I said loudly and pointed at my sister and fiancé.

“I’m sure it was a mistake, right?” my dad asked desperately. “Too much eggnog, eh, James?”

“They’ve been having an affair.” I sobbed.

“I’ll get the shotgun,” one of my uncles said with a chuckle. “We’ll have roast cheater for Christmas dinner.”

Finally. For once, my family was rallying around me.

But it was not meant to be.

James put his arm around Kelly.

“I just want you to know,” he said, in a voice that for some reason I was just now noticing was annoyingly whiny, “that I’m sorry you all had to find out about me and Kelly this way.”

I think of all of you as family. We were going to wait until after Christmas season was over to tell everyone, but it's out now. Kelly and I are in love."

My sister beamed at me.

"What do you mean, after the Christmas season?" I said, hyperventilating. "We are supposed to get married tomorrow, James. You mean you were going to tell everyone *after* we got married that you were in love with another woman?"

James sighed heavily, like I was the problem here, like I was the one making things difficult and being childish.

"I was going to let you have your little Christmas wedding moment, Gracie," he said to me condescendingly, "then offer a quiet annulment."

"Bullshit!" I screamed at him. "Bullshit! You were going to keep fucking my sister behind my back until she got bored of you and bounced. Then you were going to mope around like a man-child and force me to take care of you and stroke your ego back into some semblance of function, just enough for you to attract some other pretty airhead with fake tits."

James scoffed. "Her breasts aren't fake."

"Yes, they are. My dad bought them for her for her eighteenth birthday."

"Kelly has self-esteem issues," my dad fretted.

"No. She has the issue of sleeping with someone else's fiancé." I turned on James. "I was going to marry you, you lying rat. And if I hadn't walked in on you coming in Kelly's chimney—*excuse me*, back door—then I never would have known. I would have married you and been blissfully unaware that you had no fucking respect for me."

"Gracie," my mother chastised, "can you please watch your language?"

"No, I won't, because James is a fucking asshole." I twisted the engagement ring off my finger and threw it at him. "This was supposed to be the best Christmas ever. I was supposed to get married."

“This was a very expensive ring,” James scolded, bending down to pick it up.

He walked over to me, pretending like he was going to hand it back. As he did, he hissed in my ear, “Unless you want your big secret to get out, just shut the fuck up and smile.”

My big secret? After the night I’d just had, having everyone know my secret was going to send me over the edge. I’d drown myself in peppermint hot chocolate.

My family looked at me in concern.

“I might have been too hasty. It is Christmas,” I said weakly, feeling dizzy. “And the holidays are about family, so if James and Kelly are happy, I’m happy.”

“Really?” Dakota was appalled. “Gracie. I know you’re a doormat, but come on.”

“I’m sorry, Dakota.” My stomach was churning.

Maybe I did need to cut back on the holiday sweets.

“She’s gonna puke,” my brother hollered while my male cousins all freaked out.

I looked around desperately. I had just cleaned the living room rug, goddamn it, and the stockings had already been filled.

“Gracie, go outside,” my mom yelled.

“Open a window!” my brother shouted as my male cousins hooted.

Granny Murray handed me a novelty ceramic Santa boot.

As I puked my guts out to cries of disgust from my family, the grandfather clock began to chime.

It was December 25th, and my life had completely imploded.

Merry freaking Christmas.

GRACIE

“Only two and a half weeks until Christmas,” I announced, opening up the door on my Advent calendar decorated with smiling mice celebrating the holidays, to reveal a mini wheel of brie.

Pugnog, who was my sister’s reject Christmas present two years ago, woke with a snort and made grunting noises, begging for a treat.

“One of the budget airlines is offering cheap flights to the Bahamas,” Dakota said to me as I took a bite of the cheese and tried to rally myself.

“I cannot spend Christmas on a beach. That’s not very festive. I need snow and cold and spiced wine to recharge. A person only has so many Christmas seasons on this earth, and I want to make the best of them.” I gave the pug a bite of cheese.

“There’s a happy medium between going to the Caribbean for Christmas and planning and executing a yuletide wedding for your sister and your ex-fiancé. Why don’t you compromise and go to a ski resort?” my cousin coaxed. “Hot cocoa, hot tubs, hot ski instructors.”

“Gracie.” James poked his head out of his corner office.

I shrank in my seat.

“You need to rage quit,” Dakota whispered. “You should have stormed out eleven months ago.” She was my cousin and

best friend since before I could remember, and she was angrier than I was at James and Kelly.

“It’s my dad’s company. He begged me to stay on and help,” I reminded her.

“Then Uncle Rob needs to pay you more.” She shook my chair armrest.

I made a face at my cousin then scurried into James’s office. Though he did the least amount of work, James had the biggest, nicest office on the floor, with a view down to the snowy Manhattan streets.

My ex-fiancé was sitting at his desk, scrolling through tour packages for his upcoming honeymoon.

No one would admit it, but I had a sneaking suspicion he was just recycling our honeymoon plans for my sister.

You’re in a work environment, I reminded myself. Sure, it’s your dad’s company, but let’s try to stay professional.

“How can I help you, James?”

“Just want to make sure that everything’s good to go for the next few weeks. We can’t drop the ball with Roscoe Energy Solutions. They’re our biggest client.”

Correction. They were our only client.

“Did you have anything specific you were concerned about?” I asked James, pausing to watch him flounder for a response.

My ex had no idea what went on at EnerCheck Inc.

He waved his hand. “We just need to make sure that we’re hitting the benchmarks and that we’re on schedule for delivery. We can’t let anything fall through the cracks over the holidays.”

“We offer software monitoring solutions, and we don’t have any big rollouts planned,” I said to him slowly. “The last big update went out in early November. Next one is scheduled for March, so ...”

James scowled at me.

“Okay, then why did you ask me if you already know?”

“You’re the boss, and you called me in here,” I reminded him, resisting the urge to tidy up his desk for him and pick up the empty cups of coffee.

I am not a doormat. Well, not a big doormat. I am a small one.

“I called you in here because ... I need you to ...” More angry floundering.

Maybe Dakota was right and I should just quit and leave him in the lurch. Unfortunately, my dad had a number of our less-success-inclined extended family members on payroll, and they relied on the money. Not to mention the eldest daughter in me couldn’t just tank the company like that.

“I need you to ... the maintenance guys are coming by to check the heating, and you have to make sure they have access to ... what they need access to.”

I glanced through the glass wall of his office, where I saw a man wearing gray coveralls and carrying a ladder. He plodded toward us through the rows of empty desks.

I opened the office door and called out, “We didn’t call in a work order. You all have a glitch in your system. I told your colleague who was here last week, and he promised to get it fixed. I’m sorry you came all the way down here, but you need to leave.”

“My apologies, ma’am,” he said, setting down the ladder next to the door. “I called and confirmed with your boss.”

“He doesn’t know what goes on around here,” I said, before I could stop myself.

“The assistants always run the show, don’t they, man?” The maintenance worker grinned at James.

“Actually, I’m a project manager,” I corrected.

The man muttered an apology and backed away.

“Just let him look around.” James blew out a breath.

“I’m not letting the company get charged for work we didn’t order. Merry Christmas,” I told the maintenance man firmly and directed him back to the front door.

James rolled his eyes.

“You’re so nitpicky.”

“I’m trying to keep this business afloat.”

“It’s fine.”

From James’s point of view, the company was fine, but the rest of us employees were working overtime for no pay to keep up with the demand from the big energy company that was our bread and butter.

“Did you think about my idea for giving out Christmas bonuses?” I asked him.

“I said I’d think about it, didn’t I?” My ex crossed his arms.

“You’ve been saying that since Halloween, and here it is, Christmas—”

“I told you that we can’t afford it,” he snapped.

“Actually,” I said, tapping on my tablet, “we could afford it if you would just—”

“I have a wedding to worry about,” James interrupted, standing up and reaching for his fancy ski jacket that was hanging on the coatrack. “Your mom wants to know what time your bus gets in. She has the big holiday party planned and needs your help.”

“You know how the buses are,” I said, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice. “I’ll get there when I get there.”

“I’m tired of your attitude,” James scolded me while I struggled to keep a professional face. “This is Kelly’s big moment, and you need to be a good big sister and support her. Remember—”

“*I know.*”

A few hours after I had discovered James doing the reindeer nasty with my own sister, he had proposed to her, in front of the Christmas tree, on Christmas morning, just like he'd done with me. And I'd just sat there and taken it, pretending I was happy for them. Because the alternative was even worse humiliation.

He hadn't used the ring he'd given me. Not out of respect for me, of course. When I'd went to have the diamond ring appraised, the jeweler had told me the stone was cubic zirconia and basically worthless.

Somehow, he'd convinced my mother to let him use her great-aunt's vintage ring, the one I had wanted that he had claimed my mom wouldn't give him. My preferred ring would have been Great-Grandma Cecelia's, but that had been stolen and sold by one of her daughters in the '70s.

"I'll see you at the party, Gracie," James said. "Bethany promised you'd make my favorite lobster dip, too, so don't forget to stop at the store for what you need. I have to go. Traffic's getting bad."

He didn't even offer to drive me up to our small hometown in Rhode Island. Not that I wanted to be stuck in a car with him, but still.

I steamed as I went back to my desk. I did not have a window view and instead looked at the men's bathroom door that no one ever freaking closed.

"There was a suspicious lack of quitting," Dakota said.

"If I left, no one would manage the company," I reminded Dakota, "and your job would be toast."

"I have no problem going down with the ship after you set it on fire," she assured me.

Because of my sister's upcoming wedding, the office was empty, with the few cousins that actually did come into the office begging off with the excuse that they needed to get hair, nails, and spray tans done.

"You sure you can hold down the fort for the next few days?"

She shrugged. “Roscoe Energy Solutions slows down in December because everyone has to burn their PTO.”

