



the big bad's *mail order*

BRIDE

ERIN HAVOC

BIG BAD'S MAIL-ORDER BRIDE

CURVES AND RUINS

BOOK FIVE

ERIN HAVOC

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All characters are adults.

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HARLEY

Five years ago, if anyone told me I'd sign up for a mail-order bride service, I would laugh in their face. Me? Never. I always believed love would come along, riding on a white horse and wearing gleaming silver armor, and he'd pick me up, kiss me, and we would get married two weeks later.

Maybe I watched one too many Disney movies, yes, but I had a single mother who worked herself to exhaustion, and kids back then were super nasty to me. My only friends were two-dimension ones, and I may have watched *Beauty and the Beast* more times than it's approved by the doctors.

A mail-order bride service is offensive, I would have said. Certainly, a man who truly loved me would come along soon enough. There were so many men in high school, and in college, surely one of them would fall in love with me.

Never happened. And when my mother passed, and I celebrated my twenty-first birthday alone, I knew I had to do something.

Men aren't the way Disney movies taught me. They're mean, and they make fun of my weight and tease me about the way I look. I've been made fun of for being chubby, and for flustering easily, and for enjoying children's movies, and for reading romance. They had mean jokes for my straight-A's,

and I thought I'd meet some cool people in college, but they were mean there, too.

Dating apps suck. People send naked pictures before *hello*, others think you owe them something because they were polite to you. I hate this. I hate how alone I feel in a world so full of technology, and nowadays I've adapted my romance fix from Disney movies to romance books, and I live vicariously through heroines who find their happily ever afters easier than me.

And some of them do it through mail-order bride services. So, I thought *why not?*

This one had hundreds of great reviews, and the matchmaker was super nice to me. She never made a joke, never looked weird at my full hips, and was super attentive, asking me about what I desired in a partner. In a matter of days, it was all settled.

Just one plane ride away and I'll meet my soon-to-be groom. Roman Fraser is such a male name. A bit Scottish, too. There were no pictures, but I hope he's got red hair. That would be so hot. I've never dated anyone with red hair. Well, I never dated, *period*, but red hair would be nice. Not in an Ed Sheeran way, but in a Sam Heughan way.

My face grows hot from the daydreaming. Also, because I'm running across the airport. I cringe, shooting my gaze up to the gates, searching for mine. God, how could I get so distracted? I've been sitting next to a cafe for the last two hours, immerse in this amazing romance book, and I almost missed them calling my name. I can't miss my flight. Setting my jaw, I pump my legs and ignore the stitch burning on my side as I drag my suitcase behind me.

I'm one flight away from meeting my happily ever after. There's no way I'll miss it because of a book.

Gate fourteen rises to my left, and I skid to a halt in front of a brunette in a pencil skirt. She gapes at me, then opens a smile, as if her colleagues weren't grabbing the gate behind her to close it. "Harley Stoltz?" she asks.

"Yes," I blurt out, breathless, heat burning my cheeks. "I'm so sorry. I got—"

"It's okay," she cuts me in, offering her hand. "Just let me check your ID and ticket."

Nodding furiously, I dig through my book to find both. After she nods me in, I hurry into the finger, pulling my suitcase behind me with my heart hammering in my chest. This was a close call. Next time, I'll sit in front of the gate to avoid this.

After being greeted by two other flight attendants, I swallow my heart and check my seat on the ticket. This plane is tiny, with two chairs on either side of the narrow corridor. I turn sideways to avoid bumping into anyone and let the chatter inside the plane soothe me again. It's alright now. They're not leaving without me.

Seat ten, and only one empty chair. That's mine. The man sitting next to it looks down at his phone, fingers working on the keyboard. Wow, he has big fingers. I wonder how he can hit the letters. Another glance tells me he's huge *everywhere*. Knee thrust against the seat in front of him, the other leg out in the corridor. His shoulders are so broad they take the seat and a few inches to either side. Salt and pepper hair covers his head, curling behind his ears in soft waves. He grunts at his phone.

I should get seated. Hauling the suitcase up, I grab it with both hands, aiming at the open bin in front of me. Wow, this suitcase is heavier than I expected. There's a reason humankind invented wheels—I would have been exhausted if I had to carry this around. I take a step closer to the bin, but my foot hits the man in front of me and I trip, the suitcase bumping against the open bin.

“Sorry,” I breathe out, and the man moves his foot away just an inch. I try again, my arms already burning. The suitcase hits the corner as I shove it into the bin and I have to put it down. Someone closes the baggage compartment below us, making the plane jerk, and this time I slam against the man chest-first. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry.”

The man shoots a glare up at me, moving away, and green eyes freeze me to the spot. Cheekbones so sharp I could have cut myself right now, a jaw tight and straight like a piece of marble. My heart skips a beat, and it's not because of the exercise.

“Allow me,” he says, his voice hoarse.

Stepping back, I let him grab my suitcase from me. Oh, wow, he's tall, too. My heart shoots up my throat again as he shoves the suitcase into the bin as if it weighed nothing. His biceps are eye-level and I gape at the curl beneath his well-cut dark suit. My mouth waters.

I should not be salivating for a man, and I should not be salivating for a man while I'm taking a flight to meet my groom.

He steps away, motioning me into my seat. Jerking back to reality, I swallow hard. “Thank you,” I whisper, my voice tiny like a mouse. Grabbing my book closer to my chest, I sneak toward the narrow chair.

The man takes his seat while I'm still getting into mine. I turn just as another compartment downstairs closes, jerking the plane and throwing me down. Reaching out, I grab onto the back of the front seat, but I don't land where I meant to.

Glancing sideways, I find the man's gaze on me, his arms spread open as I sit on his knees. Heat blooms on my face as he stares and stares, his green eyes so close, the musky scent of his cologne spreading in my lungs.

Oh, God, I fell into a stranger's lap.

Shooting up, I throw myself to my seat, my face so hot I might combust. "I'm so sorry," I repeat, fumbling for my seat belt. "Oh, my God, I'm so, so, so sorry..."

"It's okay," he grunts back, landing both his hands on his lap and gripping his phone. "Stop apologizing."

"Okay, sor—" Oh, wait. I cut the word before it leaves my lips. Dropping my book on my lap, I take a few deep breaths, finding my seat belt and tugging it around my hips. The person who sat here before me must have been a child or a size zero woman. I struggle with it until it's wide enough for size fourteen hips, then latch it with a final click.

My shoulder blades touch the seat, and I close my eyes, releasing a breath. Finally. It's finally done. One hour and a half flying, and I'll meet my groom, and we'll laugh about this story.

I open my eyes and find the stranger's gaze on me. On my lap. His brows furrow, and I shoot a glance at the book on my knees. *Claimed by the grumpy billionaire* stares back at me with its bright red font and a man-chest in the cover.

My throat tightens as I grip it to my heart, hiding the cover from the man. "It's, it's... Um, it's a romance." Steamy, but a

romance.

The man shrugs. “None of my business,” he says, turning back to his phone, and I think he’s dropping the subject when he goes on. “I just think these books feed into a fake expectation. That’s why women have their hearts broken so often. They expect something that doesn’t exist.”

“Grumpy billionaires exist,” I insist, then notice my argument is ridiculous. “Besides, it’s not crazy to expect true love.”

“True love is fiction,” he says.

I arch an eyebrow. “True love is fiction? Of course not. People fall in love all the time.”

“People want to fuck, or they want financial stability, or they want to prove something to society. It’s not love.”

Oh, wow, I found one. A grumpy person who doesn’t believe in love. My eyebrows shoot up. “There’s no way you never fell in love. You’re, like, forty.”

He shrugs again. “So? I never let myself be swindled by those concepts.” And he shoots me a glance with those burning green eyes. I ignore the way my stomach churns beneath his gaze.

“Well, I believe in it. In true love, and love at first sight, and all sorts of loves.”

He shrugs those huge shoulders, his arm brushing mine. “Then you’re going to be disappointed.”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I swallow what I was about to say when the flight attendants start the emergency instructions. Though I follow them, I keep sliding a glance at the man sitting next to me. There’s no way he doesn’t believe

in love, right? Maybe someone broke his heart, and that's the story he tells now.

The flight takes off, my city growing tiny beneath us, and I can't stop thinking about it. I signed up for the mail-order service because I feared never finding someone, or that no one would ever think I deserved true love... But it exists. There's no way he doesn't think that.

As soon as the belt sign goes off, I turn to the man again. "What about your family? Are you going home for the holidays?"

He shoots a glance at me, like he's growing annoyed. "Yes," he grunts in response.

"So, you don't think your mother loves you? That's true love, too."

He rolls his eyes. "A mere construct of society thrown into women. They're expected to love their children, so even if she didn't, she wouldn't tell me."

My eyes almost pop off their sockets. "There's no way you believe that."

He motions for an attendant, still looking at me. "Miss, no need to get hyped up over what a stranger believes. We're never seeing each other again after this." To the flight attendant, he says, "Can you get me the strongest coffee you manage? I have to catch up on some work." And he digs into his pockets for his earphones.