“Must be nice to have an actual PTO system instead of people just randomly leaving for a three-week vacation with no notice, and then when you complain, they tell your mom,” I said tartly.

I sat down at my desk to compose a strongly worded email to the maintenance company about showing up at the office when I hadn’t authorized any work. Then I responded to a few questions from our client and made a grocery list.

“Look,” Dakota said, turning her laptop screen to me. “Two hundred dollars to fly to Switzerland. Ski resorts, fondue. You could meet a rich Swiss count.”

“Or I can ride on a very slow, very smelly bus, go back to my parents’ house, and make lobster dip for James.”

“You have got to show some backbone,” my cousin sighed.

I rubbed my forehead. It was greasy. “You know I can’t.”

“Your secret’s not that bad.”

“I just can’t, okay?”

I stood up. The pug followed me to the break room.

“Seriously,” Dakota said, racing after me. “You need to go scorched earth. Shoot, sabotage the wedding.”

“I can’t do that,” I said quietly as I pulled my Advent cheese calendar out of the fridge.

I opened the paper door for tomorrow’s cheese. “There, see? I’m living on the edge,” I said as I shared the wedge of cheddar with Pugnog.

“Girl ...”

My phone chimed with a photo from Kelly of her wedding dress, along with a list of demands from her describing, among other things, how some of the lace was fraying and she needed me to fix it because the seamstress wanted her to pay for more alterations.

“I see the theme of this wedding is holiday wedding skank. Did Kelly chop that dress up to pieces and hot glue on some silk?” Dakota asked, looking over my shoulder.

I frowned at the photo. Then FaceTime started ringing.

“Why aren’t you responding?” My sister was snappish on the video call. “I’m getting married, and it’s a disaster. I cannot believe that seamstress ...” My sister didn’t even say hello.

“I thought you were wearing Great-grandma Cecelia’s dress?” Dakota interrupted.

“This is her dress.” Kelly fluffed out her hair. “I upcycled it. Isn’t it amazing?”

I pressed a hand to my chest and sat down heavily in a chair.

“I just made a TikTok post of the before and after.” My sister texted me a link.

The first photo was a black-and-white of our great-grandmother in 1912, wearing an elegant Edwardian white wedding dress flowing with handmade lace. The classy portrait then transitioned into the holiday skanktacular.

Tears were threatening to spill.

“That was my dress, the dress I was going to wear to my wedding,” I said quietly. “Everyone knew that ever since I was a little girl, I had wanted to get married in that dress. I planned my wedding around that dress.”

Of course, when Kelly stole my fiancé, she also decided that she just had to be married in that dress.

“I can piece what’s left together into a veil or a handkerchief or a small bag maybe,” I said, trying not to panic.

“Well, you can’t tear up my dress for that.” Kelly made a face.

“That’s fine. I’ll use what’s left.”

“I didn’t need the rest of the dress, so I tossed it.”

“Kelly, how could you?”

“God, you’re so emotional,” Kelly snapped. “You didn’t even fit in that dress. Besides, it’s cool to upcycle. I got a ton of comments on my post.”

“You don’t upcycle a vintage dress,” Dakota shot at her. “I can’t believe you did this.”

Kelly turned her nose up. “My astrologist said to expect that there were going to be people out there trying to tear me down and make me feel small because they were jealous that I was getting married. Mom already promised that you would fix my dress, Gracie, so I’m putting everything in your room. You’ll see where the lace isn’t attached right.”

“Does Grandma Astelle know about this?” I choked out. She had jealously guarded that dress.

“Daddy talked to her and convinced her to let me upcycle it.”

Ah, the life of the favorite youngest daughter of a favorite youngest son. With their powers combined, my sister would have anything she wanted.

“Kelly, do you want the red or—” I heard my mom ask.

My sister hung up abruptly to talk with her.

“Did you know?” Dakota said in alarm.

“No,” I sobbed. “I didn’t know she was going to destroy it.”

“Maybe you can piece it back together. You know how to sew, right?” Dakota rubbed circles on my back.

“Not like that.” My shoulders shook as I sobbed. “I can’t believe Kelly did that.”

“That fucking bitch. Sorry, I know she’s your sister, but she is a fucking bitch,” Dakota said defiantly. “You can’t let this go. Stealing your fiancé is one thing. Honestly? James kind of sucked, and I never liked him. Kelly did you a favor. But destroy a hundred-plus-year-old dress? That bitch needs to be cunt punted into next Christmas.”

“I can’t.” I wiped my eyes.

Pugnog pressed his cold nose against my ankle.

“Stop being such a pushover,” Dakota rallied. “Shoot, I’ll dump marinara sauce all over that wedding dress if you want me to. Just say the word.”

I shook my head numbly.

“Seriously?” Dakota yelled, banging her hand on the table. “You’re just going to let this slide?”

“No,” I said, ripping open another door on the Advent calendar. “But only because I don’t want whatever’s left of my great-grandmother’s dress to smell like oregano. Besides, Kelly deserves so much worse.”

GRACIE

What in all honesty could I do to Kelly?

I was her unpaid wedding planner; therefore, I knew all the vendors had already been booked, decorations ordered, catering menu approved, and cake deposit paid. There wasn't much left to sabotage.

"Just face it," I told myself angrily. "You're not going to do anything. You never do anything. You're going to eat the rest of the cheese in this Advent calendar, then you're going to go home and hide in the kitchen while your family talks shit about you losing yet another boyfriend to your sister, and then come the New Year, you'll be back at your desk doing everyone's work for them."

It wasn't fair that my sister could ruin my life over and over and everyone still loved her and catered to her and gave Kelly everything she wanted.

I blinked back tears. A long-haul bus trip was bad enough without being the crying girl.

Just my luck, it was a full bus. I wasn't even going to get a row to myself.

"Watch it!" a woman snapped at me as I pushed my way to the back of the bus, looking for an empty seat.

There was only one open seat in the back.

An angry-looking man in a worn leather jacket and heavy boots was manspreading in an aisle seat, arms crossed, reading a book. He ignored me when I stopped in front of him.

I cleared my throat.

“Excuse me.”

Pugnog barked, though since he was a pug, it was more of a wheeze.

The man acted like he didn’t even hear me.

“Excuse me,” I said, louder this time. “Is this seat taken?”

The man, wearing a black skullcap, looked up at me, annoyed.

I shivered as his pale-gray, almost-silver eyes met mine. There was a scar on his forehead and another under his jaw.

Dakota’s right. You need to grow a backbone.

“Could you scoot over so I can sit?” I asked firmly.

The man sighed in annoyance and made a big show of closing his book and standing up. He didn’t even offer to put my bag up above on the rack and instead stood there, arms crossed, and watched me struggle with it.

What a dick, I thought as I wedged myself into the window seat.

The man sat down beside me and resumed his reading and manspreading.

I hugged the window as the bus rumbled to life and we turned out of the bus depot.

My seat neighbor read, I stewed, and Pugnog snored loudly and drooled as the bus drove at a snail’s pace north from New York City to Rhode Island.

I bet James was halfway there already, driving the company car, because, of course, my father was going to side with my ex-fiancé over me, his firstborn child.

I didn’t even get paid enough to take the train. Whenever I had asked my dad for a raise, he hemmed and hawed and say that it would mean he’d have to take money from someone else in the family. Like that was some great loss. Shoot, Kelly

was on the payroll, and she barely did anything besides sleep with my fiancé. Now she'd gone and torn up that dress.

Even though I knew it was going to make me cry, I opened my phone and stared at the photo of my great-grandmother in the handmade lace wedding dress, her hair piled high on her head in an Edwardian pouf.

Dakota was right; my sister needed to pay. I'd suffered because of Kelly for the last twenty-five years. A woman had to take a stand. Lines needed to be drawn.

A plan, a plan, Gracie, you need a plan.

I fished out my Advent calendar, bumping Mr. Leather-Jacket with my elbow.

He gave me a dirty look.

"You can stay on your side of the armrest then," I muttered under my breath.

See? Growing a backbone.

I pulled out the calendar and opened another door. This one had Muenster cheese.

It wasn't fair, I thought as I angrily chewed the cheese. James wasn't even Kelly's type. I stuffed some of the cheese in Pugnog's stunted jaw, and he chewed noisily, snorting like a piglet and drooling.

I could feel the anger radiating off of my seat neighbor.

Kelly liked bad boys, guys like, well, like Mr. Manspreader over there, whose knee was practically halfway over my seat. I scrunched closer to the window, which only served to allow his legs to splay even more.

Was it too late to book a vacation? Christmas in my hometown of Maplewood Falls was my favorite time of year, but instead of being a newlywed with a baby on the way, I was going to watch my sister marry my ex while all my nosy aunts asked me when I was going to start dating again.

Tears dripped down my nose.

I ripped open another door on the Advent calendar, much to Pugnog's delight and Mr. Leather Jacket's annoyance. I took a bite of the sharp Manchego. This time next year, Kelly was going to be pregnant. I'd have to listen to everyone make comments about how they always thought I would be the one to give my parents their first grandchild because I was the one who liked to bake, sew, take care of people, and decorate. My mom would declare Kelly her favorite daughter ever, and I'd have to listen to my sister be insufferably smug about motherhood.

Bet she steals my baby name, too, and butchers the spelling, just like she did that vintage dress.

I straight up ripped off three more doors and stuffed a fistful of cheese in my mouth.

Pugnog slobbered and whined then fell backward onto the lap of Mr. Doesn't-Respect-Other-People's-Personal-Space.

"Can you control your mutant dog?" he snarled in a deep voice, deeper than I was used to after dealing with James and all the Manhattan suits all day long.

"Can you control the location of your knees?" I shrieked, cheese flying out of my mouth.

Pugnog ran for it, leaking slobber everywhere.

"This is disgusting." My seatmate's mouth twisted into a snarl.

"Take the train next time," I snapped at him.

It was very unlike me. Usually I tried to be nice to everyone, but today had been a very bad day.

Focus on your revenge.

Unfortunately, I wasn't the type of person who dreamed up elaborate revenge plots. Instead, I planned my dream house—a historic Victorian with a garden and a big fancy kitchen and lots of children.

Now all of that was going to my sister. Ten years from now, I would still be sitting on the bus with a selfish,

egotistical seat neighbor while my sister waltzed through life, stomping all over my dreams and ruining my Christmas.

I cannot deal with her being pregnant next year, I decided. It's going to trigger a mental breakdown, and who knows what I might do? I have to break up their relationship. I'm not doing it for me. I'm doing it for the world. I must find a way to stop that Christmas wedding from happening.

And suddenly, like reindeer on a rooftop, an idea appeared. An awful idea. A wonderful, awful idea, because I was now in my Grinch season.

My sister was always boy crazy. Unlike me, who wanted to settle down with my soulmate, my sister was always looking for the next big thing, and that next big thing usually resided in the pants of a hot male, preferably one with lots of tattoos, a terrible attitude, and no respect for authority.

James was not her type. I had a hunch that she was disappointed with his bad jokes, his pudgy shortness, sweater vests, and lackluster bedroom performance. The only reason she was with him was because of the excitement of stealing something that belonged to me and the drama surrounding the whole situation.

But that was last year. As we counted down to Christmas, this was officially the longest relationship my sister had ever been in. The wedding excitement was waning. Kelly was staring down the barrel of a boring suburban life, because that's what James wanted—a housewife to take care of him, suffer through his demands, and suck his dick every once in a while. My sister wanted glam, drama, screaming fights in the middle of the street, jealous men, passionate sex, and a whirlwind romance.

All I needed to do was slide an ideal man in front of her, one who looked like he had stepped out of her wildest fantasies, a tall, muscular, tattooed bad boy who would give my father a heart attack and make James jealous. To make it extra enticing though, I needed that bad boy to be my boyfriend. My sister couldn't resist blowing up her marriage to steal something of mine.

It was the perfect plan. Muahahah!

My villain origin story, complete with a bug-eyed sidekick and all the cheese I could eat. Well...

I looked down at the empty, torn-up Advent calendar.

Some wine would be good with this.

The only problem with my epic revenge plan? I didn't have a bad boy.

Mr. I-Hate-Pugs was stoically sitting next to me, ignoring Pugnog's snorting and reading his book. He'd removed the book jacket, and I couldn't make out the title. It was probably one of those how-to-be-a-sociopath-to-pick-up-women type of books.

Don't ask him. Find someone on Craigslist or the Meat Market app. You need a professional.

I wished I'd had this brilliant idea when I was still in New York City. Then I could have hired an out-of-work actor. If I tried to hire anyone in my hometown, word would for sure get back to my sister.

I chewed on my lip and tried not to look at the tall, broad-shouldered man in the seat next to me.

He flipped a page in his book.

My mouth was dry.

Grow a spine.

I turned and studied him.

He was handsome; the scar made him seem rugged and mysterious. With the straight nose and strong jaw, he was totally my sister's type. To be fair, he might be any woman's type. Not mine, though.

I bet he's wearing that skullcap to hide a bald spot, I thought uncharitably.

Mr. Bad Boy flipped another page in his book then turned his body slightly toward me.

I quickly crossed my arms and faced the window.

You cannot ask a strange man to be your fake boyfriend, I scolded myself. That's ... well, it's rude.

Besides, I'd have to pay him, and who knew how much money you had to pay a man to be your fake boyfriend. What was the going rate for that these days?

Maybe it wouldn't be too expensive. If he was riding a bus, then he must need money.

No, this is crazy. Just distract yourself with planning the postwedding Christmas brunch and do some knitting.

I pulled out the doggy sweater I was making. I was in the process of knitting holiday outfits for the local animal shelter to use to dress up their wards for Facebook posts and hopefully help find the dogs new homes.

The needles clacked as I knitted. Every so often, I glanced over at Mr. I-Insult-Pugs. Outside the bus window, dirty snow was piled on the side of the highway. This was the scene I was going to witness every Christmas from now until eternity, because I'd lost my one chance of getting a halfway decent boyfriend, and none of the men at that speed-dating event Dakota had dragged me to had written down that they wanted to keep talking to me, and I was going to ride in this slow, smelly, too-hot bus every Christmas forever and ever, and never have a house or a family or wear that dress.

I dropped a stitch. Dammit.

Do it.

I licked my lips; my mouth was dry.

Knitting clutched in my hands, I turned to the bad boy sitting next to me.

“Do ... um ...” I cleared my throat. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

His finger paused on the page he was turning. He fixed those pale-silver eyes on me, a dusty gray like the winter sky.

“No. Why? Are you offering?”

“Sort of. See, I kind of need to break up my sister and her boyfriend. She’s dating my ex. He’s a jerk. It’s complicated. But I need you to be my boyfriend so I can ruin her wedding. I don’t know if you do that type of work?”

I smiled hopefully.

The book closed with a loud thud.

He looked angry.

“Er, never mind,” I squeaked and held up my knitting. “I’ll get started on those baby socks. Forget I said anything.”

But he didn’t go back to his book.

“So you want a fake boyfriend.”

“Um, yeah. I mean that was the plan. But plans change ...”

Those ghostly eyes still locked on mine, he leaned over, his huge body crowding my space.

I scrunched against the window.

“You sure you can handle it?” he asked in a deep, gravelly voice. He smelled like leather and the winter wind.

No. No, I don’t think I can.

I swallowed. The empty Advent calendar was digging into my side.

“Yes,” I squawked.

“Prove it,” he said, his breath cool on my cheek.

He twisted out of his jacket, the ridges of muscle under the tight gray T-shirt flexing and rippling as he shrugged off the garment.

“Give me a hand job.” The baritone voice deepened. “I have my jacket on my lap. No one will know. Just go for it.”

My eyes were about as big and round as Pugnog’s and ready to pop out of my head.

“Unzip my fly,” he breathed against my mouth, “and stroke my cock.”

My stomach was flip-flopping. The air between us was supercharged, and my skin felt tight and prickly.

“I-I can’t,” I stammered.

He huffed out a laugh, smirked, and pulled his jacket back on, the leather creaking.

“Thought so.” He sat back in his seat and opened up his book. “You’re weak. You have an elaborate revenge plan all mapped out, yet you clearly can’t handle having a fake boyfriend.”

“I just wanted you to show up at dinner and brood and scowl.” I flapped my hands.

No man had ever been that forward with me, especially not one who looked and sounded like this one.

“Have you ever planned anything more complicated than a dinner party in your life?” he asked, lip curled up derisively.

“I have a job,” I protested.

“I was in the military,” he retorted, “and as someone who was paid to destroy things for a living, your plan to get back at your sister sucks. You’ve failed before you even started.”

The tears were threatening again. I blinked them back. I should have bought two cheese-filled Advent calendars.

“Tears don’t win wars, Sugarplum.” He opened his book.

I angrily wiped my eyes.

“You’re such an asshole,” I said.

Those eyes flicked up from the page. “Excuse me?”

“You’re perfect,” I said determinedly. “Kelly’s going to love you and dump her fiancé like that.” I snapped my fingers.

He snorted and continued to read his book.

I shoved the knitting in my purse that was on the floor between my knees.

In for a penny ...

I flexed my fingers then leaned over and reached for his zipper.

He swore loudly and slapped my hand away.

“Don’t touch me.”

“I’m showing you I can do this,” I said stubbornly, going for his crotch again. “I can complete the mission. I’m committed.”

“I don’t want you to give me a hand job in a bus,” he snapped. “I just wanted to see what I was working with. Besides, you look like you give terrible hand jobs.”

“You’re so rude.” I smiled at him. “When can you start?”

He fixed that snowy gaze on me.

“What would be your, ah, going rate?” I asked. “I’m thinking definitely I need you at the wedding kickoff party and the holiday party and to just hang around the house a few nights.”

“You think I regularly date women for money?” He set his book down.

I shrugged helplessly. “The economy is rough right now. I could do a flat fee, maybe \$600. Is that too low?”

I winced when he looked at me, incredulous.

“Do you take credit card?” I fumbled for my wallet.

Mr. Bad Boy took the credit card from me, face softening.

“Actually, I think we can help each other out. I have a rich grandmother I need to impress with a pretty girlfriend so I can get my billion-dollar inheritance.”

“Oh, really?” I cried. “That works out perfectly then.”

“No,” he snarled and threw the credit card at me. “This isn’t a fucking Hallmark movie, Sugarplum. I want cash: \$5,000.”

I sucked in a breath. “You sure you don’t want that hand job?”

He gave me a wolfish smile.

“Fine. You dress up in a sexy elf outfit and let me have you however I want for a weekend, and we’ll call it even.”

HUDSON

“**R**elax, Sugarplum, I’m just kidding,” I said as she stammered. “I hate Christmas, and like I said, you look like you’d be a terrible lay. How about I put you on a payment plan? First date’s free.”

Grace O’Brien—Gracie as her family called her and the name she used to register for store loyalty programs, according to the file I’d put together on her—stared at me with wide brown eyes.

You pushed too hard.

I didn’t allow the fear to skitter across my face; I was too well trained for that.

She’s going to balk, and then you’re going to have to go back to HQ, tail between your legs.

And after I’d given the other guys so much shit about getting thwarted by one dumpy little office girl and her overweight pug.

I read her file. I knew her, knew her better than she knew herself.

Trust the plan.

Gracie wavered.

I gave her a derisive look.

“Deal.” She stuck her hand out. It was small and soft in mine as I shook it.

“Let’s talk strategy,” Gracie said, pulling out a notebook covered in green, red, and white fuzz that immediately began shedding all over my black canvas work pants.