Grinding my jaw, I take the hint, sinking into my chair. He's right. Even though I find his point of view shocking, it's not like we're ever seeing each other again. I open my book on my lap, and a smile stretches across my lips when I think of what's waiting for me.

Roman Fraser, and my one true love.

2

ROMAN

The Airbnb I rented is so decked out in Christmas decorations, it looks like a Hallmark movie. One of those my mother forced me to watch with her, and she would cry every time, even though they all mixed into a blob of nonsense to my eyes.

Mom loves Christmas and she loves baking, and she loves romantic movies. Mom is everything I'm not, and though my brothers are all Christmas lovers and such, she's never given up on making me one of their own.

She tried everything when I was younger, and, to her disappointment, I never believed in Santa Claus. I was always thankful for the gifts, but an old man dressed in red, sneaking into the house in the middle of the night? Either fantasy or a burglar. Mom called me her *little Grinch* through all my childhood.

Being the Grinch of the family doesn't sound that bad. He lived alone in a big house on the top of a hill, with no one to bother him while he did his work, enjoyed his life, and enjoyed the view.

He was a bit lonely, but I'll admit I never minded that until this morning.

My phone rings. I take a beat, shooting one last glance at the Airbnb. On the site, the pictures showed such an elegant, cabin-like place, huddled in the woods just out of town, with a gigantic fireplace in the living room. Thick rugs, soft couches, dark wood floorboards, huge floor-to-ceiling windows into the expansive back yard, covered in a thin blanket of white.

It would have been perfect. I would sit down on the table in front of the glass windows, get some work done, and sip Irish coffee between virtual meetings. What I have instead is a mess strewn across the house, as if Rudolph had puked all over the living room. A gigantic Christmas tree with a pine smell so strong it has to be the real thing. Two hundred picture frames, posters, plaques, all thematic. And, of course, what feels like a thousand fairy lights, climbing up the chimney like a hungry vine, taking over the windows, the doors, the bed frames.

There are even candles, cinnamon, gingerbread, and candy cane. What's the smell of candy cane? It's impressive what capitalism does to people. They even buy candles that smell like fucking sugar.

I've already paid for the place, and I don't have the patience to argue now. So, I pick my phone up from my pocket, accept the call, and drag my suitcase to the bedroom. At least, it's only a few days. Just the holidays, just because my mother asked, just because she called me four times in two hours because she wouldn't give up.

And talking about her.

"Hey, Mom," I say through gritted teeth. God, there's a huge reindeer plush on the bed. This is a fucking nightmare.

"Hello, dear! Have you arrived? The company site says the flight landed in the past hour. Why aren't you here yet?"

“Mom.” And I take a deep breath. I’m forty-two. Why does my mother still treat me like a child? It’s not like I’ve ever been a rebel or irresponsible. I make good money as an investment consultant, and though she never understood my faith in cryptocurrencies, I’ve made enough money with them to make the front page of several magazines. “You know how far you live from the airport. I had to rent a car, I had to drive. Listen.” And I put the suitcase down with a heavy thud. “This was the sound of the suitcase on the ground. I’ve been in the Airbnb for less than five minutes.” And I already hate it.

Mom makes a disappointed noise. “I thought you’d change your mind and stay here with me.”

“No, Mom, I told you. I have some work to catch up on, and the others are already staying there. I wouldn’t have a moment of peace.” Not with my nieces and nephews running around, not with Mom’s new dog, not with how she loves to receive the neighbors for tea.

“Well, your loss,” she says with a chuckle, and I hear the thud of a door through the line.

“Are you leaving?”

“No, just arriving, in fact.”

“From where?” I arch an eyebrow. And here I thought she was waiting for me.

Mom giggles against her phone. “You know that friend of mine who married her daughter through a mail-order service?”

“Yes, and I’m still sorry about that.” Such a primitive concept to put people up for taking like that. Like animals in a bidding action.

“Don’t be! Don’t be, son, because you’re forty-two, and I’m not getting any younger, and I want you to have some

grandchildren to brighten up your life.”

I grunt, dropping on the mattress. “Mom. No. You already have grandchildren.”

“Not *your* grandchildren.”

“I have no interest in relationships, Mom.” And the image of golden hair and blue eyes flash in the back of my mind. I shake it off. “It’s a good thing you had more children because my brothers gave you daughters-in-law, and grandchildren, and the whole nine yards. Not me. I’m the son with the company, the business, and the money. Remember? I’m the son who pays for your new car, your new house, and the cruise across the Mediterranean.”

“All amazing presents and I’m grateful for them, but nothing makes a mother happier than seeing her son happily married. And I want that for you, son. I want to see you in love, and I want to see you smile.”

“Not going to happen, Mom.”

“Not if it’s up to you,” she insists. “And that’s why I took it into my own hands.”

Silence follows her words, and it’s so heavy it makes my stomach flip with nerves. “Fuck, what did you do, Mom?”

“Nothing much. Just signed you up for the mail-order bride service.”

“Mom!” How could she do this? I made it plenty clear I disagree about it, and I hate the thought of being shoved together with some woman I don’t know. And yet, she went out of her way, paid I don’t know how much, all to do something I asked her not to.

“She’s already here,” she blurts. “I picked her up from the airport, and she’s so lovely, Roman. You’re going to love her, I know it. I can already feel it in my heart.”

“Mom, this is ludicrous.”

“This is going to be a Christmas miracle if there was ever one. You better come along. Don’t leave your bride waiting!” And she dares to hang up.

My fingers curl around the phone and I grab it hard until I hear it crack. Only then do I stop, my teeth clenched, my heart thumping. Fuck, I can’t believe she went around my back like that. When I asked her not to.

Mothers are an unstoppable force of nature. Emphasis on *unstoppable*.

I balance not going at all. Leaving her there until Mother sends the girl away so we can have a normal Christmas. Something tells me it won’t happen like that. Mom will insist, and she’ll find a way to force me to meet the girl.

Shaking my head, I change out of the suit into something more comfortable. A pair of joggers, and a thick sweater that will make me extra sweaty when I leave for a jog later on. Though snow blankets the ground, no new flakes float down from the sky. I wash my face and run my wet fingers through my hair, then stride to the door.

The cold kisses my cheeks, and I imagine them burning into a soft red. It reminds me of her again. The mysterious girl in the airplane, all beauty, clumsiness, and fierce honesty.

My heart skips a beat. It happened then when our eyes locked for the first time. It happened again every other time our gazes met, and when she plopped down on my lap, and when her arm brushed mine. Shit, I have no idea what this is,

but she beckoned to my body like she was the fucking sun, and I am a mere planet orbiting her.

Blond hair draped around her shoulders in soft curls. Her small eyes were the bluest of colors, like a clear, winter sky, and they sparkled with something every time I looked at her. A perfectly drawn cupid's bow, soft pink lips, her skin tinged red with a fluster. And that body of hers, fuck...

Full, round, like a fertility goddess, like a marble sculpture from millennia ago. Hips perfect for my big hands to curl around, tits round enough for me to stick my cock between them...

Oh, shit. No, cut that out, Roman. I pick up my pace, running faster, flaring my nostrils so the cold air grounds me. I shouldn't be thinking about that. She was way younger than me, innocent, and everything I'm not.

The girl believed in true love, and she read romances, and she and I couldn't be more different. She was beautiful, and I can't deny how much my body wanted her. When she plopped down on my lap, I thought she'd feel the raging erection in my pants, but she didn't. Instead, she turned to read her nasty books...

If only I could have the chance to do those nasty things to her. Whatever she wanted, however she wanted it. I would make her feel so good. I could make her squeeze that tight cunt of hers around me, and...

No. Holy shit, stop that. I shake myself again, and I promise it's the last time I think of her. Shit, am I getting obsessed over a woman I'll never see again? This is madness. I must be too idle. I'm kissing Mother hello, and I'm telling her to take the girl back home, and then I'm darting back to

the Airbnb to work. That's the only way I'll put my head out of this business.

Time will make me forget the blond girl with her sharp mouth and flushed cheeks.

The Airbnb I rented is a ten-minute walk from my mother's. I climb onto the front porch, kick the snow off my boots, then knock on the door. The pup barks inside, making me wince. Mom's hurried steps announce her a moment before she jerks the door open, her smile wide, her eyes burning with expectation.

"Mom, I can't believe you did that," I tell her.

She throws her arms around my shoulders. "Welcome home, baby! I haven't seen you in forever!"

"Three months, Mom." Though I complain about her, I try to come often. As a man in his forties, I'm lucky my mother is still around, and I'll make sure she has wonderful memories of me when she leaves us. "Listen, Mom..."

She cuts me in. "Come in! Take off these ugly shoes. There's someone I want you to meet..."

And though I obey, kicking off the boots and following her into the living room, I'm already shaking my head. "Mom, I hope this girl hasn't traveled far. Honestly, if you..."