She wrote in a loopy cursive at the top of the page:

Fake Boyfriend Operation

I grabbed the notebook from her and ripped out the page, crumpling it up.

“First rule, don’t write anything down. No creative notes, no lists, no text messages, no emails.”

Gracie saluted.

“Got it. No evidence, no witnesses.”

“Second, you do what I say, when I say it. No questions.”

“What if—”

“No questions,” I interjected.

“But what’s the plan?”

“The plan is total annihilation, by any means necessary.”

She gulped.

“Do you want to win? Do you want to wipe the floor with your ex’s corpse?” I demanded.

“Um, no. No, that is not what I hired you to do,” she said, waving her hands.

“Metaphorically, I mean.” I gave her a toothy smile.

She shivered.

Pugnog drooled.

“Third, you need to keep that dog away from me. He smells bad, and his eyes are pointing in two different directions. He’s an affront to intelligent life.”

“He didn’t mean it, Pugnog.” Gracie scooped up the pug and squeezed it hard.

His eyes bugged out of his head so far I thought one of them was going to pop out and start rolling around on the bus

floor.

You are getting a very lucrative payday out of this, I reminded myself. Just play the part that she wants you to play.

Grace squirmed in her seat. “Do I need to tell you about my family, you know, give you an information download?”

“No,” I said then mentally hit myself. She didn’t know I’d spent the last few months digging up dirt on her family. Or trying to anyway.

“I’ll know what I’m working with when we have our first family gathering together,” I backtracked.

Sloppy.

“Don’t worry, Sugarplum. I’ll break up your sister’s relationship, and you can have you ex back.”

“I don’t want James back,” she said in a rush.

“Of course you do,” I said, crossing my arms. “It eats at you that he chose her over you, that he loves her and not you, that he wants her and not you.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “You want him to wrap you in his arms, tell you you’re his one and only, to beg for your forgiveness, tell you he loves you and beg you to take him back.”

“No, I don’t,” Grace said forcefully, but the slight tremor in her voice told me she was lying.

“Don’t feel bad, Sugarplum. It’s because you have low self-esteem.” I rubbed my thumb on her chin.

“Asshole.” She faced the window.

“That’s why you hired me.”

I turned back to my book.

Love was a weakness. And Gracie was weak.

Unlike me.

I wasn’t motivated by love. I was motivated by money. When my father left my mom and siblings to run off with the family’s money one Christmas—what was left of it anyway—I saw love for the scam it was. Love made people irrational and

ineffective. That was why I'd been able to wrap Gracie around my finger, because she had been weakened by her love for her ex.

I glanced over at her. She was staring dreamily out of the window, watching the snowy Rhode Island countryside pass us by. Other men would probably find her soft femininity alluring, but not me. Gracie's only attractiveness was as a means to an end.

I mentally plotted my next steps as the bus rumbled into the small town of Maplewood Falls. The bus terminal was on the wrong side of town, the side where I grew up.

I'd signed up for the military as soon as I had turned eighteen, needing to escape the town by any means necessary. Yet I had never been able to completely shake its hold on me.

Gracie, as I knew from her file, had grown up on the right side of town, gone to the good school, lived in a nice house in a desirable neighborhood. What I hadn't been able to figure out, when I'd been compiling my research, was why her parents made her take the bus home.

Guess you're about to find out.

Gracie was awkward when the bus pulled up under a 1950s-style awning. The terminal numbers had fallen off years ago, leaving only the shadow of the number five on the peeling white paint.

"I'll let you know when the first family event is," Gracie said quietly as the passengers jostled to escape the cramped bus.

"Call me," I reminded her, taking her notebook and jotting down the number of a burner phone I'd bought for this specific purpose.

"Wait," she said and looked around furtively. "What's your name?"

"Hudson," I replied, "Hudson Wynter."

"Grace O'Brien, but everyone calls me Gracie."

I knew that, of course, but said, “We’ll be in touch, Gracie.”

The much-smaller woman struggled to extricate herself, her dog, and all of the shit she’d brought with her.

“Aren’t you going to help?” she grumbled.

“Helping is extra,” I breathed in her ear, just in case someone her family knew overheard. “Besides, no one told you to pack this much. Are you moving home?”

“I haven’t sunk that low yet,” she muttered.

Pugnog yelped as Gracie accidentally banged him in the head with her laptop case.

I took pity on her and grabbed the overstuffed carry-on from the overhead rack then slung my rucksack on my back. I didn’t have much in it—it was just for show. Everything I needed had already been stashed in town.

“You don’t have more luggage than that?” Gracie asked me as she followed me off the bus, her bags thumping against the empty seat backs as she passed.

“I travel light,” I replied, setting her bag on the icy sidewalk.

The bus driver was standing beside the open underbus storage, smoking a cigarette.

“I have a small animal,” Gracie said defensively as she headed for the storage bay to retrieve another overstuffed bright-pink suitcase, sliding on the icy asphalt as she tried to drag it out.

I strangled a curse, stalked over, and grabbed her roughly before she and Pugnog could crash to the sidewalk.

My client was not going to be pleased if I couldn’t fulfill the contract because I’d let Gracie crack her head open on the pavement.

“I’ll get it,” I growled.

“Oh, look. He does have manners.” Gracie sounded slightly breathless.

Probably all that cheese she ate.

“You have anyone coming to get you?” I asked as I picked up both of her bags.

“They have wheels,” she huffed as I carried them toward the dilapidated, small-town bus station.

I ignored her.

“My family is busy,” she said, trotting after me, “but I called an Uber.”

Inside the too-warm building, a bored bus station employee was watching sports on his phone. Christmas carols played, tinny over the ancient speakers in the terminal.

“An Uber,” I repeated.

“Do you have anyone coming to get you?” she asked behind me.

I did, but I didn’t need her to know that.

“I work around here,” I lied.

“Oh.” Her phone chimed with a notification from Uber.

“Come on, Pugnog, we need to go to the store.” She was talking to the pug in a high-pitched voice.

I threw her bags into the trunk of the Uber then slammed the car door closed when she was safely inside.

“Call me.”

“Are you ...” she began in a small voice. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“We shook on it,” I said and smacked the side of the car.

As I watched her drive off, I pulled out one of my burner phones and dialed a number from memory.

“I assume you are calling me with good news.” Grayson Richmond’s voice was dry, emotionless.

“I’m in,” I reported. “We’re still on schedule.”

GRACIE

“**T**here you are,” my mother said, exasperated, when I stumbled through the front door, dumping my luggage on the floor.

I didn't have the budget for an Uber, but I hadn't wanted Hudson to feel like he had to babysit me. The five hours I'd been trapped next to him in the bus had been intense. All I wanted were some Christmas cookies, a glass of wine, and a hot bath.

Instead I got the holiday chaos of my family.

Two younger cousins raced by, high on sugar cookies and holiday excitement. I let Pugnog out of his carrier to join the fray.

“Did you buy the ingredients for lobster dip?” my mother asked. “Sandy, I don't want to use those plates tonight. We'll use the other ones.”

“Why couldn't you convince Dakota to come?” my aunt Babs asked, coming over to me and giving me a huge hug.

“Someone has to manage the office.”

Aunt Giana sniffed. “You smell.” She sprayed me with Febreze, making me cough. “Why do you insist on taking the bus?”

“I don't know.” My mother threw up her hands. “James offered to drive her, but she refused. I don't know why you can't forgive him, Gracie.”

“No, he—”

“It’s been a whole year, and he and Kelly are so in love,” my mother lectured. “James is trying, Gracie. You’re going to have to get over it at some point. Kelly’s going to have children, and you want to have a relationship with your nieces and nephews, don’t you? She wants a big family, you know.”

No, *I* wanted a big family. Kelly wanted to party.

“The fish needs to go in the fridge, and can you make the custard for the Boston cream pie?” my mother continued as she shook out table runners. “Your uncle Bic asked me at the last minute if we could serve it, and I need to set up for the buffet. Oh, Gracie come here and help me figure out where to arrange the tables.”

“I told you the buffet needs to go on the back wall, and we can seat people in the dining room and living room,” I told her, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice so my mom didn’t scold me for having a tone.

A mopey-looking young woman in a crop top, Ugg boots, and leggings, slouched into the room, followed by my brother.

“I just wanted to make sure that there are going to be some vegan options for Piper,” Logan said over my mother shouting at my aunt to not drop a goblet.

Bethany threw up her hands. “Vegan options?”

“She ate steak the last time she was over here,” my uncle Eddie remarked as he and another married-in uncle moved the tables to where I directed.

“No, that wasn’t Piper. That was Pippa,” my brother corrected.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” I said before I could stop myself from volunteering. “I’ll make sure Piper has something to eat.”

It was a compulsion to help make my mother’s life as easy as possible—the curse of being the firstborn daughter.

In an ill-fated attempt to lose the pounds accumulated in the post-being-cheated-on fog of sadness and self-loathing, I had tried to be vegan. It had lasted all of two weeks and had

ended when my sister had posted photos of herself in a thong bikini on the beach with James, her engagement ring front and center.

A woman needed a cheeseburger and a bourbon milkshake after a social media post like that.

On the bright side, I had assembled a repertoire of plant-based dishes.

“I’ll make you a very tasty zucchini ‘spaghetti’ dish with fresh spinach, pine nuts, and other winter veggies,” I promised.

“Um, I don’t actually like vegetables all that much?” Piper said, twirling her hair.

“She doesn’t like the texture,” my brother explained. “When we go out, she always orders an Impossible burger.”

“French fries, Oreos, and imitation sausage links it is then.”

Piper brightened. “Sounds great!”

“Thanks, sis!” Logan hugged me. “We’re heading to the park to shoot some hoops.”

“Great. I’ll just be here throwing a dinner for forty together,” I said under my breath.

It’s Christmas, I told myself firmly. You’re with family. That’s what’s important.