"This is Harley Stoltz," she says as we enter the living room. "Harley, this is my son, Roman."

I comb the living room for the poor girl who's about to pack up and leave, and my eyes land on the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. My heart jerks in recognition, and my jaw drops in surprise.

Holy fuck. It's her.

3

HARLEY

A girl less optimistic might have packed up and left. Or maybe a girl with more sense. Me? I'm ignoring everything that's happened before this moment, and I'm embracing the chance to get to know Roman.

The fact his mother signed him up is a big red flag at first. Disappointment and fear burn in my chest. My groom had no idea I was coming. But then, the man from the airplane walks in, and I'm one hundred percent sure this has to be fate.

We sat together, and we even bantered a bit, and there has to be a reason the mail-order bride service thought we fit together. A reason I won't give up on finding out.

Yesterday, I was a bit awkward, I have to admit. I was surprised, and disappointed he didn't know about the match. But his mother was so nice, and she had this cute little pup who loved me, and the afternoon changed as I opened up.

Mrs. Fraser is sixty-five, but she has much more energy than I do. She showed me around the house, pulled up the family albums, and whipped together an amazing afternoon tea, with tiny finger food, and three different cakes. Roman sat with us and looked aloof at first, but as Mrs. Fraser asked me about my life, my job, and my childhood, he started changing.

He looked up, head tilted toward me as if he were paying attention.

Either that or he pretends well.

Mrs. Fraser took us out to have dinner in a quaint, cozy restaurant five minutes away. There, we met a couple of her friends, and the trio together was so vivacious and so boisterous I didn't have the chance to think about Roman until I put my head in the pillow.

His pillow, because his brothers arrived and there was nowhere to stay at his mother's. And though entering the house with him made my stomach churn with expectation, he just put me in the master bedroom, wished me a good night, and locked himself in the smaller one. I wonder if he even fits the bed there.

Today, things are going to be different. I'm going to make Roman look at me, truly look at me. We don't have long together, and I fear that if we leave, he won't ever bother with this again.

I never thought I deserved love, and if he leaves, he might just prove me right.

Shooting to my feet when my phone alarm goes off, I make my bed, flip on the fairy lights that wrap around the headboard, and run into the bathroom. Today is important. Christmas Eve and everything, and I have to look extra nice. I shower, then put on a pair of thermal leggings and a dress sweater on top. The green of the sweater is the same as Roman's eyes, and the insight makes butterflies set off inside me.

I brush my blond hair, carefully unmaking the curls so they look soft. After applying a bit of makeup—eyeliner to make

my eyes pop, gel so my brows stay in place, a bit of foundation to conceal the redness of my cheeks—, I spray my favorite fragrance on and take a deep breath.

This is it. I look nice but effortless. No need to pep-talk myself in the mirror. I'm alright, and today is going to be awesome.

Steps make the floorboards creak outside. Goosebumps ride down my arms. He's already up. I should hurry.

Opening the door with a jerk, I force myself to calm down. The plan is the same—make him breakfast, show him appreciation, and ask him about his work. Mrs. Fraser mentioned something about investments, and how he puts hours and hours of his day into it, but I still don't know what he does. Does he work for a bank? A private company?

I make my way to the kitchen, crossing the living room, and I almost trip and fall in awe. Oh, wow, this house is beautiful! Yesterday, with the lights dimmed, I didn't have the chance to study it. My jaw drops as my bare feet touch the dark hardwood floors, and I stop in the middle of the living room to gape.

There's a fireplace, and it's empty and cold, but fairy lights and garlands wrap around it. A gigantic Christmas tree stands next to it, so tightly packed with lights (currently off) and trinkets and ornaments that it looks straight out of a movie. More lights take every door frame, and several cute pictures of pups and kittens in Santa hats take the walls. There's even a Santa raccoon!

“Morning,” a deep voice grunts from behind me. “Do you drink coffee?”

I whirl around to find Roman standing in the middle of the kitchen in jeans and a t-shirt. The fabric struggles around his biceps and my mouth goes dry as I watch him. The jeans are a strange choice for the weather, but he looks great in them. A part of me wanted to see him blurry-eyed with sleep, his salt and pepper hair mussed, but, just like me, he is showered and dressed, ready for a day in town.

From the laptop opened on the dining table, I'm guessing a day in town is not on his list.

"Mm, coffee?" I mouth, arching an eyebrow as my gaze gets lost in his barrel chest and, God, if I could ask for one thing for Christmas, it would be Roman in sweatpants. Why is he wearing jeans at home? Who does that?

Sweatpants are the epitome of man's wear. Yesterday, I was so nervous I couldn't take the sight of him in sweatpants in. I wish he wore them today, too. The piece hanging low around his hips, the bulge of his manhood silhouetted against the thin fabric... My mouth turns into a desert, my tongue sticking to the roof. Would his manhood go hard for me? Would it twitch under my scrutiny?

The butterflies setting flight inside me make me nauseous. It's like a hurricane inside my stomach now.

Roman tilts the coffee jar toward me. "Coffee? Sugar?"

Sugar, oh, I'd love it if he called me that. Heat spreads over my face when I notice I've been silently staring at him all this while, daydreaming. Talk about being awkward. Shaking myself back to reality, I rush into the kitchen.

"It's Christmas Eve," I say, my voice faltering. "And Christmas Eve is not a coffee day." I go around the cabinets, looking for the material I have in mind. Blessed be, I find

chocolate powder—sealed, and from a nice brand—and a bag with mini marshmallows. My shoulders droop in relief.

“Every day is a coffee day,” he grunts in response, fitting the jar back into the machine.

“No, today is a day for hot chocolate.”

Roman doesn't leave, leaning into the cupboard. That has to be a good sign. He takes a loud sip of his coffee. “Is there going to be alcohol in the hot chocolate?”

I shoot a horrified look back at him. “Alcohol? In the chocolate, at nine in the morning?”

He shrugs, but the tiny shadow of a smile crosses his lips. “As you said, Christmas Eve.”

Turning back to the cabinets, I find a pan to warm up the milk. “Some men just want to watch the world burn,” I murmur to myself, but Roman makes a pleased sound behind me, something like the beginning of a laugh. My shoulders pull tight, but I don't dare turn to check it out.

“Alcohol warms you up,” he says.

“Yeah,” I shoot back, not missing a beat. “But I don't need to warm up. I'm hot enough.”

“True that.” And this time, his hoarse voice brushes the back of my head, making my hair flutter. I freeze there, gaping at the chocolate, my heart galloping. He surely doesn't mean *hot* in a sexy way, right? I never thought I was sexy. No, there's no way. But Roman's standing close, the warmth of his body coming off in waves, seeping into mine.

I force myself to go back to work, mixing the chocolate powder and milk. “Besides,” I bite out, “it's too early for

alcohol. What's the point of getting tipsy and not enjoying the celebrations?"

"Some people don't care about that."

"Everyone should. It's a special time, and not because of Christmas itself, but because of family. Everyone should prioritize spending time with family while we're all here. Even if it's just a couple of days. Not everyone has a family or a loving family." And I clamp my mouth shut because now I'm babbling. Apprehension is a knot in my chest. Did I talk too much? Did I bother him? Will he go back to work, complaining about his mom setting him up with a crazy girl?

As the chocolate warms up, I reach for the cupboards, searching for a mug. They're on the second level, a bit too high for me. Pressing myself to my toes, I stretch for them.

A massive hand closes around the mug, and a hard body presses to my back, forcing my hips against the counter. I halt, freezing as Roman's body touches mine. His warm breath touches the side of my face, and we're stuck in that bubble, together. I look back, finding his burning green eyes on me. He takes a breath, so I take it, too, his male scent inebriating me.

My head goes light as I gape at him. At the way he looks at me, at how he licks his lips just slightly. I swallow, parting my lips for him. Would he kiss me? Would he hold me closer if I asked? His zipper digs into the small of my back, and I want to close my eyes and pretend it's his manhood, pretend he's aroused by me. More of his warm breath skitters along my cheek. Desire tightens inside me as I lean back, my head touching his chest, a silent plead in my eyes.

His arm flexes, and he brings the mug down. It clatters on the counter next to me, but Roman doesn't move away. His

eyes study me, willing to see into my soul.

“My mother’s having a Christmas Eve dinner tonight,” he says, his voice strained, pulled tight. “Would you like to go?”

“Yes,” I reply without thinking, because, right now, I’d agree to anything he says.

Roman nods and steps away. My knees buckle and I almost fall, gripping the edge of the counter at the last second. Cold washes over me, a mix of disappointment and frustration, and I look back at him. He creates distance between us with strides, disappearing into his bedroom. The door closes a second later.

Why does this feel like a step back? Why is this emptiness in my chest gaping bigger than when I arrived?

Am I the only one who’s feeling like this?

4

ROMAN

The ruckus in my mother's house gets louder every year. My brothers and their wives are here, and one of them also has a new pup, and there are the children. The fertility rate in our genes is impressive. I don't know how I have so many nephews and nieces in such a short time. They're so many I can't tell one from the other, running up and down the house, screaming, laughing out loud.

Somehow, Harley fits right into it. Like a puzzle piece missing, she slots herself into my family like we've all been waiting for her. She laughs out loud with my brothers, and she chats with my sisters-in-law as if they're old friends. The children love her, fighting for who's sitting on her lap this time, and begging her for attention. Even the dogs lie at her feet.

Harley is empathetic, sweet, and bubbly. She's everything I'm not, and she's so natural at it. It doesn't even look like she's doing chores, because that's what it is, right? She's been tricked by my mother to come here, with promises of a marriage I never made, and she's acting nice because that's what's expected of her.

I'm well aware of the twisted expectations women hold in this society. Whatever she chose, to stay or to leave, she'd be

judged. Women are judged for having kids, or not having kids. For studying, or not studying. For turning left or right. And though I find it impressive how Harley deals with this, I hate to think she's feeling forced to stay.

She's so fucking pretty it hurts. Golden hair like an angel, clear blue eyes, those soft lips I can't stop thinking about. This morning I almost blew it out of the water. My hard cock pressed into her back, half-concealed by my zipper, and it got harder with every whiff of her scent I captured. She's so soft, and those curves of hers have crowded my head.

I don't work, I don't think, I do nothing other than imagine her beneath me, cheeks flushed, parted lips, as I ram into her tight cunt like there's no tomorrow.

My cock twitches in my pants—again—, and I grind my jaw. Fuck, it's a never-ending cycle. As long as I'm close to her, my erection never goes down.

“Everything alright, Roman?” she asks me, and I blink to find her eyes on my face. My brothers are staring, too, as is my mother. Shit, have I been gaping at her like a madman? Like a stalker?

I'll never hear the end of this.

“Sure,” I blurt, shooting to my feet and burying a hand into my pocket. “Just thinking I needed more wine.”

My brothers smirk, both getting to their feet. “Oh, I just happen to need more, too,” one of them says, even when his glass is half-full.

“No,” I cut him in, knowing very well they want to follow me so they can bother me with questions about Harley. Questions I don't know what to answer. “No need to come. I'll bring the bottle.”

“You s—”

“Yes, I’m sure.” And I dart out of the living room, toward the kitchen. Fuck, I need some time off.

Once in the kitchen, I grab the island counter with both hands to ground myself. Fuck, what am I doing? Harley is younger by some twenty years. She’s barely out of college. Too young, too bubbly, too beautiful. We’re nothing alike. She loves Christmas, while I hate it. I’ve spent my life with my head down, working hard, and studying hard.

What is this feeling inside me? Why can’t I stop thinking about her? She’s beautiful, yeah, and I understand this strange obsession my body has with hers, but there’s more. There’s a warmth inside me when I hear her talk, and I find her both impressive and bright. She’s a star, burning fiercely next to me.

I don’t believe in love, so it can’t be it. Then what the fuck is going on?

A clatter outside makes me look up. I squint at the kitchen windows, but there’s no one out there. The clatter again, and I make my way to the back door, grabbing the doorknob and yanking it open, hoping to surprise whoever’s sneaking around the house.

The motion sensors for the lights go on, and bright white washes over the back porch. Half-hidden by the trashcan lid, big brown eyes gape at me, a long gray nose twitching.

“Fucking raccoon,” I hiss, jumping down the steps toward the animal. “No fucking Christmas gifts for you here!” I roar, shooing him off. He rushes away with my stomps, and the lid clangs closed. Shooting a glance at the bushes it disappeared under, I give it a moment to make sure the raccoon’s not

coming back. Once nothing happens and the chill evening air clings to my face, I turn around and wrap the chain around the lid once more. With a tug, I make sure the raccoon can't slip inside again.

A silhouette forms on the threshold, and I look up to find Harley standing there, haloed by the light. *Like an angel* seems to be my go-to way to describe her. She parts her lips, air puffing past them as her blue eyes glitter in the dim light.

"What happened?" she asks, hugging herself against the cold.

"Raccoon."

"Oh! Did he spill the trash? Maybe we could put some cookies out for him." She has the audacity to say both sentences in the same breath.

I gape at her, pausing a foot away. "Cookies. Out for the raccoon."

"Yeah."

"For the raccoon."

Her brows drop as she squints at me. "He's hungry! It's Christmas! Why wouldn't I put food out for him?"

Scratching the back of my head, I let my lips stretch. This woman. This woman is a fucking mystery. "Because it's going to teach them to come here often, and then they'll be wanting more food."

Harley *pouts*, and shit, it's so fucking *sexy*. "But he's hungry. And it's Jesus' birthday."

Oh, God, I can't believe she's convincing me to feed a freaking raccoon. But there's something on that pout, and the way she tucks her chin down and looks up at me makes me

want to do everything for her. She could ask me impossible things and I would do my best to make them all come true.

“Alright,” I blurt before I’ve wrapped my head around the matter. “Alright, we’ll get him some cookies. But just this once.” And I don’t know why I say it like this. Like she’s staying. Like we’re both coming for Christmas with my mom again.

Harley throws her arms up, a beautiful smile blossoming on her face. She squeals, throwing her arms around my neck, and for a moment I think she did it accidentally. But my arms work by themselves, wrapping around her, my hand landing between her shoulder blades. Her hair brushes against my fingertips, her face pressed to my chest, and I tilt my head down, touching her head with my nose. She smells so fucking good. My eyelids flutter shut and I stay there, in her soft warmth, her delicious smell sinking into every part of me.

Her body tightens. She might have noticed the proximity. I don’t want to let her go just yet, so I ease the hold without dropping my arms.

Harley pulls back, staring at me with a mix of hope and doubt. Shit, there’s no way she’s hoping for more, is she? No, there’s no way she wants me. Her body presses to mine, full tits to my chest, and my cock twitches and twitches, but I can only look into her eyes.

She glances up between us. “Oh,” she breathes out, and her cheeks go red.

I follow her gaze to the doorjamb above us. A branch of mistletoe was hammered to the wood, high enough it wouldn’t hit my head when I ducked under the door. This was my mother’s doing. No doubt about that.

She's hanging mistletoe around when everyone in the family is married. Everyone, but me.

My jaw clenches as I look back down at her. Harley presses herself closer and pushes herself on her toes. Blue eyes study my face, her plump lips parting. I capture her chin, unable to stop my thumb from touching her bottom lip.

"A mistletoe," she murmurs.

"Yeah."

"You don't have to," she whispers, breath scattering across my mouth. There's wine and peppermint in her scent, and it makes my mouth water.

"No, I don't." I lean closer, tasting her gasp. "But fuck, I've never wanted something more." And I kiss her. It's a press of lips at first, her hands curling on my shirt, holding me close. But I've always been a greedy man, and I want more.

Licking at the seam of her lips, I part them, dipping my tongue into her mouth. She shudders against my hold, her tongue brushing mine as I coax her. As I explore her, taste her. Peppermint, ginger, wine. She tastes amazing, and I want to drink from these lips the rest of the night. I want to put her on my lap so this nice ass of hers snuggles my cock, and I want to kiss her mouth until she's breathless and flushed.

Harley kisses me back with innocent touches of her tongue. I bury a hand into her hair, fisting the strands, and a gasp of hers makes me want more. Moving my hips, I dig my cock into her stomach, lust coiling inside me like a mad snake. Fuck, I want her so bad. I want her so fucking bad my blood sings.

"Oh," she breathes out, and I bet she noticed how fucking hard I am for her. "Is that you?" she whispers against my lips.

“Fuck, of course, this is me, sweetheart,” I reply, having no idea where the endearment came from. “And this is all because of you.”

She swallows hard. “Oh, God.” And I don’t know if that’s a good or a bad thing, and she kisses me again, but it’s timid, another press of lips. Her entire body locks, and it’s obvious she’s pulling away from me.

She hated this. She hates me.

“Close the door!” one of my brothers screams from the living room, and it’s only then I notice the door’s still open, and the chilly wind blows inside the house.

Harley steps back as if electrocuted. She doesn’t look at me as she whirls around and marches back to the living room. All I have is a slight glimpse of her flushed face... And that might be the one thing I will ever have of hers. Her taste in the back of my memory, her scent wafting in the air. I curl my fingers around my hardness, squeezing hard.

Letting the door close, I abandon the glasses and the wine and stride to the closest bathroom. There’s no way I can survive the night without beating my cock. There’s no way I can see those plump lips without picturing them wrapped around my cock.

Harley is driving me mad, but she’s made it plenty clear: she has no interest in a man like me. Whatever we had, the kiss smothered all hope, and I’ll forever have only the memory of her against my body. The memory of what could have been.

5

HARLEY

For the first time in forever, I'm so well rested I wake up before my alarm. I stay there, eyes half-open, a silly smile on my lips as the duvet holds me close, cuddles me. It's a warm feeling, not only because of the soft sheets and the amazing pillow but everything that's been happening.