It was Hudson, with his lack of respect for my personal space and his military metaphors and his sexually charged comments, that had put me in a bad mood.

I pulled out my great-grandmother’s cookbook. It was one I had designed from a collection of her recipes that I had carefully typed up, tested, and photographed then given to the family one year as Christmas presents. It had the best custard recipe.

I opened the fridge.

“Where are all the eggs?”

“Your aunt Janet used the last of them,” my mother said as she swept through the kitchen.

“You could have told me. I was just at the store.”

“Gracie, don’t use that tone,” my mom chided. “I have a full house here. I’m trying my best.”

“Don’t scowl like that. You’ll get wrinkles, Gracie,” Aunt Sandy told me. “A single woman can’t afford to get wrinkles.”

“You’ll have to go to the store and buy some eggs,” my mom told me.

“She needs to go to the store and get a man,” Granny Murray said from the doorway.

I rushed to hug her.

Granny Murray admired me. “Your tits look great.”

“Really?” My mother frowned and pulled at my top. “I think your bra is too small.”

“I’m too busy to date,” I said to Granny Murray as I pulled self-consciously at my clothes.

Nothing seemed to fit right. No wonder Hudson wanted cash instead of a hookup. He had been positively repulsed by the idea of sleeping with me.

I felt nauseous thinking about my big plan.

He’s going to balk, I assured myself. No man in his right mind was going to pretend to be the fake boyfriend of a girl he met on a bus. That was absurd. Hudson was probably just pulling my leg, passing the time. A slow bus ride makes people do crazy things. He gave me a fake number, which was no problem because I was not going to call him. Ever. Instead, I was going to pretend this whole thing never happened.

Granny Murray lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“I heard the lesser grandma”—meaning my father’s mother—“talking smack about you, saying that she would be surprised if you were even going to show your face this

Christmas. You need to get a real home run of a man, shut them all up.”

“It doesn’t hurt my feelings,” I promised Granny Murray. “I’m an adult. I can take it. And I don’t need a man to be happy. That’s what you said when you threw that divorce party last year, remember?”

“I’m not telling you to get married. I’m telling you to find a hot piece of tail, fuck him in the back seat of a Camaro, parade him around, and shut up that gossipy old woman.”

“It will have to wait until I’ve gone to the store.”

“I added onions and flour to your list,” my mother called as she sailed through the kitchen, carrying a soup tureen into the dining room.

I picked up my coat from where I had draped it over my bags.

“Also, can you do something with that dog?” my mother added as she floated back, carrying a tablecloth to the laundry room.

One of my younger cousins, who was probably trying to be helpful, had put down a dish of water for Pugnog. The chunky pug had inadvertently tipped over and was drowning in his water bowl.

I righted him, picked up the water dish, dumped it out, and gave the dog a few whacks on the back.

“You’re going to the store, Gracie?” my dad asked hopefully as I walked through the den. He was watching the football game with several of my cousins and uncles. “Could you pick up some ice cream? Pistachio if they have it, though it’s not as good as yours.”

Hint. Hint.

“I can make you some,” I offered weakly.

It’s Christmas, it’s Christmas, I chanted.

“Can you pick up some chips and salsa?” another cousin asked.

“And some of those jalapeño poppers?” another added.
“We need snacks for the game.”

“Of course,” I said, jotting it down on my quickly ballooning grocery list.

I stepped out onto the back porch and trudged through the snow to the detached garage with the mother-in-law suite above, where Granny Murray lived.

Both of my parents’ cars were gone, and Granny Murray didn’t have a car because she had lost her license after getting in a police chase.

“Guess we’re walking,” I forced out between my teeth as I grabbed the wheeled cloth grocery cart hanging on the wall of the garage.

“You need the exercise. It’s a beautiful winter day. We’ll walk to the store, taking in all the Christmas lights. It will be grounding, centering, meditative.”

But it was no use. I felt no Christmas joy, no holiday cheer.

Twenty more days ’til Christmas.

For once in my life, I wished the Christmas season could just be over and done with already.

HUDSON

“**T**hat’s how we do it!” Jake whooped when I climbed into the back of Anderson’s SUV.

I leaned back in the cracked leather seat, allowing myself a small smile.

“She practically crawled right in my lap. I didn’t even have to use any of your idiotic pickup lines.”

I could still feel the phantom touch of Gracie’s fingers trailing over my zipper.

Focus.

“Women can’t resist that handsome face.” Jake grabbed my jaw and shook my head.

I let my little brother manhandle me for a moment then pushed him off.

“Eyes on the prize, men.”

“It’s going to be a good Christmas this year,” Jake crowed, leaning over the center console and turning on the radio, then punched buttons until Christmas carols blared out of the speakers.

As the second to youngest, Jake preferred to shirk as many responsibilities as I, the oldest, would let him get away with, which of course wasn’t a lot.

I turned off the radio.

“Thank you.”

Like me, Anderson, the second-oldest Wynter brother, was not a fan of Christmas. Always seeking ways to optimize his life, Anderson had followed me into the Marines, and he'd been an asset in the military and was an asset at my company.

“You two,” Jake said, turning the radio back on, “need to get in the holiday spirit. Especially you, Mr. Casanova. You’re dating a Christmas-loving woman and her Christmas-loving family. Time to pack up the family trauma and rediscover your inner Frosty the Snowman.”

“Never.”

Anderson glanced over at me.

“You better not fuck this up. It’s not just money, but our reputation is on the line. This contract has already taken longer than it should. If you have to dance around a Christmas tree in nothing but an inflatable reindeer costume to complete the mission, then you’d better do it.”

He drove us to one of the warehouse buildings I owned in town and where we’d set up a makeshift field office. I needed all hands on deck for this one.

“Gracie doesn’t want a Christmas-loving potential husband,” I reminded them. “She wants a bad boy with a dangerous streak.”

“Thankfully, you’re a grade-A-certified asshole,” Jake said as Anderson parked by the loading dock door.

Inside the field office, several large monitors were set up on tables. The stale smell of coffee hung in the air. Lawrence and Talbot, the third and fourth youngest, stood in front of a large TV where drone footage played.

Elsa, our little sister, was up in Harrogate with our aunt and uncle, helping them with the Christmas rush at their lodge.

This job should have been a straightforward corporate espionage contract. Robert O’Brien’s company was a family office, and there was no HR, no IT, and no corporate structure. The whole thing was held together by a shoestring. It should have been like shooting fish in a barrel.

Except that Gracie's cousins hadn't had anything on the laptops my men had managed to gain access to, Gracie kept blocking access to the office, and all of my team's attempts at using phishing to gain access to the EnerCheck computer system hadn't worked.

I had a sinking suspicion that Gracie, with her soft, pretty mouth, big innocent eyes, and curvy body was not, in fact, a dumb, coddled daddy's girl like I'd originally thought.

No matter. I'd taken down men ten times what Gracie was. I'd deliver her and her family wrapped in a bow before Christmas.

"The O'Briens are having some sort of big family gathering," Lawrence said, showing me live drone feed from outside of Gracie's house.

We watched as Gracie entered the frame, lugging a heavy rolling grocery sack behind her up the icy walkway.

"Wait. She has a baby?" Anderson asked in alarm. "There wasn't anything about a baby in the file."

I suppressed a growl as a familiar stunted black snout poked out from under her scarf.

"That's just her pug. She's overly attached to it."

I frowned as I watched Gracie haul the bags up to the porch. She pushed up her skirt and pulled up her tights then adjusted her bra.

Probably because she thinks no one is watching.

I scowled.

I don't feel guilty.

"Gracie and Hudson sitting in a tree ..." Jake sang softly under his breath.

"Watch it," I snapped at him.

"K-I-S-S-I—"

"*Shut up,*" I growled at Jake.

"So what's the plan, chief?" Lawrence asked.

“Hudson has to wait for her to call him,” Talbot said with a smirk. “Like a good little lapdog. Gracie’s collecting quite the menagerie.”

“Do not compare me to Pugnog,” I growled.

Jake slapped the table, doubled over laughing. “Is its name really Pugnog?”

“Yes.”

“Dude.”

I worked my jaw.

“I am not letting this chance slip through my fingers.” I grabbed my motorcycle helmet. “I’ll be back later. I’m going to a Christmas party.”

GRACIE

“**N**o. No no no no.”

I looked out of the upstairs bathroom window. I was quickly trying to shave my legs so that I could wear the dress I had planned on for tonight.

My mom’s holiday party was in full swing.

“Gracie!” my mom shouted up the stairs. “Gracie, I need you to make sure the spinach turnovers aren’t burning.”

“Coming, Mom,” I yelled as I desperately washed off the shaving cream.

Okay, so there were a couple stripes of dark hair I had missed, but I wasn’t Kelly. I didn’t have nothing to do all day except pamper myself, dream up ways to cheat, and destroy historic dresses.

“This was supposed to be a hallucination you made up,” I muttered to myself as I raced downstairs.

“Gracie, the spinach puffs.”

I ignored my mother and ran to the front door, catching Hudson as he was heading up the walkway, motorcycle helmet swinging in one hand, long shadow cast by the streetlight darkening freshly fallen snow. Hudson’s dark hair was trimmed short at the neck and fell in longer locks over his forehead.

“You,” I hissed, “cannot be here.”

Hudson dipped his head down. In the Christmas lights that decorated my parents' huge Victorian house, his eyes seemed almost luminous.

I shivered.

You made a deal with the devil.

Then the devil needed to remove himself.

Large hands encircled my waist, making me squeak.

“You didn't call me.”

“I did not call you because I'm not ready for you to be here,” I said through gritted teeth.

My second cousin and her new husband gawked at me and Hudson as they walked past us to the front door.

“You need to leave now.”

Hudson tipped my chin up, the stiff leather of the motorcycle glove rough on my chin.