The memory of Roman's kiss burns into my skin and sends goosebumps down my arms. I've never been kissed like that. And it wasn't because of the mistletoe, too. Something tells me Roman cares so little about Christmas and traditions he would have ignored the plant if it wasn't for me. Instead, he picked me up, kissed the air out of me, and made sure I would never forget that moment.

Christmas Eve dinner was amazing, and I adore his family. They received me so well. Everyone was so nice, his brothers so funny. His sisters-in-law have already followed me on every social media, and it feels like we've known each other forever. The kids were cute, and the puppies were lovely. The house feels like a true home.

A home they welcomed me in.

I want to stay, and I want to stay with him. Roman felt so close yesterday. He'd sit nearby, and watch me, his gaze

lingering. Then the kiss... Everything felt perfect. As if we teetered on the edge of something big.

Then it broke, like a bubble bursting, and I know I rushed off too soon, and I was so nervous, and maybe I screwed it all up.

Slamming my eyes shut, I press my face to the covers. No, this couldn't have been my only chance. Yes, today is Christmas morning, and my flight is scheduled for tomorrow, but this couldn't have been my only chance.

Roman is everything I've ever wanted. He's big and bulky, and it sends all the right signs of my secret wish to be protected. He's hardworking, and a family man. Someone who treats his mother well, and who makes sure she's taken care of. His brothers love him. His sisters-in-law are comfortable enough around him they make fun of his closed-off ways. Roman might be a somber man, and a big Grinch, but he's everything I want.

And there's a reason the mail-order service matched us. There is a reason they thought we'd be good together, even if Roman wasn't the one who signed up for it.

I can't let this hope go. No, I'll grab it with both hands. There's no way I'm leaving this magical place without being sure if we're good together or not. And that kiss Roman gave me yesterday? It set me on fire like nothing else and no one else ever did. I want another kiss. At least that.

When I flutter my eyes open and decide to do my best with my last day, the sight out of the window makes me gasp. While I thought of him, snow started to fall, tiny snowflakes dancing to the ground, swaying before settling on the windowsill.

I shove the sheets back and dart out of the bed, pressing my hands and my face to the cold glass. A thin blanket of white covers the world, and from the gray skies above, more is coming. A Christmas snow. Like in the movies. I can't help but smile. If there's ever been a sign, it's this one.

I hurry through the shower and get dressed, brushing my hair, and putting a bit of makeup on. My phone tells me it's not even nine, and Mrs. Fraser asked us to stop by around noon for lunch, so there's enough time. I don't even know if Roman's up. It's Christmas, after all.

Opening the door, I laugh at myself. His footfalls sound from the kitchen, softer than usual as if he's holding his breath while he walks. A warmth spreads over my chest. He's trying to keep quiet so he won't wake me up. A smile stretches my lips further.

I make my way to the kitchen and find Roman standing near the stove, flipping something in a pan. Cocking my head, I study the materials scattered around the counter. Flour streaks the marble, and the forgotten eggshells lie by one side. There are a couple of dirty forks, and syrup waiting next to two plates. The coffee maker bubbles with fresh coffee, the scent of it filling the space.

"Shit," he grumbles under his breath. He still hasn't seen me, his broad shoulders bunching in distress. "Hot chocolate. She likes hot chocolate, not coffee, you idiot."

The warmth on my chest spreads up to my face. God bless the foundation I put on, or I'd be looking like a tomato. Pressing my lips together, I clear my throat. "Morning," I say, my voice coming out tiny, hesitant.

Roman whirls around so fast that the pancake almost flies out of the pan. His eyes go round in surprise, and he gapes

between me and the pancake for a moment. “Shit, I didn’t hear you coming,” he says, turning back to the stove. “Fucking pancakes take forever to cook.”

To his left, I catch sight of a plate piled high with the flat cake, a bowl full of scrambled eggs, and paper towels lining the counter with bacon strips resting on top. It’s a full breakfast. My heart thump-thumps in my chest. He’s thought of it all. For me.

“I think we’re good with thirty pancakes,” I tease, grabbing the plate. “Is your family coming over?”

“No?”

“We have pancakes for an army.” I chuckle, placing the plate in the center of the table. “And I like coffee, too.”

Roman grunts under his breath, flips the pancake, and turns the fire off. He places the bowls with eggs and bacon on the table. I grab the coffee, he grabs the mugs—without pressing against me, a pity—, and we sit across from one another on the table. There’s only silence for a solid minute as I soak the pancakes in syrup and Roman watches me.

He wants to know if it’s good enough, doesn’t he? The idea he cares about my opinion warms me to my toes, and I curl them under the table. I bite into the pancake and hum in delight, picking up some crispy bacon and bathing it in syrup, too.

“This is amazing, Roman,” I tell him. “Thank you.”

He relaxes against the chair. “Good.” Only then does he turn to his food. He bites a forkful of eggs, and something crunches in his mouth. He narrows his eyes. “Fuck. I think I’ve bitten into a shell.”

I laugh. “Good. Calcium for your bones.”

He shoots me a deadpan glance before spitting out the shell. It's not even a tiny thing, but a big one. I cackle, covering my mouth to keep the sound inside, but it's useless. Roman teases me about it, and I tease him, and whatever tension existed between us vanishes. He asks about my job, and I tell him about being the project manager of an IT company, and how I love being able to work from home. He agrees since he's an investment manager, and we chat about how we chose our careers, and the subject changes to college. The two of us were nerds, not interested in parties, and we can relate in several things. We clean our plates, but we keep talking—about family, and my mother, and his mother.

Time flies. It's so easy to talk to Roman. He hears me out, pays proper attention, and his eyes are always fastened on me. I never thought it would be this easy to share with someone, and it just serves to make me more certain about the matchmaker.

I glance at the clock in the living room, and my eyes almost pop off of their sockets. "Oh, no, it's eleven already!"

Roman grunts. "No, that clock must be wrong." He checks his watch and his eyes go round, too. "Oh, shit. It is eleven."

We laugh—or rather I laugh, and he chuckles a little under his breath—, then grab the plates and take them to the kitchen. "Sorry," I tell him as we walk back to the living room. "No one's ever heard me babble as you did, and I guess I poured everything out on you."

Roman grabs my hand. He stops me in my tracks. I whirl around to find his eyes softening, his gaze on me. He shakes his head once. "You didn't. I enjoyed hearing you out. I never have the patience for people because they're self-centered, but it's not the same with you." His hold tightens. "Turns out it's

not about what people say, but who says it. I don't care about them. Never did. But I care about you. I'd hear anything you'd like to say."

More warmth spreads onto my cheeks. "I don't want to bother you."

"You'd never. Not in a hundred years. The way you see the world is special, Harley. Really." He tugs me closer, and I let him. My heart thunders in my chest as I tilt my face up, keeping my eyes on him. "You're beautiful, and you're smart, and you're so hard-working," he says. "And you're good. I can see it inside you, and it fascinates me."

His words make me smile. I raise on my tiptoes, my hand pressing to his chest to keep my balance. "Well, if it isn't a Christmas miracle," I tease him. "Is Mr. Grinch saying he finds me beautiful?"

Roman's lips stretch into a small smile. "Mr. Grinch here finds you the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." He pulls me against his chest, his breath coating my lips. "Would you kiss Mr. Grinch again?" he whispers.

I swallow, my heart beating in my throat. "Absolutely."

Roman kisses me, that press of lips that does things to my belly. Butterflies set off in a hurricane, and my blood boils when he urges my lips open so he can dip his tongue into my mouth. I'm not sure I'm doing it right, so I just follow his lead, swirling my tongue against his, tasting his lips.

Roman folds an arm around my waist and hauls me up on the kitchen counter. Warmth pools between my legs, low in my core, but I keep my eyes shut, my arms around his neck. He fits his body between my knees, hands brushing up my sides, down to my hips. Roman has huge hands, but they fit around

my ample curves perfectly. Fingers dig into my soft flesh, and he gropes at the rolls on my body as if they're so much sexier than I ever thought.

Every sweep of his tongue makes me moan softly now. The kiss warms me up, his hard body pressed to mine, my fingers itching to explore him. I arch my back, begging silently for him to touch my breasts. They ache now, my nipples tight against my bra, throbbing with need.

Roman keeps a safe distance, though, and once I'm out of breath, he pulls back. His eyes burn with desire, but he doesn't do what I want him to. He doesn't take me to the bedroom, rip off my clothes, he doesn't claim me as his. I press my lips together, watching him.

He kisses the tip of my nose, his chest heaving as he catches his breath. "Let's get ready for lunch. There's a lot to do today."

And I follow his lead, but honestly? I wanted to forget the world outside. All I need is him, and for him to tell me it's alright to fall in love this quickly.

6

ROMAN

Time is ticking. I've never been more aware of it moving than today. We make it to lunch before noon. There's the usual feast, then coffee, then afternoon tea. Mom gets ready to start dinner. I receive the much-dreaded email.

The airline company reminds me to check in. My flight is tomorrow afternoon, after all. Less than twenty-four hours and I'll be flying back home. Away from my family. Away from Harley. It's never felt like this. Like I was making a mistake.

The clock strikes six—too late, and I haven't had time to spend with Harley—, and knocks sound on the door. A flurry of blizzard blows outside as people crowd on our porch. Mom's closest friends greet her, hugging and kissing the air next to her cheeks. I pretend I care about their presence as I hope they'll distract my family and give me time with Harley. Instead, they show their sons in—a couple of guys I went to school with. They smile and slap my shoulder, and I see myself dragged away from Harley again.

I summarize the last year to them—I basically worked—, and they give me long versions of what they did the last twelve months, with detailed stories about work, family, and women they hung out with. The house smells like roasted potatoes, and I'm cursing myself. Harley sits on the couch

between my sisters-in-law, and she looks like she's having a good time. Chatting away, laughing, and playing with the kids and the dogs.

Me? The one thing I can think about is her. Her lips, her body, and how I fucking want to spend time with her. This is entirely new for me. I've never had friends because I never cared enough about people. She's different, unique, and bright. I want to stay with her, and I want to watch her and talk to her. And I don't have the time.

"Is that your girlfriend?" one of my former classmates asks. "She's cute."

She's not cute. She's glorious, with her golden hair, her sky-blue eyes, and juicy curves. Cute doesn't even begin to describe her. Her lashes are cute. Her toenails are cute. She's a fucking goddess.

I grind my teeth together. No use telling that to him. "Not a girlfriend. I mean, I don't know. Mom signed me up for a mail-order bride service."

"No shit?" he yelps, then laughs, looking over his shoulder at her again. "Well, I guess it could have been worse."

My gaze snaps at him. I roar deep in my chest. "What?" Rage and possessiveness curl inside me like a vile thing. I don't want him looking at her, but now that he did, I don't want him talking about her. How fucking dare he say something like that? Fucking trash. My hand closes into a fist.

The other guy raises both his hands in a pacifying gesture. "Chill. That was a shitty thing to say."

"Oh, sorry, man. I had no idea you liked her this much."

I grunt because I don't know what to say. *Like her* is not the right word. I don't like her. It's something more, bigger,

more intense. “No,” I reply, keeping my eyes on them. My family moves around, the girls getting up. They’re probably going to the kitchen to grab dinner. “No, it’s not like that.”

“Like what?” my brother asks, sitting on the chair next to mine.

“The girl your mother brought,” my former classmate says. “We were saying she’s cute, and he acted up.”

I growl again. “I didn’t *act up*.”

“He likes her,” my brother teases.

“No, I don’t *like* her.” The feeling pulsing inside my chest, this obsession, the inability to fall asleep without thinking about her... This isn’t about liking her. It’s more, and I don’t know what it is. “That’s child’s play.”

My brother snorts. “Then what? You’re all possessive over her. We know you kissed.” He leans closer, poking my shoulder. “Is Roman Fraser, the man without a heart, going to admit the matchmaker was right? Did you fall in love with the girl in two days flat?”

No. That would be impossible. The matchmaker wasn’t right, because such a thing doesn’t exist. Falling in love in two days? Impossible. And I’ve never been in love, so I can’t even tell.

I shake my head hard. “No. Love at first sight doesn’t exist,” I grunt at him, leaning away from his annoying hands. “And you know what I think of love. That’s made up. Marketing. A genius idea from capitalist minds.”

Feet hurry into the kitchen. Mom’s friends cackle at something, the cling of cutlery on plates rising over the sound of voices. I raise my eyes and search the living room for

Harley, but she's not here. My heart wants her. I want her, and I don't even care it's Christmas night. All I want is her.

"Then what?" my brother insists. "Come on, Roman. Be honest with yourself. You've been all over her."

"She's too young," I flail, but it's useless. I don't even care about the age gap any more.

"She's an adult, and she signed up for this. I think the matchmaker was right. You two get along so well you're falling in love with her."

Arching an eyebrow, I glance at my brother. "How could you know?"

"You changed," he says. "You're distracted. And you're always searching for her. Don't you think we noticed? You follow her like a lost puppy."

"I'm not a puppy!"

"No, but you're head over heels for her. Harley showed up to prove you wrong. You can't stop thinking about her, right?" my brother asks, his brows shooting up. "You can't sleep. I haven't seen you on your phone or your laptop. You want her, Roman. And for more than sex. You want to hear her out, and you want to spend time with her."

Shit. Shit, he's right. That's exactly what I feel. Gaping at him, I open and close my mouth, trying to form the words. "Okay. Considering I do feel like that. What does it mean?"

My brother grins. "It means you're in love, silly."

My mother rushes into the living room, wide eyes on her face. I shoot to my feet, adrenaline flooding into my veins. Did something happen? Is the house on fire? I flare my nostrils,

searching for the smell of smoke, but there's nothing. The fire alarm didn't go off. What is going on?

“Roman!” she cries out, reaching both hands to grab at my shirt. “Go! Quick!”

“Where?” I hold her around the shoulders. Mom is out of herself, gaze snapping to her sides, her mouth moving. “What happened?”

“Harley! She ran out of the door into the blizzard! You have to go and save her!”

And if I thought there was urgency before, I had no idea. The adrenaline running through my veins now doubles, and I circle my mother and rush into the kitchen. The back door is thrown open, and snowflakes blow into the house. I don't waste time, I don't question it. I rush into the storm after her.

7

HARLEY

Hope is a fickle, stupid thing. I can't believe I let myself fall this easily, this soon, for someone who isn't interested. Roman is everything I've ever wanted, but it means nothing. It means not a thing if he doesn't want me back.

And he said it from the very beginning. Roman doesn't believe in love, and he isn't interested in relationships. No matter what I felt about him, and the time we spent together, nothing changed for him. He'll pack up and leave town tomorrow, and our nights together will disappear in the back of his mind.

I fell in love with someone who doesn't want love. And if I thought I could wake something inside him, I was desperately wrong.

The words he tells his friends are knives to my chest. How he doesn't believe in love at first sight, or in love overall. It makes my cheeks burn in shame. The days we've spent together meant nothing. Did he treat me well because he pitied me? Because he thought I'm so silly, so wound up in this fantasy, that he had to take pity on me?

What about the kiss? Did that mean nothing, too?

I can't bear the thoughts, the fear, the pain. The sound of laughter, cheers, and the amused sounds of people chatting is too much. I can't keep a smile on my face and pretend everything's alright. As I rush into the kitchen, looking for a way out, I find nowhere to hide.

"Harley?" Mrs. Fraser calls out from the island, her fingers curled around a glass of eggnog. "Everything alright, dear?"

I can't face her. My heart shatters in my chest, and I can't meet her gaze. She had hope, and she brought me here because she believed it... But Mrs. Fraser was wrong. She was wrong about her son, and when she disrespected his wishes bringing me here, she doomed me.

She doomed me to love a man who doesn't want me back.

Whirling away from her, my gaze lands on the one escape out of this place. Tears brim on my lower lashes and I grind my teeth together. I stride to the back door and fling it open. Icy air slams into me, locking air into my lungs. A blizzard rages outside, blowing snowflakes furiously across the backyard, covering the grass in a thick white blanket. I curl my toes inside my shoes, faltering for a moment.

"Harley!" Mrs. Fraser calls again, and it's her voice that moves me.

I run into the storm, the wind slashing at my arms, clad in a thin sleeve. My face burns with the cold, but I keep going, darting out of the porch. I sink several inches into the snow, my shoes not ready for this. Icy water seeps into the material, but it doesn't stop me. I can't face them. There's no way. I keep going, bracing myself against the wind.

The cold slashes at my face, at my neck. Even though I'm covered in a long sleeve, it means nothing when facing the

fury of nature. My body shakes with trembles, fierce goosebumps racing down my arms and legs. It doesn't stop the tears streaking down my cheeks.

I was so silly. We should never expect people to change for us, and that's what I hoped Roman would do. He hates the idea of love and Christmas, and he finds me young and silly. There's no way he'd love me back. He might have kissed me out of pity, but he would never love me back.

The cold gets to me as I reach the main street. Snow piles up on the curb, and no cars dare cross the icy streets. Everyone's snuggled up at home, while I'm here, crying my eyes out, shaking with pain and cold. I sink my nails into my arms, glancing up the road. If I can get back into the Airbnb, I'll manage to hide until tomorrow. With some luck, there are Ubers in this small city, and I'll call one to take me back to the airport.

No more pain. No more putting my hope in this empty relationship.

A voice calls out in the wind. I bet someone is calling me crazy right now. Forcing myself to keep moving, I slip into a piece of black ice, then move back to the snow. No use breaking an arm now. I don't even know if the town has a hospital.