“Where's the girl who was going to give me a hand job in a crowded bus? I don't want weak soldiers.”

I glanced back at the house.

Through the large front-room windows, I could see everyone congratulating Kelly and James, gushing about the wedding, hinting at babies to come next Christmas.

Hudson narrowed his eyes.

“Shock and awe.”

I nodded and straightened.

“I can't hear you,” he said, voice softly mocking.

“Shock and awe.”

“Good girl.”

“Just give me a minute,” I mumbled.

He let me hurry past him into the warm house.

“The spinach puffs are burning,” my mom said when she saw me.

I am taking charge of my life.

“Sorry,” I said. “A ... uh ... friend of mine stopped by unexpectedly.”

“Was it Muriel?” my mother asked as I raced to the kitchen, feeling flighty and nervous about what I was about to do. There was no going back once I let Hudson inside.

I scooped the steaming pastries onto a platter decorated with scenes from the Grinch.

“No,” I squeaked as I headed back to the living room. “It’s a male friend.”

“A male friend? What male?” my mother demanded.

“Holy St. Nick, Santa came early!” I heard my cousin Violet drunkenly whoop to shrieks of delight of my other cousins.

I raced into the foyer in time to see Hudson push his way into the house.

In his motorcycle gear, heavy boots, and black scarf that half obscured his mouth and nose, he clashed with the cheery Christmas décor—the garland winding up the stair banister, the vintage hand-carved Santa’s reindeer, and the dancing Santa statue that greeted people on one side of the door with a Christmas tune.

My family, attracted to the drama, crowded around the doorways that led to the foyer. Hudson slowly unwound the scarf around his neck.

I cleared my throat. “There is someone I’d like for you all to meet.”

Backbone. Show a backbone.

I straightened up, still clutching the heavy platter.

“Family, this is Hudson. I invited him to stop by the Christmas party tonight.”

“Ooh la la!”

Several of my cousins were snapping photos of him and me.

“Thank you for coming, Hudson. Would you like a spinach puff?” I shoved the tray at him.

Those pale eyes flicked down to the platter then back up to my face.

“No.” There was a scowl stamped on his mouth.

“I’ll take one,” my drunk uncles slurred, crowding around for a snack.

My family was on the shorter side, and Hudson towered over them as they crowded around him. Collar on his leather motorcycle jacket popped up, he surveyed the decorated room.

He only gave one-word answers or grunts when my family tried to talk to him. He didn’t smile or act friendly or even offer his hand for a handshake like a normal man would do when he was meeting his girlfriend’s family for the first time. Somehow his body language had shifted, making him give off even more of a fuck-you vibe.

“Um, so ... is that, like, your boyfriend?” Piper asked me.

“I don’t do relationships,” Hudson said, slamming the motorcycle helmet down on an antique side table. “I just hook up with her on the regular.”

I clutched the platter of slightly too-brown spinach puffs.

Hudson flicked the nose of a Rudolph clock that was hanging on the wall.

“Disgustingly cute house. Got anything to drink?”

“Sure. I’ll make you a drink.” Ducking my head down, I hurried over to the wet bar, thinking that I’d made a terrible mistake.

Hudson followed me.

“Do you want an elftini or a candy-cane mojito?”

“I don’t want any of your Christmas shit,” he said loudly. “Just give me a scotch.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said, feeling frazzled.

The dark-brown liquor sloshed in the glass as I handed it to Hudson.

He downed it in one go and handed it back to me.

You wanted an asshole, I reminded myself.

Still.

My parents pushed their way through the crowd of my extended family, confusion and concern on their faces.

My inner neglected teenage self was thrilled to finally be the center of their attention.

“Gracie didn’t tell us she was bringing a boyfriend,” my dad said, blinking rapidly behind his glasses.

“He’s a man friend,” Granny Murray crowed from where she was emptying scotch into a mug that read *Let Me Make Your Nose Glow Bright*.

“I’m Rob, Gracie’s father.” My dad stuck out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Hudson ignored his hand and focused on my mom.

“Guess Gracie gets her great tits from you.”

My mother made an indignant noise while Granny Murray cackled.

“Those are fake, sonny. Gracie gets those milk duds from me.” The elderly woman reached for her blouse buttons.

“Gran, please leave your shirt on,” I said loudly.

I saw the briefest crack in Hudson’s façade, and alarm peeked through.

He squashed it.

“Gracie, can we talk to you privately?” my parents said in hushed tones.

Though my original plan was to waft Hudson under Kelly’s nose like a pan of fresh peppermint bark brownies, it turned out there was an added bonus for having him as my

fake boyfriend. I was now the belle of the ball. Well, Christmas party.

I followed my parents into the kitchen.

“Grace O’Brien, what has gotten into you?” my mother declared. “I don’t want you dating someone like Hudson.”

“You don’t want me dating anyone at all,” I said snidely before I could stop the words.

My parents had forbidden me from dating until I was eighteen, not that guys were that interested in me. I liked to sit in my room and read or sew and listen to audio books. I had had exactly two boyfriends before James, and Kelly had slept with both of them. Before the cheating, they had been fairly bland, vanilla guys, picked because I knew my parents would approve of them and, I had thought, Kelly wouldn’t be attracted to them.

“This Hudson is all wrong for you,” my father insisted.

My mom nodded. “He rides a motorcycle, and he isn’t wearing a button-down shirt to a holiday party.”

“Does he even have a job?” my father demanded.

“He works odd labor jobs. He used to be in the military,” I added.

“An officer?”

“I don’t believe he went to college.”

“You don’t know anything about this man.” My father shook his head.

“What will the neighbors say?” my mother wailed.

“They’ll probably think Hudson is Kelly’s boyfriend,” Granny Murray said loudly, coming into the kitchen. “Need some ice for this scotch.”

“Mom, this is a crisis,” Bethany said to her mother.

“Why, because my granddaughter finally has a piece of ass worth writing home about?” Granny Murray demanded.

“I know you’re still upset about losing James,” my mom began, pressing her hands together.

“You mean James cheating on me?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Gracie, watch your tone with your mother,” my father begged.

“Rebound relationships are beneath you,” my mother scolded. “You need to try harder for a boyfriend. A real boyfriend.”

“Maybe I’ll just steal James back,” I snapped.

“Gracie, don’t say that. I didn’t raise a home-wrecker.”

Oh, the irony!

I pulled a tray of mini quiches out of the oven.

“I need to refresh the appetizers,” I said, heading back out into the dining room, just in time to see James and Hudson sizing each other up.

James, in his Christmas sweater vest that I had made him, was puffed up to his full height, which was no match for Hudson’s six-five.

James was blustering. “We all care about Gracie very much ...”

Liar.

“We just need to know what kind of man she’s dating. So I’m not going to ask you again. Tell us about yourself.”

Hudson’s wintry gaze slid over my family.

For once, a family party was dead quiet as people waited to hear what Hudson had to say for himself.

“All you need to know about me is that Gracie doesn’t have any complaints ... if you know what I mean.”

“Then I guess you can leave.” James put his hands on his waist.

Hudson stared up at the ceiling, then his eyes flicked to mine. His posture was insolent. Bored.

“What the hell were you on when you thought it was a good idea to waste your time with him?” James turned to chastise me.

“Probably could say the same about you,” Hudson drawled.

All the stress, the needling comments from Hudson in the bus, were worth it just to see my ex-fiancé’s face fall and his smug expression melt like a gingerbread house in front of the fire.

Hudson unzipped the heavy leather motorcycle jacket.

Kelly’s attention was glued to Hudson. Her eyes, framed by oversized fake lashes, followed his hands as he slowly pulled the zipper down, down.

Kelly’s tongue darted out to lick her lips.

Hudson mimicked the gesture.

James noticed it, too, and his eyes widened in alarm.

“At least tell us where you’re from,” James barked at Hudson.

Hudson didn’t look at him, his gaze still locked on Kelly, who made a big show of adjusting her top and sticking her chest out.

“I’m from Maplewood Falls, but the Gulch side. I went to Nixon High.”

“The *bad* high school,” Kelly said it like it was the name of an exclusive club.

“Then you’re really not good enough for Gracie.” James was bombastic.

Hudson tipped his head back and rolled his shoulders.

“Gracie thinks I’m good enough to come all over her face.”

What the—

The color drained from my father’s cheeks.

“Gracie?”

His elderly mother gave me a scandalized look. “Robert, I thought you raised your daughters better than this.”

My cousins were snickering. One of them was streaming the whole dumpster fire to the family group chat for those like Dakota who hadn’t been able to get off of work in time for the party.

My face burned.

Hudson gave me a feral look. His teeth were sharp. He was going for the kill.

It was then I realized I had made a grievous error in hiring Hudson Wynter to be my fake boyfriend.

He had, in fact, been correct.

I couldn’t handle it.

“Your daughter’s a little porn star,” Hudson said, deep voice carrying around the packed room.

I felt my throat constricting.

Stop, I mouthed.

“James, you must have been doing nothing but missionary with Gracie,” Hudson said in that same insolent, bored tone. “When I first had her on her knees in the back of my truck, she would barely let me eat her out. But I need a little more excitement when I’m fucking some girl.” His eyes locked with Kelly’s. My sister was practically panting.

“I showed her some porn flicks, told her to act like that, you know, really make it interesting. I slapped her pussy when she put on a good performance. That got her in the Christmas spirit.” He smirked. “I took her hard, doggy style in the back of my truck. And you should see her suck my cock. She’s a greedy little slut.” He turned those snow demon eyes on my ex.

“I broke her out of the bad habits you put in her, James.”

My cousins were whispering to each other behind their hands, and my aunts were looking at me in horror.

The room was too hot, too stuffy. There were too many people.

I cannot do this.

I dumped the tray onto a nearby table and raced outside, gasping in the cold winter, air the tears freezing on my face.

“That was humiliating,” I sobbed to myself, digging my fists in my eyes, trying to force the tears to stop.