The voice calls again, closer, but it's still eaten up by the wind. I stop, glancing over my shoulder, and I see him. Roman runs to me, an arm raised against the wind. Oh, no. I don't want to talk to him. Clenching my jaw, I turn back to the road and try to pick up my pace. Very hard with this much snow.

His hands come around my elbows and he flips me to face him. "What are you doing out here?" he barks against the wind.

I squirm against his hold, but he doesn't let me go. "Let me leave!" I beg, more tears touching the top of my cheeks.

Roman gasps at the sight of them, touching his fingers to my face. "What happened? Did someone hurt you?"

I bite out a laugh. This is not the time for him to be protective. "Yes!" I shoot back. "Yes, you hurt me! But it's not even your fault, don't you see?" I cry, a bit mad, not making sense. "No, it was me, Roman. I put my hopes up. I thought you could love me, but I've been a fool. You told me you didn't believe in love, and I shouldn't have insisted. I should have left."

His hold tightens around my arms. "What are you talking about?"

"I heard you. Telling your friends what you think about love."

He shakes his head before I'm done. "No. I was wrong, Harley. And it's so painfully obvious now."

"What?" I wasn't expecting this.

"I was wrong. My brother made me see it. I saw it coming, to be honest." His Adam's apple bobs, his green eyes burning in the storm. "You showed me how wrong I was. You did it, Harley. I've been asking myself what the fuck is this I'm feeling for you, and it has to be it. I'm in love with you. And yeah, it's fast, and I never believed people who talked about it, but..." He shakes his head hard. "I'm in love with you. You proved me wrong. Don't leave."

The cold makes me shiver as I gape and gape at him. No words come. I don't know what to say. Is he doing this just because I ran away? Just because he doesn't want me to freeze to death?

Roman gives me a once-over, then clicks his tongue. “Fuck, let me get you somewhere warm,” he says, and I’m about to refuse when he bends and picks me up, bridal-style. A gasp lodges itself in my throat, but my cold limbs touch his warm body and I melt in his hold. The musky scent of him hits me, and I can’t form a single word as Roman’s big body moves across the snow.

I slam my eyes closed against the storm, my stomach churning with apprehension. He’ll take me back to the house, and I’ll have to explain to Mrs. Fraser why I left... But Roman keeps walking, fast, as if the storm meant nothing. After a couple of minutes, the force of the storm diminishes, and I open my eyes to find us standing on the porch.

Of his rented Airbnb. Not his mother’s house.

“What are we doing here?” I ask, my voice weak. Cold has made my body stiff, and Roman holds me closer as he unlocks the door. We step inside, the warmth of the heater bleeding into my bones. I release a sigh, but Roman doesn’t put me down. He kicks the door closed behind us and strides with me to the couch. He puts me down and works on removing my shoes. “What are you doing?”

“You were in the cold for too long, and unprotected,” he says pulling my boots and my wet socks out. “You’ll get sick.”

“I’ll be alright,” I insist, glancing at my purple toes. “You saved me.”

“Not fast enough,” he complains under his breath.

Roman strides to the bathroom and brings back a towel, soaked in hot water. He wraps it around my feet, then strides to the bedroom and brings a heavy duvet back. Without missing a beat, he wraps it around my body, leaving only my

face out. Unable to move much, I follow the sound of his footsteps into the kitchen, then hear him putting the kettle on. He's back in a second, rubbing my feet with the hot towel.

I want to tell him he doesn't need to do all that. The cold is already gone, and I was outside for mere minutes. But I like the way he cares for me, and how his hands curl around my feet and stroke them. Roman is very gentle for someone his size. It makes me all mushy inside.

Finally, he glances up at me. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," I murmur back.

"You sure? Nothing hurts?" And he unwraps my feet to check on my toes. "Your feet look fine. That's a relief."

I hum back at him. "Why did you do that?"

He arches an eyebrow. "What? Bring you here? You were freezing."

"No. Why did you say that?"

Silence wraps around us tighter than the duvet. The glass in the windows is so thick I hear nothing of the storm outside. The only sound is my heart beating in my ears. Roman stares at me, his green eyes pinning me to the spot. He opens his mouth, and his phone rings.

He picks up and glances at the screen. With a twist of his lips, he accepts the call. "Hey, Mom," he says. "Yes, she's fine. We're back in the Airbnb." A beat. "I think we might stay the rest of the night here." He glances at me. For reassurance? He wants me to agree? To disagree? "See you tomorrow, Mom," he says, and cancels the call, turning back to me.

"Roman, I—" I don't know what to say. "You should go back. Don't ruin your Christmas for me."

His hands squeeze my feet. “I don’t care about Christmas, but you know what I care about? You. Your safety. Your happiness.”

“Why do you keep saying these things?”

He kneels on the ground, approaching me, his fingers pulling the duvet open around my face. “I’m sorry about what I said, Harley, and I’m sorry for being so thick-headed. I’m in love with you. You’re beautiful, smart, and sweet. I’ve never seen anyone fit so well with my family. Call it whatever you want, but this Christmas changed my mind completely. You changed my mind.”

My bottom lip bobs. “Yeah?”

“Completely.” He finds my hand beneath the covers and touches my palm to his chest. “This heart of mine might be old and cranky, Harley, but it’s yours. I want you. I want you for the rest of my life. God, I can’t stop thinking about you, and I keep daydreaming of all the things we could do together. I want to see you when I wake up, and I want to hear you laughing.” He tugs me closer. “I don’t even know how to say this shit. All I know is that I love you.”

His words sink into me. They make my heart skip a beat as reality flips a switch in my mind. Roman’s in love with me. It *is* a Christmas miracle.

“Really?” I whisper back.

He smiles, and I don’t think I’ve seen him smiling this wide before. “Yes, sugar. I love you.”

He called me sugar. The word melts me, and I shove the covers off so I can sling my arms around his neck. A fit of giggles threatens to come up my throat, but I keep them in. “I love you, too,” I whisper back.

Roman grabs my waist, turning to look at me. “You don’t need to say it.”

“But I do. I love you. The matchmaker was so right. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

He arches an eyebrow. “There’s no way you wanted Mr. Grinch.”

I chuckle. “If being Mr. Grinch is part of the package, then I’ll take it.”

Roman smiles at me again, big hands cupping my face. “Oh, sugar, you have no idea what you signed up for.”

And he kisses me. Roman skips the part of kissing me gently and dives straight into claiming me with his lips. I shove the covers off, slinging my arms around his shoulders and pulling him as close as possible. His big body pins me to the couch, and if I needed something to warm me up further, I only had to hold him this close.

Roman fits between my knees, his tongue sweeping over mine in sensual circles. His fingers dig into the soft flesh of my hips, and he tugs me against his body, his hardness finding my core. I choke into the kiss, warmth spreading over my cheeks.

He’s big and thick, and he’s aroused by me. The feeling of it against me makes lust coil low between my thighs, and I tilt my hips, searching for some friction. That needy spot between my legs throbs with desire.

Roman reads me as if I were an open book. He grips my hips and hauls me up against his body, my legs tightening around his waist. He gets up and flips us, sitting on the couch with me on his lap. My legs fall to each side of his thick thighs, my center landing flush on his hardness.

It's like something possesses me. The friction of our pants against one another shoots lust through my veins, heat whirling around, centered on my pussy. Every circle of my hips touches that part of me to him, and it shoots a jolt of electricity straight to my core. Moans spill past my lips and Roman eats them up.

His hands curl tight around my hips and he moves me up and down on his length. Wetness makes my panties slick. I slam my eyes closed, digging my nails into his strong shoulders as more and more pleasure bubbles inside me.

“Roman,” I mewl, my voice breaking. “Roman, I—”

“Do you like this?” he roars back, teeth nibbling along my jaw. “Are you about to come, sugar?”

Oh, God. Something tightens inside me, pleasure coiling so hard I know it's about to snap. “Yeah, yeah.” I nod hard, and Roman grinds me on his length until pleasure explodes inside me. I cry out, clinging to him as I soar, as lust takes over and sets fire to my blood.

“Fuck, you look so pretty when you come.” And he folds an arm around my waist and gets to his feet. “I can't wait to see you creaming my cock.”

His words send a full-body shiver down to my toes. I cling to his shoulders and beg for another kiss with my eyes. The storm still rages out the bedroom windows when Roman lays me down on the master bed, big enough for the two of us comfortably. His big body drapes over mine, and I race my hands down his barrel chest, up his meaty arms, feeling him up.

He leans back and strips off his shirt, then bends over me once more. Roman's eyes feast on my face, and my body, and

he kisses me hard once more. There's awe in the way he touches me. Adoration in how he explores my face, my neck, my breasts. Big fingers curl around the mounds, and he squeezes, kneads, and flicks the tight nipples through my thin shirt.

The torture is exquisite. I drop my head back, savoring the pleasure for several beats of my racing heart. Then I fist Roman's hair and force our mouths together again. He kisses me as if he owns me. And he does. He has my entire heart.

Roman strips me off my shirt and pants, and he stops and admires my body. He doesn't just look, but he gapes, studies, and awes at my full curves. Even when I curl myself away from his gaze, he holds my hands, pulls them out of the way, and kisses me sweetly.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs against my lips. "So fucking beautiful."

And every sweep of his tongue makes me more certain about that. That he truly loves me, that he finds me beautiful. That we're right for one another.

Roman's kisses trail down my jaw to my neck and he sucks on the pulse. Hands on my breasts, he explores, and we learn together what feels good. He unhooks my bra and closes his lips around a nipple, then the other, until I arch off the bed, begging for more. Next, he kicks off his pants and pulls my panties down. My chest heaves with nerves, but he kisses me again, and I know everything will be alright.

His fingers trail along my slit, gathering moisture and touching me where I need him the most. Every circle of his fingers brings me higher. Once I'm ready for him, Roman touches his cock to my core, parting my folds with the head. I

gape between us, my knees spread, my rolls all exposed, and self-awareness makes me shiver.

Do I look good like this? Does he really want me? His cock is so big, will it even fit me?

Roman presses our chests together and kisses me. “I love you,” he whispers, moving his cock up and down my wetness. Every time it touches the center of my pleasure, I tilt my hips and flutter my eyes shut.

We love each other. That’s the only thing that matters.

He kisses me hard and thrusts his hips forward. I sink my nails into his shoulders, closing my eyes against the pain. The sharp feeling makes me grunt, but I dig my heels into his lower back and keep him close. More. I need more.

Roman takes a breath, then sinks another inch in. “Fuck, you’re so tight,” he grunts against my mouth, then reaches between us to massage me. “You feel so good, sugar.”

My muscles relax around him and he finds his way home, sheathing inside me. Once he’s hilt-deep, he stops, our breaths mingling, our hearts beating in time. He takes one look at me, and he starts to move.

Every thrust of his hips is maddening. It brings me higher, pain and pleasure crashing together. My head drops back in sheer delight. He fills me so much it’s the only thing I can think about. His hands on me, his lips touching mine. Roman makes me feel so good I know, at that moment, I’ll never want anyone else.

He grips my hips, pulling me tight against him, and he picks up his pace. Pound after pound, Roman claims me. He takes me completely. My virginity is his, as is my heart, as is my body. He kisses me hard and we climb the pleasure

together. With one huge grunt, he spills his load inside me, and the warmth makes me come apart all over again.

I hold on to him, but he doesn't make to let go. Roman lies next to me, kissing my face, my neck, and my shoulders. He whispers about his love for me, holding me close, his hands moving, exploring.

The moment I catch my breath, I know we're not done. And I'm so glad he told his mother we wouldn't go back to the house.

I meet his eyes, a tingle of pain starting between my legs. "Baby," I whisper.

"Yes?" He runs his fingers down my cheek, his eyes hooded, fastened on my face.

"Can we go again?"

A smile slashes across his face. "As many times as you want."

"Really?"

He nods. "Are you kidding? I want you forever, Harley. This is only the beginning. Besides..." And he slides down the mattress until he's poised between my legs. "I haven't tasted you yet. There's so much I need to learn about you."

And before I tell him he doesn't need to do that, he closes his lips around my pussy and all words die in my throat. My hips jerk off the bed, and I have a glimpse of the future. This is how it's going to go. Roman will love me with his words, his actions, and his mouth.

We're made to be together, and this is just the beginning.

EPILOGUE

ROMAN

Five Years Later

“H onestly, baby,” Harley says, that huge smile on her face. “You didn’t have to. You didn’t have to in the first gift,” she says, pointing at the new laptop she left over on the couch. “But now it’s getting ridiculous.”

My family laughs with her. I arch an eyebrow, crossing my arms over my chest. “Excuse me? Am I not allowed to gift my wife whatever I want? The money is mine, the wife is mine, I should be allowed.”

Mom rolls her eyes. “You are allowed, but there are six presents for her from you under the tree, and the kids are disappointed you’ve only given them two.”

My brother sways his head from side to side. “It’s the newest console with a bundle of games and extra controls, I don’t think they’re disappointed at all, Mom.” And he juts his thumb over his shoulder at the children. They’re sitting in a semi-circle around the TV, already trying out one of the new games.

Harley taught me many things in these years we’ve been together. How to love her right and how to be a good husband are at the top of the list, but also how to be a better son,

brother, and uncle. This was the first year she left me to my own devices to figure out presents. She wanted me to show I cared by putting effort into it without her help.

Several articles on “best gifts for children” later, I settled into video games, and I think I got it just right. Every five minutes, someone cries out “thanks, uncle Roman”, and I can’t help but smile proudly at my wife.

“I couldn’t choose,” I tell Harley once she picks up the last present I bought for her. After jewels, a nice cable-knit sweater, a laptop, a phone, and earbuds, she finally opens the candle-making kit.

My wife squeals then runs to me and throws her arms around my neck. “Thank you, baby!” she says. “I couldn’t find a nice one to try out.”

“You mentioned it.” And I kiss her hair as she lets go to inspect her new toy. It’s amazing how much she loves the cheapest of them. That’s something I’ve been learning, too. How people often love gifts that mean something, not ones that cost a lot of money.

“Oh, let me see,” Mom asks, opening and closing her hands like a child. Mom loves seeing other people’s gifts as much as she enjoys receiving them. She squeals, too. “Such a thoughtful gift. You can make your candles, light one up, and put it next to you when you’re reading.”

Harley nods as she sits down. “That’s exactly what I thought.”

“Good!” says Mom, stretching to grab a thin box from beneath the tree. “Then open mine. I’m sure it’ll go with it.”

Harley unwraps the gift and laughs out loud. The sound of her happiness makes me warm all over, every single time. It’s

my favorite thing. “Oh, my God, thank you!” And she squeezes my mother.

“What is it?” I ask.

She shows me the box. “The new Kindle. It’s waterproof, too.”

“Oh, you can read it in the bath,” I tell her. Harley adores setting up the bath twice a week, with candles and a glass of wine. She hasn’t drunk the wine in the last month, but she still uses the candles. Dropping her Kindle in the water is an old worry of hers.

“And,” my mom goes on, “I’ve already bought a bunch of books with it. The top ten steamy romance in the store.”

The two, plus my sisters-in-law, laugh together. There was a time I thought reading romance was silly, but after Harley asked me to try the things she read on them, I changed my mind. Steamy romance books are a must in the house now.

My wife picks up an envelope from under the tree, her eyes meeting mine. Her blue orbs are full of expectation as she gets to her feet and offers me the envelope. “Here’s your first gift, baby,” she says.

I get up and kiss her. “Thank you. But first gift? Were you complaining about my gifts, but you’re also giving me more than one?”

She smiles, her cheeks going that lovely pink color. “This one is a present for the two of us. It doesn’t count.”

I narrow my eyes at her, not seeing through her words. Opening the envelope, I tug at a piece of paper from the inside. It’s a picture, black and white. Abstract art? I can’t make it out.

My brother gets to his feet and glances over my shoulder at it. He gasps. “Oh, shit.”

“What is it?” his wife asks.

“An ultrasound,” he replies, and more gasps sound around us.

It’s only then I understand the black-and-white picture. The black circle in the center, and the tiny gray blob attached to its inner edge. My heart drops to my stomach.

“Oh, shit.” And I gape at Harley. “You’re pregnant.”

She laughs, her cheeks red. “That’s a weird reaction, even coming from you.”

My mother screams so loud my eardrum thrums. She jumps from the couch as if she were not seventy. Her arms fling around Harley, and my sisters-in-law follow suit, and there’s screaming and crying and congratulating. Someone asks “how far along?”, and Harley replies “eight weeks”, and I’m frozen to the spot, gaping at the picture in my hand.

“You alright?” my brother asks.

“Yeah?” My voice is strained, breaking. I swallow.

“You don’t sound alright.” Then he turns to the others. “I think he’s having a stroke.”

My eyes go wet. I wipe the tears from my face as Harley comes closer and finally it dawns on me. She’s carrying my baby. She’s going to be my baby’s mama. I hug her close, burying my face into her neck, breathing the scent of her in.

Harley hugs me back, her chest rumbling with a peal of laughter. “You happy?”

I cup her face as a tear runs down my cheek. “Sugar, I was already the happiest man on earth. I had no idea you could make it better.”

She smiles, her eyes wet, and she runs a hand across my face. “I believe you. You look happy.”

I kiss her. Again and again. “Thank you,” I murmur into the kiss. “You proved me wrong again.”

She pulls back, cocking her head. “How?”

I glance at the picture again. “Love at first sight exists.”

THE END

ALSO BY ERIN HAVOC



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Havoc writes steamy romance with curvy heroines. Her heroes might look tough, but they have a soft spot for their girls. No matter if they are mountain men, CEOs, or wolf shifters, there's always a happy ending. Check out her Amazon page for more books, and a link to a free story.