I was never going to be able to show my face again. This was so much worse than when everyone saw James cheating on me. What had I done? It really was a deal with the devil.

The side door opened then slammed. Heavy boots crunched in the snow.

“Gracie.”

“I hate you. Go away.”

Hudson stepped around to face me, crowding my personal space.

I stepped back, but his large hand settled on my waist, trapping me against him.

“Don’t pull away from me.” His voice was laced with warning. “Your family is watching.”

I sniffled.

He dipped his head forward to whisper in my ear.

“You promised you could handle this.”

“I lied,” I sobbed. “This is terrible.”

“Wrong. It’s going perfectly,” he crooned.

“You’re awful, and you said dirty things. You were mean to me; you humiliated me. Why is Kelly going to want a man who treats people like shit? You’re not just an asshole, you’re a dick.”

“Are you kidding me?” He tilted my head up to look at him. “All women want a man who treats them like shit.”

“No, they don’t,” I protested.

“You’re dripping wet thinking about me holding you down, fucking you raw, and calling you a slut.” His tone was almost clinical.

I was glad of the dark so he couldn’t see the heat in my face.

“After that little performance, all your sister is going to be able to think about is me coming on her face,” he said in the dark. “Trust me. I understand how people work.”

He wiped the tears off my cheeks, the leather of the gloves rough.

“That’s not how I work,” I warbled out.

His eyes narrowed.

“This is war, Sugarplum. We die like men.”

He released me then stalked back into the house.

I followed, feeling stunned.

My family, who had been watching the whole thing from the windows, pretended like they were just getting more hors d’oeuvres and asking my mother for the spinach puff recipe.

Hudson stomped through the house and grabbed the motorcycle helmet.

“Not staying for dinner?” Granny Murray asked him, wagging her eyebrows.

“I have to go to work.”

“Let me guess. You’re a custodian,” James sneered.

Hudson narrowed his gaze. “Someone has to clean up the trash.”

My fake boyfriend tucked the helmet under his arm, shifted his weight, and tilted his head up at Kelly.

“You might want to level up, James,” he said, “or she might pull a Gracie and go find herself a real man.”

James gave me a dirty look.

Hudson zipped up his jacket and headed to the door. Before he left, he bent down to whisper in my ear, “*Man the fuck up.*”

The front door slammed, making me jump.

“Where,” Kelly drawled to me, “did you ever find Hudson?”

“Nowhere,” I said, eyes downcast as I grabbed an empty tray.

I hurried past my family to hide in my safe space, the kitchen, and plot how to remove Hudson from my life completely.

Because otherwise? I wasn’t going to survive this Christmas.

HUDSON

The private plane was waiting for me when I arrived at the small regional airport that supported Maplewood Falls.

It was not a lie I'd told Gracie's family. I did have to go to work.

I nodded to the pilot and flight crew then took a seat.

No, this wasn't my plane. A kid from the Gulch didn't grow up to be the type of man who owned his own plane. However, he could grow up to be the type of man who had clients who owned their own jets. I settled back in my seat, opened up my laptop, and typed in my password for the encrypted message program.

Did I feel bad about what had transpired at the O'Brien holiday party?

Not at all.

I had an in with the inner sanctum of Gracie's family. Sure, Gracie might have been upset, but I had preyed on her insecurity about her sister. She wasn't just going to walk away now that she had seen firsthand that her sister would have dragged me up to her bedroom and had her way with me if she could have.

I would have stayed to see it play out, but one of my teams had had a big break on another contract. Svensson PharmaTech, a major pharmaceutical company, had hired us to find evidence that one of their employees was selling top secret corporate information to foreign nationals.

A car was waiting for me when the plane landed.

It was a quick drive to the warehouse where my employees had been sorting through the literal tons of trash we'd recovered from the dump. Gracie's family might sneer at a man who worked a labor job, but there was no better way of digging out someone's secrets than if you had access to their trash.

After commandeering his household trash from the last eighteen months, Layla, a woman I'd served in the military with and then hired because she was organized and competent, had finally found what we were looking for. She waved me to a laptop, where a USB drive was plugged in.

"We ran a recovery program and found evidence of contact between the person of interest and a member of the Chinese government. We have a name, and we just ID'd the recipient. We also," she said, leading me to another station, where several people were meticulously piecing together scraps of shredded documents, "found the remains of a receipt from a deposit made to an account at a local credit union. Forensic financial analysis has determined the account has been closed, but Skylar created a fake Tinder account, went on a long and boring date with a bank executive, and was able to access his system long enough to pull records of transactions in the account."

"Thank you for your sacrifice," I said to Skylar, Layla's girlfriend, who had the body of a supermodel and the mind and constitution of a Cold War spy.

"I told her she owes me a ring for Christmas," Skylar replied.

"OBVIOUSLY, the client can't give that information to the authorities. However, between the USB and the receipt, this is enough information for our client to get a warrant to have an official paper trail," Layla said loudly.

"Why don't you call the client with me, and let's tell them the good news," I told Layla.

The Svensson PharmaTech rep thanked us profusely when we showed them the evidence. After assuring them that the physical evidence would be delivered by hand that night by Layla personally, they wired over the money.

“Nicely done,” I said, shaking Layla’s hand when the money cleared our account.

“That’s a holiday wrap!” Skylar fist-bumped me.

“Do you need help on the EnerCheck Inc. contract?” Layla asked as she put on her coat.

“No.”

Layla raised an eyebrow. “That’s not a confident no.”

“You have your holiday plans,” I reminded her.

“I can cancel.”

“She cannot,” Skylar said loudly.

“It’s just one girl,” I told Layla.

“I think you mean grown woman who’s been leading you and C-Team around by the nose while eating copious amounts of cheese.” Layla smirked.

“It’s just because all my best people were focused on the Svensson PharmaTech contract.”

“Flattery doesn’t close accounts.” Layla put her hands on her hips.

“Go enjoy your ski trip. And if you see a certain banker there ...”

“She’s not supposed to be working!”

“Please.” Layla snorted. “I know you and Demarcus have a bet to see if you or I get the banker’s passwords off him first.”

I shook my head. “Enjoy your Christmas.”

“Let me know if I need to swoop in and save the day,” she sang as she accepted the locked case from Demarcus.

I headed up to the rooftop to look out over the industrial park where I’d set up shop.

Most people thought of hacking as something you did in a fancy war room with lots of blinking lights and frantic typing. However, brute forcing your way into a system wasn't how it was done. Hacking was all social engineering, a scavenger hunt, a monthslong process of carefully advancing your way past layers of security to reach the treasure trove.

Well it was months long in cases like the Svenssons' PharmaTech contract. For the EnerCheck Inc. contract, I should have had what I needed weeks ago.

Dammit, Gracie.

Usually, I didn't get directly involved in the project, but I needed to close this account. Gracie must have the information I needed on her laptop. Once she was used to me being around, I would wait until I saw her type in her password, memorize it, then while she slept one night, I'd log into her laptop and copy over her data. Done. Mission accomplished, just in time to be home by Christmas.

Not that I celebrated.

I felt the air move before I saw him.

"I am starting to think this job isn't a priority for you." Grayson Richmond stepped up beside me at the rusted railing on the roof deck.

"I told you we're ramping up."

"It's December. I've had to listen to 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' five hundred times already, and I don't go shopping, don't listen to the radio, and don't have a Christmas-obsessed girlfriend. It's everywhere. You promised me in July that this was a slam dunk, that you could do it with your eyes closed."

"This job has actually turned into one of my trickier ones," I admitted. "EnerCheck is locked down."

"It's run by frat boys and some girl," Grayson countered. "Are you even sure there's anything there?"

"Family businesses always have exploitations and skeletons in the closet," I assured him.

“I need this deal closed by—”

“December twenty-third, yes, I know,” I told him. “Have I ever failed you?”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“I’m in with her now,” I told him. “Give me a week.”

“I’ve heard that one before.”

There was a pause.

Grayson stared out over the dark industrial park. It was down on its luck, like the Gulch of Maplewood Falls. It was just how I liked it. Fewer potential witnesses that way.

I had met Grayson over fifteen years ago and kept in touch. He’d been my first client back when he was building his empire by any means necessary.

I appreciated Grayson’s take-no-prisoners attitude, his single-minded dedication to success. That was how he had become a billionaire. I was cold-blooded, but Grayson was ruthless, though not without reason. If you did your job to his satisfaction, he was generous. Fail, and he’d end you.

I also appreciated how he wasn’t emotional about jobs he hired me to complete.

Give me a corporate espionage contract any day over someone trying to find evidence that their mistress was cheating on them. Yes, you read that right.

“You’re not falling for her, are you?” Grayson asked.

Are you fucking kidding me?

I didn’t fall in love period, especially not with someone like Gracie O’Brien. I pulled out an envelope from my jacket and waved it at him. “Just for that, I’m not giving you this.”

“What the hell is that?”

“I came across this on another job. Looks like the woman your brother is dating is a ticking time bomb. She’s got a track record of unsavory and self-serving behavior.” I handed him the envelope. “Maybe he does his due diligence and figures it

out, maybe not, but best to cut these things off at the knees before it gets too far.”

Grayson was wary.

“Hey, I have little brothers too,” I told him softly.

He snorted and opened the envelope and pocketed the flash drive.

“I can never figure out your motives.”

“The best way to get rich is to do a good turn for an even richer man and take your cut,” I quipped.

“Uh-huh,” Grayson said.

The unspoken words between us:

He was going to fuck me up if I didn’t deliver.

GRACIE

“So what the hell was that?” Dakota asked when I answered the phone the next morning.

I was making biscuits, so many biscuits, enough to feed an army. I had, on a whim, asked Dakota if she could talk, but since this was the Christmas season of me making terrible decisions, I realized belatedly that I should have just chosen an audiobook.

“I take it that my assumptions were correct and Bella and Violet were, in fact, live streaming the holiday party,” I said with a sigh.

“You mean live streaming the preamble to a porno.”

“What the—”

“God!” Dakota fanned herself. “That was so fucking hot. Where did you even find him?”

I looked around furtively.

It was early in the morning. I didn’t hear anyone else in the historic house. I almost typed in the words in the chat then remembered what Hudson had said.

Nothing in writing.

I lowered my voice, cupping my hand around the phone receiver.

“I hired him.”

“He’s an actor?”

“I think he just needs the money. He works as a custodian.”

“I didn’t know they made custodians that hot.”

“*Keep your voice down.*”

“Oh my god, his eyes as he talked about taming you.”
Dakota swooned.

I ground my teeth in annoyance.

“It wasn’t hot. It was demeaning.”

“I mean yeah, sure. But a guy like that you don’t want to do missionary with. You want hair pulling and dirty talk and getting fucked in his truck. I practically squirted when he said that. Also,” she snickered, “Kelly is so jelly!”

“I can’t even ... This is ... Argh! He’s so ... so ...”

“Alpha? Assertive. Cocky. Rough?” Dakota was practically drooling.

“*Male.*”

“That too,” Dakota purred.

She motioned me closer to the screen and whispered, “Does this arrangement come with conjugal visits?”

“Gosh no.”

“Boo.”

The ancient house creaked as my family woke up.

“Got to go.”

I hated Hudson and hated even more that apparently he was right. Women were falling all over themselves, panties raining from the sky, just because he had said he liked fucking a woman doggy style in the back of his pickup truck.

I angrily cut the ice-cold butter into the flour.

Not me. I did not like bad boys. I wanted a grown man with a dad bod and a 401(k). I didn’t do adventurous sex, and I didn’t do relationship drama. Finding James screwing my sister under the Christmas tree notwithstanding, the most

drama I'd had in any relationship ever was this fake one with Hudson blowing in like a winter storm, riling everyone up, being all possessive alpha male and talking down to me and mansplaining what women actually want. Which apparently is being called a slut while a hot guy fucks their brains out.

I cursed as I realized I was overworking the biscuit dough. I hoped it would still rise. I put it in the fridge to chill it out.

I needed to chill out.

Hiring Hudson was a mistake. I should have told him right then and there when he had followed me outside last night that the deal was off, and he could kindly take his big dick energy, his motorcycle, and himself on out of my life.

"You always let yourself get bossed around," I scolded myself as I started forming the sausage patties. Now I was angry and out of sorts. Nat King Cole blared from the stereo. I flipped the station to punk rock.

"Honestly, Gracie. It's December. Let me have my Christmas carols," my mother insisted, coming into the kitchen and flipping the radio back. "First, that man that you scraped up out of the trash and brought home, and now rock music."

"Someone get the smelling salts." I set the cast-iron skillet on the stove.

"And that attitude."

I gritted my teeth as I stacked neat round sausage patties on a plate.

"All of Hudson's big dick energy is rubbing off on her," my cousin Bella said with a giggle, coming into the kitchen and pouring out the last of the coffee.

"Pot's empty, Gracie," she said.

"I'll make some more in a minute." Then added, "Or you could."

"I'll wait."

“We can talk about your new man,” her sister Violet said, hopping up on a stool.

“Hubba-hubba!”

“I’m so jealous.”

“He is literally sex on a stick.”

“He’s not good for her,” my mother scolded her nieces. “I need you two to back me up here.”

My cousins just giggled.

“I’m one hundred percent team Hudson.”

Kelly was wearing a robe that had Bride embroidered on the back in pink and gold letters, made with toxic positivity by her only sister.

My mother had always insisted that a woman be fully dressed when not in her bedroom. I had always followed the rules. My sister had not. Therefore she got to run around in a robe while my mother still acted like the biggest scandal last Christmas was not that Kelly had been caught with my fiancé but that I had been downstairs in my pajamas.

Kelly scoffed. “I just can’t believe that he’s actually her boyfriend.”

Violet giggled. “He did say they weren’t dating. He was just f—” My mother gave her a dirty look.

“They were just getting it on.”

“In the back of his truck,” Belle added, and she and her sister erupted in more giggles.

“Gracie?” Kelly gave me an assessing look. “I don’t believe it. I bet he’s some street person you gave twenty bucks to, to try to get him to show up and ruin my big moment. Right, James?” she called to my ex, who was grabbing orange juice out of the fridge.

More of my cousins had wandered into the kitchen, unable to resist the siren call of drama.

“Do you want any help?” Connie asked sweetly.

Sure. I needed help three hours ago when I started cooking.

“Nah, I’ve got it.”

“Hudson didn’t smell like a street person,” Bella said, wrinkling her nose.

“He smelled divine,” Violet swooned.

You don’t care that they’re talking about him like he’s a piece of fried chicken. You don’t even like Hudson, I reminded myself as I heated up the big cast-iron skillet on the stove.

“Prove it,” my sister demanded. “Prove that you actually are sleeping with him.”

“What do you want her to do? Throw down a used condom?” Connie asked, rolling her eyes.

“Text him.”

Just tell them you broke up.

If having Hudson tell everyone fake stories about having sex with me in his car was bad, if everyone in my family thought I had paid for a fake boyfriend to steal my sister’s spotlight, I would really never live it down.

I wiped my hands on my apron and pulled out my phone.

Gracie: Hey Hudson, my cousins don’t believe the story about the truck.

I waited, unsure if he was going to text back. This might be against the rules, or it could be counted as part of the scam.

A scam that you need to end.

I didn’t have the stomach for it. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours, and I was spent.

Hudson: I’m still cleaning the back seat. You squirted everywhere.

“Oh my gawd!” Violet crowed.

“How do we know it’s him?” Kelly said with a scowl.

“Even if it is him,” James said, “Hudson could just be a liar. Where does he live, Gracie? Where does he work? What kind of car does he drive?”

“He drives a Ford F-150,” I said because that was the only brand of manly car that I knew.

“What year?”

“I don’t know.”

“What does it look like?” James demanded.

“It’s green.”

“Hudson has a green car?” Connie said in disbelief.

“It’s a dark forest green,” I backtracked. “Almost gray.”

I was sweating. Did they make trucks that color? Who knew?

“What does the front look like?” James insisted, drawing the attention of my uncles who had wandered into the kitchen, drawn by the smell of biscuits and sausage.

“Did it have a big grille like this?” Uncle Eddie asked, miming with his hand. “Was the center console sort of swoopy shaped?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“It’s the limited edition 2018,” he said confidently.

“Sounds right,” I said weakly, feeling like I was digging a hole for myself that was also quickly filling with water.

My mom handed Uncle Eddie an apple and sent him on his way.

“Breakfast will be ready soon.”

“I think she’s making this whole thing up. Gracie could just be texting with a chatbot or something,” my sister declared.

Gracie: They want photographic evidence it's you.

Hudson: ...

My phone dinged with an incoming photo.

“Oh my lord,” I said as the photo finished downloading. Wasn't it illegal to send photos like that?

It was ... well it wasn't almost porn. It was literally porn.

The photo was of Hudson, nude. I mean, I assumed it was. I hadn't seen him naked, but there was what looked like a military tattoo of a sigil with Latin script on the right side of his washboard abs, partially covered by his hands that were grasping the biggest, thickest cock I had ever seen.

Not that I watched porn, but even if I had, I doubted anything on Pornhub would match that weapon in Hudson's hands.

And this is why I needed to call it off.

Connie grabbed the phone and immediately started screaming.

Was it too early for a drink? Didn't 1950s housewives start drinking at like nine in the morning?

“I see why you had to parade him around,” Granny Murray said, taking the phone and making an appreciative noise. “If you need a sex pad, you just let me know, girlie. I'll clear out of the in-law suite.”

Violet and Bella screeched, holding on to each other and jumping around.

“What in the world?” their mother said as she and my other aunts rushed into the kitchen.

The phone was passed around. Appreciative noises were made.

“Kelly, are you so envious?” Connie teased my sister.

She snatched the phone.

“Is James that big?” Aunt Sandy asked me.

My mom glared at her sister-in-law, who shrugged with a smirk.

“She’s the only one who knows.”

James gave me an ugly look.

This was out of control. Completely out of control.

“And to think Kelly was bragging about James’s American Express Black Card.” Violet snorted.

Did she mean the company card? That I’d been on the phone for months trying to get from him? Sure. Okay.

“Can you text this to me?” my cousin begged.

“No.”

“Text it to *me*. I’m the one who just got rid of my cheating ball and chain,” Granny Murray declared.

“If you keep phrasing it like that, people will think you killed that poor man,” Granny Astelle harrumphed, her cane dragging on the floor as she stomped into the kitchen, which apparently was no longer my safe space.

“I wish I had,” Granny Murray stated.

“Do you want to see it, Grandma Astelle?” Connie asked as the elderly woman, hair perfectly coifed, slowly made her way to a chair at the kitchen table.

Astelle stared down her nose at the phone.

Connie gulped and handed it back to me.

She stomped her cane on the tile floor.

“This is absurd. Where is my son? Bethany, you need to control your daughter. One expects this type of behavior from lesser members of society, not from my granddaughters. You’re better than this, Gracie. And you wanted to wear my mother’s dress. She’s rolling over in her grave right now.”

I felt sick and ashamed.

“I’m almost glad Kelly destroyed it, if it was going to someone who’s receiving lewd photos from a man who refused to officially court her.”

Grandma Astelle was right. I was better than this.

And it ended now.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I write the kind of books I love—romantic comedies featuring snarly guys with hearts of gold, kick-ass heroines, and a swoon-worthy happily ever after! Also wine. And cupcakes.

When I'm not writing I can be found drinking tea, surrounded by my massive to-be-read pile! So many books...

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